

Mormon Woman Historian

Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian by Levi S. Peterson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), xi, 528 pp., \$19.95.

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STUDENTS OF UTAH and Mormon historiography ought to be rejoicing at the flowering of literature in that field over recent years. Beginning perhaps in the last decade with Wallace Stegner's biography of Bernard DeVoto and his edited collection of DeVoto's letters, we have seen a succession of historiographical studies, including John Phillip Walker's collection of Dale Morgan's letters and Morgan's fragmentary history of the early Mormon Church, the recent brief survey of Mormon historiography by Davis Bitton and Leonard Arrington, and the happy news that Newell Bringhurst is preparing a biography of Fawn Brodie. It is now abundantly apparent that Levi S. Peterson has made a superb contribution to that growing literature with this exhaustive biography of Juanita Brooks.

In singing the praises of this fine book, it is difficult to overemphasize the almost unique appropriateness of Peterson as the biographer of Juanita Brooks. The profound interest, not to say obsession, that Peterson has exhibited for many years with her life and works grows, it seems, from two fundamental common elements in their lives. One is that both grew up in small rural communities on the very frontier of Mormondom where paradoxical mixtures of zealotry and liberalism, earthiness and piety, created tensions in the way they view life, tensions they have attempted to resolve through extraordinary literary and public

careers. The other is their common identification with "liberal Mormonism," whose modern focal points have been such publications as *DIALOGUE* and *Sunstone* and informal study groups such as those led by Will and Juanita Brooks in Salt Lake City and St. George.

The first half of the biography is inevitably the best, for it deals with the period of Juanita's life when those tensions were created and resolved most strongly. Peterson's empathy for rural Mormon folkways and the general tenor of life in such communities, his energy in seeking out fresh sources for largely unknown episodes in his subject's girlhood, and the fortunate existence of elaborate documentation in the form of *Quicksand and Cactus* and other early autobiographical writings give an extraordinary richness to the narrative. He appropriately gives major attention to the awakening of her intellectual life primarily through her close study of the pioneer diaries she collected under government programs during the 1930s and through her correspondence with Dale Morgan. The fruit of that intellectual maturation was the great literary monuments of her middle years: her study of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the biography of John D. Lee, and her editions of the Lee and Hosea Stout diaries.

The later chapters become increasingly tedious as her physical and intellectual powers diminished, as she turned her attentions to literary projects of secondary or even dubious value, and as humdrum family and professional concerns came to dominate her life. In dramatic terms, there is surely nothing less engrossing than the details of the daily life of a Mormon housewife, even a Mormon housewife with a