REVIEWS

Reappraisal of a Classic

Great Basin Kingdom Revisited: Contemporary Perspectives edited by Thomas G. Alexander (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1991), 164 pp., index, $17.95.

Reviewed by Gary Topping, instructor of history, Salt Lake Community College.

IN MAY 1988, the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University and the Mountain West Center for Western Studies at Utah State University jointly sponsored an interdisciplinary symposium to reappraise, on its thirtieth anniversary, Leonard J. Arrington's classic *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). Though neither editor nor publisher of this collection of essays presented on that occasion offers any explanation for the frustrating three-year delay in its appearance, the collection is worth the wait.

The carefully chosen participants are major scholars in literature, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, and geography. Since Arrington's book studies Mormon history and institutions, we should expect most of its appraisers to be Mormon as well. But not the least of this collection's assets is the presence of two card-carrying Gentiles—Donald Worster and Richard Etulain—whose fresh perspectives are sorely needed in the insular world of Mormon scholarship.

Like most collaborative projects, the essays vary considerably. Many contain personal reminiscences of Arrington and his book; however, geographer Ben Bennion and sociologist Stan Albrecht bolster their appraisals of limited themes in the book with original research presented here for the first time in tables, maps, and narrative. Donald Worster's essay in intellectual history focuses on what he calls "the irrigation myth" (p. 30)—the notion that irrigation of arid lands creates not only a new agriculture, but a new people as well—a Mormon idea which he believes exists as an uncritically accepted assumption in *Great Basin Kingdom.*

Bennion, Albrecht, and anthropologist Mark Leone all explore the influence of *Great Basin Kingdom* on their disciplines and, even more important, reasons why the book has had a limited effect. Their conclusions, of course, vary, but Bennion's invitation for increased communication and even collaboration among disciplines is implicit in most of these essays. If accepted, that invitation could well be the most significant achievement of the conference.

Are Mormon studies, as I alleged earlier, insular, incestuous, and intellectually sterile? Certainly the quality of the minds represented in this symposium indicate the possibility, at least, of creative, critical thought within the community of Mormon scholars. But in the concluding essay, "Beyond the Problems of Exceptionalist History," Charles S. Peterson asserts that few Mormon studies since 1958 have followed Arrington's precedent in relating Mormon history and institutions to the wider world of American thought and experience. Instead, Mormon scholars have hidden behind an assumption of Mormonism's profound exceptionalism, defeating comparative studies and absolving them of the obligation to relate their research to the larger world. Thus, meetings of the Mormon History Association attract only a few regular "token Gentiles," and Mormon articles and monographs feature tightly focused studies of

Mormon institutions and biographies of increasingly minor figures.

Editor Thomas G. Alexander takes up the cudgels against Peterson in his introduction, as he does against no other contributor, but it is difficult to avoid concluding that Peterson has the best of the debate. The narrow range of publishers of the best recent Mormon monographs cited in Alexander's footnotes and the limited circle of reviewers in Mormon periodicals strongly indicate that Mormon scholars are generally writing for each other.

If Peterson's indictment of Mormon scholarship is at all valid, then young Mormon scholars could hardly do better than to dust off their copies of *Great Basin Kingdom* and try to fathom some of the genius of that great book. Along the way, they may find ways to connect Mormon studies once again with the nourishing bloodstream of American scholarship.

I Laugh, Therefore I Am

Only When I Laugh by Elouise Bell (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 136 pp. $9.95.

Reviewed by Miriam B. Murphy, associate editor, *Utah Historical Quarterly*.

A STUDENT OF ZEN BUDDHISM meditated daily on koans assigned by the Zen master. None of his insights impressed the master until one day, after years of thought about these puzzles, the student timidly began his exposition of a koan and then burst into uncontrollable laughter, at which point the Zen master clapped him on the back and shouted his congratulations.

Laughter is not necessarily the appropriate response to every koan or to all of life's mysteries and travails, but Elouise Bell, like the Zen master, leads us to suspect that laughter may be one of the great liberating forces in the universe. Indeed, I laugh, therefore I am (which Bell may well have coined) is probably a more useful precept than that originated by Réné Descartes. From Descartes' time to our own, the world has been awash with the weighty thoughts of competing philosophies—many of them ridiculous and some downright dangerous. Imagine, for example, how different history might have been had Elouise or an equally gifted wit cut her teeth on a turgid copy of *Das Kapital* when it first plopped off the press.

The thirty-six entries included in *Only When I Laugh* cover a range of cultural topics from Z (for zucchini) to C (for Christmas). Many were originally published in Bell's *Network* column. Their collection in book form is a stroke of good luck for those interested in literary history, because her work represents a rare genre in Utah and Mormon letters. Utah has poets aplenty, historians, writers of song lyrics and fiction in its many forms, and even playwrights and philosophers—but where are the humorists (other than cartoonists)? Possibly the late Pulitzer Prize winner and one-time Utahn Phyllis McGinley fits in this niche, as does the late *Salt Lake Tribune* columnist Dan Valentine. Really, though, the field isn't overpopulated.

Bell's humor is disarming rather than armor-piercing; moreover, it usually directs the reader to a closer examination of life and the cultural norms we live by. "The Mug-wump" asks us to look again at the extremist positions of the clenched-fist feminist and the don't-you-dare-call-me-one-of-them camps. Bell engages the reader in a dialogue that gently restores equilibrium by dispelling the polarizing notion that true-believer zeal is superior to a more open, less vehement view. In the context of *Only When I Laugh*, we could call it the Elouisean mean.

"The Meeting" is classic satire. It describes a typical Sunday morning church service in a familiar format of announcements, music, and talks; but in this instance all the key players are women—