History for the People

Utah: A People's History by Dean L. May (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 210 pp., illus., index, $25.00 cloth, $14.95 paper.

Reviewed by M. Guy Bishop, Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

DEAN L. MAY has tackled a difficult problem in this brief survey of Utah's history. First of all, his book came *after* the successful media presentation of the same material instead of vice versa, as is usually the case. Second, Professor May is a professional historian who, by training and, presumably, inclination, commoniy writes for a like-minded audience. And, finally, *Utah: A People's History* has been preceded by several other solid treatments of the same subject. Nevertheless, this book *does* accomplish its purpose — to provide a companion volume to KUED television's Utah history series (p. x).

May's beginning chapter, aptly entitled "Man and Desert," provides a strong introduction to the book by immediately calling our attention to the fact that surviving in Utah has not always involved cozy homes, mundane commutes to one's workplace, air-conditioned summers, and centrally-heated winters. Utah was, and in many ways still is, a harsh land. As the forty-niners, who passed as quickly as possible through the area on their way to the riches of California, observed, Utah was a distinct land marked by vast deserts and a huge saltwater lake. Even for the Mormon immigrants of 1847 and later, the Great Salt Lake Valley — not to mention areas more distant and isolated settled later — must certainly have been a disheartening reminder of the fertile soil and abundant water left behind in the Midwest. It clearly took a dispossessed and/or a committed people to live in the Great Basin.

Chapters two and three, almost Turnerian in interpretation, discuss the impact of the fur trappers and then the Anglo-American farmers, merchants, and community builders who succeeded the Jedediah Smiths and Peter Skene Ogdens across the Rocky Mountains in hopes of exploiting the natural resources and open land of the West. Chapter four discusses the Mormons, whose presence, the author notes, cannot be escaped in any study of Utah (pp. x–xi). On 22 July 1847, William Clayton accompanied the first sixty wagons of Mormon pioneers into the Great Salt Lake Valley. May notes Clayton's first impression, "The land looks dry and lacks rain" (p. 65) — certainly one of history's great understatements! But, as would his fellow Latter-day Saints, Clayton tried to remain upbeat by adding that the numerous creeks and springs in the location might be used to moisten the land somewhat. From that thought and commitment sprang present-day Utah.

Dean May has rendered a more than adequate, popular treatment of Utah's history. Some might criticize him for the extensive coverage he gives to Mormons throughout *Utah: A People's History*, but a quick review of any recent Utah history, for example that of Charles S. Peterson, demonstrates what May notes from the outset: you cannot write about the Beehive State without writing about the Mormons. It would be like writing about Massachusetts and downplaying the Puritans.

The format of this book, written for a popular audience, has allowed May to make some useful asides that would have been out of place in a more "scholarly" monograph. For example, he advises his readers that, when visiting archaeological sites, "It is against the law and shamefully irresponsible to alter or remove . . . artifacts" (p. 19) — an ethical issue certainly important for Utahns as well as other Americans to understand.

Finally, the University of Utah Press should be congratulated for publishing what is truly "a people's history" of Utah. This reasonably-priced, attractive book abounds in well-chosen and placed illustrations and maps and clearly fills a need in the Utah history book market. It is highly readable, factually sound, and interesting to the casual browser. In other words, in this book May has accomplished what he set out to do.

What Do Mormon Women Want?

Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective, edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 268 pp., $21.95.

Reviewed by Rebecca Reid Linford, a Ph.D. student in Renaissance history at UCLA, currently a political analyst for the United States government.

EARLY IN MY ACADEMIC CAREER I determined to study neither Mormon history nor women's history, so I was at first somewhat hesitant to review this book which obviously dealt with both. As a historian I have steered clear of the ongoing debate surrounding the validity of the New Mormon History; and I have always had difficulty understanding the more strident anti-male, anti-patriarchy feminists in the Church. The book's title, too, aroused my suspicions. I guessed that it might be a collection of sappy "Especially for Mormon Women — Volume IV" type of vignettes promoting faith and sisterhood. Or maybe the title was actually a tongue-in-cheek twist for a raving feminist diatribe against a dictatorial patriarchy.

Happily, I discovered within a few pages that I was wrong. This collection of essays has been written by thoughtful, scholarly Mormon women who think and feel deeply about various aspects of Mormon womanhood. Each essay shows that intelligence and faith are not mutually exclusive — not even for Mormon women. These sisters have overtaken the "sisters in spirit" cliche and infused it with a new depth and beauty.

Taking its roots from a lunch/discussion group that met in the early 1970s in Salt Lake City, this compilation discusses pertinent social and religious issues. The first two essays examine the Eden story and other biblical stories about women, tracing them through centuries of Judeo-Christian theological and cultural interpretations and showing how they have influenced the way women are viewed today. While they do not directly deal with the sisterhood of religious women, both lay the groundwork fundamental to an understanding of the evolution of scriptural and religious views on the role and value of women and therefore to an understanding of the successive essays.

Jolene Rockwood's refreshing examination of the Genesis account sheds new light on the garden scene, showing how the story may have been twisted to reinforce patriarchal and cultural stereotypes. She traces the Genesis story through centuries of theological debate and doctrinal reinterpretation, showing how each generation has used Eve as a scapegoat, not only for the sin in the garden but for many of the world's ills. Rockwood also identifies the special meaning for Mormon women of the Genesis account as communicated in the temple ceremony, noting several subtle