

# AMONG THE MORMONS

## *A Survey of Current Literature*

1981 is destined to be remembered as a year of indelible significance in Mormondom. Within a two-month period early in the year, stories about the Church twice achieved front-page status. During March the discovery of a 137-year-old document threatened to renew the succession arguments between the LDS and the RLDS. Then in May, the LDS First Presidency's statement on the MX missile system produced a myriad of provocative editorial comments. Of the two events, the latter had greater impact. The president of the Organization of American Historians, William Appleman Williams (in a 5 September 1981 *Nation* cover story), characterized the Mormon statement on MX and the arms race as a truly radical action. For Williams the Church had displayed "a very shrewd understanding of the kind of national power that can grow out of organizing a relatively small number of people in a specific region." He concluded that "they comprehend the politics of demography and ecology at least as well as any other group in contemporary America." Of course, other writers had widely differing opinions.

Early in 1982, a more personal struggle erupted within the Church that Kenneth L. Woodward aptly characterized in *Newsweek* as "Apostles vs. Historians." This controversy revolved around the "methods and motives of LDS scholars who attempt 'objective' histories of the church," and "place what are supposed to be divinely inspired church doctrines in a relevant social and historical context." Woodward believed the conflict was a "long way from being settled, but the scholars may have the advantage. If . . . faith in Mormonism means faith in the Church's history, they would seem to have the edge over their adversaries."

In reflecting on this latest "newsworthy" event, one recalls that when Alvin R. Dyer announced "the Church's exciting new reorganization of its historical department under the direction of the general authorities in 1972," he foresaw a "truer picture of the past" emerging, an "unexpurgated inspirational history" in which the "intimate images of the early Church" would prove useful aids "to our appreciation of the present." By making the Church's archives and history more accessible, he announced, the "historian can view the development of a man's thought or of an organization's growth and understand how ideas are formed, developed, and brought into action." (*Ensign*, Aug. 1972, pp. 59, 61)

Some believe that recent events have shown this to be an unrealistic aspiration. Even so, several Mormon historians during the past decade have distinguished themselves through their responsiveness both to the concerns of the Church hierarchy and the standards of fellow scholars. One can only hope that this tradition of responsible access to Church archives will be allowed to continue. If not, most of the scholarly work acknowledged in these pages may cease.

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