

REVIEWS

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.

Reviewed by Gary Topping, curator of manuscripts at the Utah State Historical Society.

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

200 I.Q., particularly in contrast with the salad days when she strode into the office of David O. McKay to make an eloquent case for access to affidavits relating to the Mountain Meadows Massacre, or crossed swords with the ferocious Kate B. Carter over the objective presentation of Mormon history. But Juanita Brooks was, as Sterling McMurrin observed, "a most uncommon woman draped in a very common exterior," and such humdrum details remind us how very common that exterior, and indeed much of her interior, really was.

Peterson's objectivity, in the best spirit of Juanita Brooks herself, will not let even her squeak by with a courteous "A" when she deserves a "C minus," and he is gently but firmly critical of the perfunctory projects of her later years. One happy circumstance in Peterson's sharp-eyed coverage of those years, however, is that the friends and editors who helped pick up the slack in her personal and professional life as her powers began to diminish receive their due at last.

The last two or three pages of the book, where Peterson describes Brooks's current unfortunate physical and mental circumstances and, in the third person, his own recent visit to her home and bedside, are

extremely touching and unforgettable. As he concludes the book with an overall appraisal of her historical and cultural importance, though, one wonders if he does not slip into wishful thinking. "Because of her," he writes, "the collective mind of Mormondom is more liberal and more at peace with itself than it might be otherwise" (p. 422). One has to wonder where the locus of that collective mind exists: at 50 East North Temple? At the offices of *DIALOGUE*, *Sunstone*, or Signature Books? Some Mormons certainly regarded her *Mountain Meadows Massacre* as a welcome dose of honesty in the otherwise almost exclusively faith-promoting historiography of the Church. Others, perhaps even most Latter-day Saints, clearly did not: how widely utilized are any of her books, for example, in the Church educational system? Mormon historians have gradually found it possible to express themselves more freely since 1950, partly, no doubt because of the appearance of her book in that year, but the "collective mind of Mormondom," statistically at least, still seems overwhelmingly to prefer the torrent of defensive and faith-promoting literature that floods the shelves of Deseret Book outlets.

A Prophet's Progress

The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith edited by Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), v, 736 pp., \$18.95.

An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith edited by Scott R. Faulring (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1987), vii, 504 pp., \$50.00.

Reviewed by Roger D. Launius, command historian, Military Airlift Command, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois.

NO ONE TODAY KNOWS MORE about the handwriting, letters, and other documents produced by Joseph Smith, Jr., than Dean

C. Jessee. Long a careful student of these primary resources, his comprehensive editing of the Prophet's writings demonstrates his expertise on virtually every page. *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, therefore, is a landmark publication. Scott R. Faulring's editing of the diaries and journals of Joseph Smith also makes a significant contribution to the field. These two fine publications clearly contain the best work of this type, and both deserve a place on the bookshelf of any serious student of early Mormon history and its founding prophet.

Dean Jessee originally planned to publish all significant holographs, those documents produced wholly by Joseph Smith,