

A Reasonable Approach to History and Faith

History and Faith: Reflections of a Mormon Historian by Richard D. Poll (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 134 pp., \$9.95.

Reviewed by F. Ross Peterson, professor of history at Utah State University and co-editor of *DIALOGUE*.

RICHARD POLL'S CONTRIBUTION to the study of Mormon history is significant. As a scholar and teacher, he has influenced many for decades. In this collection of ten essays, he reflects on his personal experience as a historian and the way that training has helped him interpret contemporary events.

Many readers find in Poll's work a reasonable, flexible approach to both history and faith. Poll gained intellectual immortality with the seminal essay on religious tolerance, "What the Church Means to People Like Me," first published by *DIALOGUE* in 1967. That essay, reprinted at least five times and still used as a touchstone of the Mormon experience, is reprinted in this volume as a foundation for what follows. Seven of the volume's essays appear in print in their entirety here for the first time.

Each offers readers opportunities to pause and reflect upon themselves and the way they view history. Poll's central binding thread is that Mormon history needs to be open and available. Indeed, he argues that religious faith and conviction

are personal; consequently Mormons should not fear proper, well-written, documented history.

In essays entitled "Our Changing Church," "Confronting the Skeletons," and "The Challenge of Living with Change," Poll reminds us that a dynamic, evolving organization cannot remain static nor does it achieve perfection. There is little room in either our religion or its history for fixed interpretations. These essays use concrete personal examples to document Poll's view of history's changing roles. He recalls a lengthy discussion with Joseph Fielding Smith concerning the relationship of faith to the historical and scientific method and concludes that neither gave ground. At another point, he discusses how he became a myth in Denmark. When Poll was recalled from his mission in Germany on the eve of World War II, he stopped in Denmark and spoke in a Danish branch. Because he spoke in Danish, some members concluded he had spoken in tongues. A legend was born. Poll's point is that people base their faith on a variety of experiences, even some that never happened.

This small volume merits close examination. Richard Poll knows the test of faith in history, and his journey can serve as a guidepost for many. However, the path is not straight, and there is always need for a Liahona as well as an Iron Rod.

Just Dead

Baptism for the Dead by Robert Irvine (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 239 pp., \$3.95. [The first of a projected series of detective novels featuring Moroni Traveler.]

Reviewed by Mark Edward Koltko, a psychotherapist and writer who lives in Newark, New Jersey.

LET'S ROLL BACK the clock a hundred years to a time when Catholics or Jews were more

exotic to the American reading public than they are now. If I were an aspiring novelist, I could gain an immediate audience by bringing my readers a behind-the-scenes look at life in these cultures. Of course, to keep the prejudices of my nineteenth-century WASP audience in mind, I would have to make my Jews into scheming Shylocks, with rabbis muttering into their beards about how "We are the Chosen People, and if we have to make ends meet by teasing some extra *gelt* from the *goyim*, then so be it. Blessed art thou, Creator of the Universe, who has made the gentile so stupid." My Catholics would be involved in an international Papist conspiracy, with slick, sinister Jesuits laying plans to assassinate Lincoln. My simple-minded nuns would fall to their knees in prayer whenever a Protestant walked by, making the sign of the cross and saying three Hail Mary's that the misguided sinner would accept baptism into the true church, or else die a sudden and painful death.

Actually, there is a sizable body of nineteenth-century literature like this about various minority cultural groups, Mormons among them. In his novel *Baptism for the Dead*, Robert Irvine attempts to follow where many have tread before. But prejudice is easier to tolerate when it belongs to people who are a century dead. Living prejudice is much less forgivable.

Baptism's plot offers murders, polygamous cults in the desert and the city, and long-hidden documents with scandalous implications for Church history. There are the elements of what could have been a good story here, although it is thinly drawn. But the book fails in its characterization of the Mormons, quasi-Mormons, and apostates who are the center of the story.

Irvine has kept his newsclippings in order, and he does provide "a wealth of local color," as one of the book's blurbs proclaims. He generally gets his Book of Mormon quotes correct. Readers meet fictionalized counterparts of Rulon Allred and Mark Hoffman. However, a good

novel requires something more than a few "colorful" details. Good fiction requires that the characters be *real*, even if they are very different from a reader's everyday experience; on those grounds, the author has failed miserably.

In Irvine's Mormondom, not only are faithful Saints narrow-minded proselyting machines, they will beat you up to prove it. Early in the book, the protagonist, a non-Mormon private detective, oddly named Moroni Traveler, meets an old high-school friend who is now a high-level Church Public Relations functionary, Willis Tanner:

Willis Tanner never seemed to change. . . . His face still screwed itself into a lopsided squint whenever he was under pressure. At the moment, it was completely askew.

"Jesus," Traveler said, "I know that look of yours."

Tanner condemned the blasphemy with a grimace.

"You know me, Willis. A sinner in the land of Zion."

Tanner shook his head sadly and made an obvious effort to relax his face. Then he brushed snow from the shoulders of his overcoat and turned his back as though expecting Traveler to help him out of the garment.

"I'm not one of your wives, Willis."

That brought Tanner whirling around, fists clenched. He was a high official of the church, sworn to defend it against the slander of polygamy.

Traveler raised his hands in mock surrender. "You wouldn't hit a defenseless gentile, would you?" . . .

Tanner was shifting his weight to attack when he slipped on the snow-slick tile underfoot. . . . He had to grab hold of the detective to keep from falling. The office was so small they ended up lurching into a wall.

"I took you once before," Tanner said to cover his embarrassment. "I could do it again." (pp. 22-23)

Get real! People like this are not remotely typical of Latter-day Saints (or "LDSers," as the author calls them). Yet Willis is no isolated crackpot; *every*