

table to examine what historians have said of it. He thus displays no evidence, beyond simple assertion, of truly believing that important historical events and the faith that is founded on those events "might possibly be false" (p. 223).

Midgley also says we should "welcome" challenges to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and to the Joseph Smith story (p. 224). But he never seriously discusses the validity of any such challenges and refers to those who raise them as "savants," "cultural Mormons," "marginal members who . . . can neither spit nor swallow when it comes to the gospel," "not sound guides," and "the rebellious" (p. 225-26).

Midgley shows himself to be incapable of mythological thinking or of seeing as genuinely faithful any scriptural hermeneutic other than the strictly literal. The Book of Mormon is either historically true or it is "fiction." "The question of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon is necessarily the initial question. . . . A negative . . . decision about the initial question closes the door to a faithful response" (pp. 223-24). He is obviously aware that there are Church members who are not restricted to such a dichotomy, but he gives them no fair hearing. His unyielding demand for absolute historicity reminds me of Northrup Frye's comments:

Someone recently asked me, after seeing a television program about the discovery of a large boat-shaped structure on Mount Ararat with animal cages in it, if I did not think that this alleged discovery "sounded the death knell of liberal theology." . . . This attitude says, for example, that the story of Jonah must describe a real sojourn inside a real whale, otherwise we are making God, as the ultimate source of the story, into a liar.

It might be said that a God who would deliberately fake so unlikely a series of events in order to vindicate the "literal truth" of his story would be a much more dangerous liar, and such a God could never have become incarnate in Jesus, because he would be too stupid to understand what a parable was. (*The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovonovich, 1981], pp. 44-45)

I began this review by suggesting an alternative ending to the title *To Be Learned Is Good If*. . . . Perhaps it would be better to replace the title entirely, as the book ultimately conveys no belief in the goodness of learning, or, for that matter, of faith, when either of these leads the seeker outside the narrow confines of the authors' definition of "truth."

## Tempering Memories

*A Good Time Coming: Mormon Letters to Scotland* edited by Frederick Stewart Buchanan (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), x, 319 pp., \$24.95. Foreword by Charles S. Peterson. Volume 4 in the Utah Centennial Series edited by Charles S. Peterson.

Reviewed by John S. H. Smith, a Scot, who is a historian and writer currently teaching at sea for the U.S. Navy.

THE LETTERS IN THIS collection, ably edited and annotated, are neither literate nor consistently interesting. They lack

informed perspective and only occasionally throw any light on the larger questions of the times of which they are a part. Almost wholly absorbed with family or personal matters, the letters are relentlessly ordinary. Yet this is their value as historical documents and the source of their fascination.

The MacNeil-Thompson collection, from which this book has been fashioned, is housed in the archives of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. It consists of letters sent home to Scotland from Utah, Arizona, and Illinois by members of the MacNeil-Thompson family and two of their friends. The letters tell of failure and heartbreak, of dreams never clearly articulated but unmistakably gone sour. They are a record of the bad times that memory often later suppresses or selectively edits when the "good times" come around. Sadly, the good times never did come around for this luckless family. Their history, frustratingly and elusively incomplete though it is, makes this book a necessary corrective to the cloyingly upbeat and deceptively positive histories of pioneer families with which we are all familiar.

The level of religious commitment of the various letter-writers is never very clear, perhaps because Scots tend to be reticent in such matters. Caution and realism shape their experience of Mormonism, which does not appear to be as central to their lives as their response to the doctrine of "gathering" might suggest. John MacNeil, easily the most interesting family member, is the only letter writer who displays any passion on the subject: "All they preach about hear is water ditches, field fences, canyon roads, cooperative Stores & Such like things" (pp. 105-6).

John MacNeil's increasingly negative view of the Church—"Like all the rest of

the Churches, its pay Money, pay Money, all the time & don't ask where it is going" (p. 184)—was matched by his resentment each time he lost a mining job to cheaper Chinese labor—"The Chinese is raising Hell with this Country. They work for a doller per day & Stands kicking & Cuffing around" (p. 184).

This combination of free thinking, resentment of job insecurity, a reluctance to acquire new job skills, and failure to adapt to the enterprising spirit of frontier Utah was, comments Buchanan, "a reason why he [MacNeil] never became truly integrated into Mormon society" (p. 106 n. 26). This judgment, which goes on to imply that MacNeil's misery was largely of his own making, is probably correct although lacking in sympathy. John MacNeil's misfortunes were more than just the product of negative thinking.

In a Dickensian hell in Smithfield, Utah, MacNeil is appalled and humiliated while working in the home of a Sister Douglas, "a mean Curse of a woman" who makes him sleep on a child's mattress on an unheated kitchen floor. "With cold i am froze nearly stiff. The question may suggest to you, why don't she give you a larger mattress to lie on. She Says i must be like the indians (and) pull my knees up to my chin" (p. 108).

From the indignity of his first months in Utah, MacNeil stumbles through the remainder of his hapless life. Through a marriage to a widow sealed to another man, through the spiritual isolation of apostasy, all the way to his accidental—and, typically, uninsured—death in a mining accident, MacNeil is a victim. In his last years he is spared nothing, for his children are a source of despair. He wrote his sister, "I have Burried five of My Children and have five Left and am Sorry I didn't burry them also. Theyr Not worth Owning" (p. 286).

The bleak sketches of the lives of most of the MacNeil-Thompson family suggest the difficulty of adapting foreign working-class attitudes to the aggressively middle-class environment that Mormonism created for itself. A few, such as the young James MacNeil who drowned while trying to save his expensive team of horses, seemed to have made that necessary adaptation. However, class values and mobility are topics with which most Americans are uncomfortable, and it is doubtful if they will ever be a productive sub-area of research in Mormon history.

Instead, *A Good Time Coming* deserves to be read and appreciated for preserving tempering memories from a time more commonly celebrated with tales of spiritual and material success.

The letters have been skillfully handled by Dr. Buchanan, and the footnotes are both useful and thoughtful. His prefatory remarks, covering Scottish Chartism and related topics as well as preliminary family information, are succinct and germane. The book, part of the Utah Centennial Series, has been handsomely produced.

## Quest for Meaning

*The Chinchilla Farm: A Novel* by Judith Freeman (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 308 pp., \$19.95.

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

AS A CHILD IN WILLARD, Utah, Verna Flake remembered a search party being called when someone had let the neighbors' chinchillas out of their cage. In the end, fears that the exotic, expensive little animals would never be seen again came to naught, for the chinchillas proved to be too timid and too tame to go anywhere and huddled in two small groups close to the house. For a while we wonder if this is Judith Freeman's metaphor for small-town Mormonism which, by the standards of mainstream Christianity and American culture, seems so exotic on the surface yet sometimes comes to appear, as it does here under Freeman's examination, so banal as to be unable to contain a sensitive, searching soul. Eventually, though, we learn that Freeman wants more than that from her metaphor, for she explains to us

that chinchillas mate for life, and when a mate is removed, the survivor often goes into depression which can result in death.

This engrossing new novel is a story of lives dislocated by failed marriages and of the quest, not so much for new relationships (though that end either transpires or is implied in each case here), but rather for meaning in a world of failed dreams. It is a big order Freeman sets for herself, since such answers, if one is to avoid sentimentalism, cannot be neat or complete.

To make things even more difficult, she inhabits her story with characters aptly described on the dust jacket as "off-center" and delineates their world in intimate detail. Though the story moves from Willard, Utah, to Los Angeles to Baja, California, its main point of reference is the working-class, Mormon world of Willard, where Verna grew up and where the story opens. To some degree it is the television and country music-saturated world of working-class America, but here it is grafted onto the Mormon elements of sacrament meetings, garments, missionaries, and other institutions so exotic to the