

REVIEWS

State-of-the-Art Mormon History

The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints. By Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979, xiv, 404 pp., illus., maps, appendix, bibliographical essay, notes, index. \$15.00.

Reviewed by Richard D. Poll, professor of history at Western Illinois University.

For years Latter-day Saints yearned for a one-volume history of the Church which could be recommended to members and non-members alike as factually sound and not so fervently partisan as to "turn off" the critical reader. Now there are two such works. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard's *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976) has already passed the acid test: it has been praised and criticized by both LDS and Gentile reviewers. *The Mormon Experience* will almost certainly provoke similar responses. The virtues of both books commend them to every serious student of Mormonism and every library interested in history, religion or Americana.

Leonard Arrington, who needs no introduction to *Dialogue* readers, first agreed in 1967 to write what became *The Mormon Experience*. Not long afterward he was appointed Church Historian. The demands of that administrative calling—through which he has been responsible for a veritable revolution in Mormon historiography—required him to seek help with the Knopf project. Assistant Church Historian Davis Bitton, whose scholarly credentials are also impressive, is listed as joint author. It is apparent that the research assistants and

other Historical Department personnel named in the preface have also contributed to the marshaling of the material in the book.

The Mormon Experience is divided into three parts: "The Early Church," "The Kingdom in the West" and "The Modern Church." The sixteen chapters include standard historical narratives, interpretive historical essays, and sociological, theological and economic analyses. Their content reflects the "state of the art" in Mormon history and social studies as of early 1978, when the book went to press.

The four-chapter treatment of the background, appeal, and persecution of Joseph Smith and his followers is as sophisticated as has appeared from Mormon authors. Analogies to Luther and Swedenborg are used, and representations of sinless saints and diabolical villains are not. Among diverse explanations of difficult historical problems, it is not surprising that one compatible with the canons of "faithful history" is always included and often endorsed. For example: "If the latter version [of the first vision] was different, this was not a result of inventing an experience out of whole cloth, as an unscrupulous person might readily have done, but rather of reexamining an earlier experience and seeing it in a different light" (p. 8). So preoccupied are these chapters with interpretation that they provide less narrative history than some uninitiated readers may need.

Beginning with Carthage events the book moves into a more conventional historical mode, which is maintained through chapters on the exodus from Nauvoo, the colonization in the West, nineteenth century immi-

gration, relations with the Indians and the "Americanization" of Utah Territory. The salt-and-peppering of quotations from recently accessible journals and other documents adds flavor here, but no new ground is broken. Indeed, the traditional approach in "Mormons and Native Americans" probably needs revising in terms of what Howard Christy and Lawrence Coates have shown about the persistence of "good Indian-dead Indian" attitudes among Mormon leaders and followers. The account of Mormon involvement at Mountain Meadows is apologetic and leaves the impression that John D. Lee was the chief perpetrator.

"Marriage and Family Patterns," "The Nineteenth Century Ward," and "Mormon Sisterhood: Charting the Changes" are social history, replete with human foibles and frailties. Plural marriage receives more attention than in Allen-Leonard or earlier general histories; it is suggested that up to 5 percent of married Mormon men, 12 percent of married Mormon women and 10 percent of Mormon children were involved in "the principle" during the four decades of its active practice. This reviewer finds the women in "Mormon Sisterhood"—which carries its subject down to the present—more real than those in the earlier chapter on nineteenth century family life. This may be in part because his own wife is particularly intrigued by the conclusion of the "sisterhood" essay: "... their own past is complex enough and populated with enough strong, achieving female personalities that they are able to continue pushing on the boundaries, trying different options, and resisting an excessively narrow conception of their role".

Part Three begins with a chapter on the transition in church policies which followed the Woodruff Manifesto. The authors prefer "creative adjustment" to "surrender" as a label for the changes which brought the Church into the mainstream of Americanism while it maintained unique group characteristics and solidarity. The last three chapters are interpretive essays on twentieth century developments. "The Temporal Foundation" dispels some popular rumors about the wealth and economic power of the Church and informatively describes present ties with business and civic enterprises. "In the World—Institutional Re-

sponses" is a good survey of present structure and programs. The suggestion that as many as 50 percent of all church members may be inactive confirms what mobile lifelong Mormons have suspected. Most disaffection is attributed to social rather than ideological disillusionment.

"Group Personality: The Un-sponsored Sector" cites the accomplishments of individual Latter-day Saints in government and arts and letters and particularly in the sciences to confirm the quoted characterization from the *Boston Globe* (1967): "... once the outer layers are peeled away, both Mormons and artichokes are most likeable". This chapter, like several others in *The Mormon Experience*, invites comparison with Thomas F. O'Dea's *The Mormons* (1957). Such an exercise confirms the expected—that when a sympathetic and knowledgeable outsider and an informed and committed insider describe the same institution, the two pictures are not mirror images.

The book is attractively packaged, with a pictorial section and two helpful maps. The bibliographical essay is highly selective; it appropriately calls attention to the exhaustive bibliography in *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*. The notes are more extensive for some chapters than others; where informational tidbits are tucked among the source citations the fact that the notes section contains neither chapter titles nor page cross-references is mildly frustrating. The index is almost complete; neither Orderville nor Brigadier General William S. Harney is listed, and in the text the first Utah Expedition commander is rechristened Stephen Harney (p. 166).

The most disappointing feature of *The Mormon Experience* to this reviewer is the lack of cohesion. Each chapter is virtually an autonomous essay, and within some chapters the blocs of material are not well integrated. Stylistic differences, and differences in perspective are discernible. The fact that the same language from the Woodruff Manifesto appears on p. 183 and then again two pages later as an introductory quotation for the following chapter illustrates the apparent lack of a final editorial overview by either the authors or the publisher. Deseret means "honeybee" on p. 114; on p. 162 it means "beehive." Amy Brown Lyman's Hull House experience is reported