

## Dale Morgan's Unfinished Mormon History

*Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* edited by John Philip Walker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 414 pp., \$20.95.

Reviewed by Gary Topping, Utah State Historical Society.

IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT to say too much in praise of John Phillip Walker's new contribution to Mormon historiography, a field that is bursting with recent major studies. Walker's book deserves a place on the shelf among those. How can one go wrong with a book that freshly illuminates two such endlessly fascinating characters as the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and the brilliant historian Dale L. Morgan?

Although Dale Morgan (1914-71) was known through his prolific publications primarily as a historian of the American West (not the least of Walker's services in this volume is an apparently exhaustive bibliography of Morgan's published writings), his consuming life's work was a history of the Mormons. He began research on that history in the 1930s, plugged away at it for most of the rest of his life, but never finished it because of a protracted series of sidetracks forced upon him by the necessity of making a living. At the time of his death, he had completed a scant four chapters and two appendices, with three more chapters in rough form.

Publication of those chapters alone would have been a worthy project for Walker, for they represent an amazing mastery of the sources available at that time and some of the most felicitous writ-

ing in the literature of Mormonism. (The Reorganized Church cooperated somewhat, but the Utah church did not, once it saw the direction of his research.)

These chapters, however, would have made a fairly slim volume. Instead, Walker used the available space to include fifty of Morgan's letters to his friends—primarily Fawn Brodie, Juanita Brooks, and Madeline McQuown—in which he discusses, debates, and offers instruction in the writing of Mormon history. Brodie at the time was finishing her biography of Joseph Smith, Brooks was working on *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, and McQuown was writing a still-unpublished biography of Brigham Young. The result is not only an expansion in size, but an expansion in intellectual importance as well, for the letters give us, for the first time, a close look at Morgan's personal life and his approach to his craft as a historian.

It is somewhat unfortunate that these letters reveal only the mature Morgan, after most of his basic research on the Mormons was finished and his basic interpretive framework established. As important as that is, it would have been even more useful if we could have had a glimpse of Morgan during his college years and the years with the WPA, a significant period of discovery and gestation. If we could see more intellectual process in operation, it would be easier for us to avoid falling into the mistaken conclusion that Morgan approached the Mormons with his mind already made up, and it would lend more weight to his protestation to S. A. Burgess of the Reorganized Church

that "I am as willing to find things in Joseph Smith's favor as to find things against him" (p. 162).

Setting aside for a moment Morgan's Mormon research, this book eloquently demonstrates the acute need for a probing study of Dale Morgan, the man and the historian. Here, truly, was a first-rate mind and, though this book reveals little of it, perhaps the finest historian of the far West. It ought to be a stinging rebuke to Western historiography that, fifteen years after Morgan's death, this is the first published attempt to deal in any sophisticated way with Morgan's life and work. To a large degree, no doubt, this omission is due to the Bancroft Library's slothfulness in processing the immense collection of Morgan papers in their care (this also explains the lack of earlier Morgan letters in this volume), but blame also rests upon the infamous shortsightedness of Western historians, who are characteristically more concerned with enumerating buffalo chips and .45 caliber bullets than with exploring the larger philosophical and methodological dimensions of their craft. So Western historiography is the poorer, and its poverty is nowhere so nakedly evident as in its neglect of Dale Morgan.

It is a fortuitous circumstance that Morgan's history of the Mormons (it might more properly be titled, in this fragmentary form, a study of Joseph Smith, since it barely gets us up to the publication of the Book of Mormon) should appear at this moment, when the documents offered by Mark Hofmann have sparked among Mormon historians an intensive reconsideration of the cultural environment of the early Mormon Church, since Morgan's interpretation is rigorously environmental in its focus. Disinclined to take anything Joseph Smith said or did at face value, Morgan gives us a secular view of the origins of Mormonism. The Mormon phenomenon, in his view, was religious Jacksonian de-

mocracy in which received authority and tradition counted for nothing, and a man could work out a whole new destiny in the New World, not only through possession of a universally available priesthood, but through direct communication with God, establishing new institutions.

The general climate of Jacksonian democracy, together with its localized upstate New York occult accoutrements, was for Morgan a sufficient explanation for the origin of Mormonism. This thoroughgoing environmentalism drew Bernard DeVoto's criticism of Morgan in a letter as a frustrated sociologist who ignored personal factors; and it distinguished him from DeVoto and Fawn Brodie, who sought, in addition to impersonal environmental forces, an explanation of Joseph Smith in abnormal psychology. The Mormon prophet was not insane, Morgan countered; he was merely the right man in the right place at the right time.

If Morgan's view is not environmental determinism, it is dangerously close to it, and a truly convincing secular interpretation of the origins of Mormonism will have to deal more profoundly with personal factors than Morgan was inclined to do. No faithful Mormon, of course, will accept any account of environmental factors that allows no room for some sort of divine intervention, and Mormon scholars recently have been looking for ways to synthesize the secular and the divine. That synthesis is a ways off, though.

Denied access to vitally important sources, deprived of adequate research funds, (Morgan enjoyed one Guggenheim Fellowship but was denied a renewal), shut out from the security and sabbaticals of a teaching career by his total deafness and lack of formal qualifications, Morgan limped along with lesser jobs and lesser writing projects and never finished his Mormon book. As this fragment indicates, it is our loss.