

Mormon Women and Families

Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons by Lawrence Foster (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 343 pp. inc. notes.

Reviewed by Glenda Riley, the Alexander M. Bracken Professor of History at Ball State University and the author of numerous books and articles concerning women in the American West.

IN *WOMEN, FAMILY, AND UTOPIA*, Lawrence Foster, an associate professor of American history at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, establishes two goals: to expand on his research regarding "relations between men and women in the early Shaker, Oneida Perfectionist, and Mormon movements for those who may never have heard of their experiments" and to further explore the way these groups dealt with the issues of "the changing role of women, the nature of the family, and the impact of sexuality . . . on society" (p. xiv). To accomplish this, Foster divides this book along the same lines as his 1984 *Religion and Sexuality*; he begins with the Shakers, proceeds to the Oneida Community, and ends with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Unlike the earlier book, however, these sections, and especially their individual chapters, read more like discrete essays than a monograph unified by an overarching theme. Foster maintains that his chief intent is to view these three groups "as part of a total gestalt, system, or way of life" that will offer insight into our own era. But because he has chosen to avoid any application of a "theoretical analysis" or of modern feminist thought to his approach and has instead "let these groups speak for themselves about their attitudes

toward the role of women in society," the messages to be drawn from their experiments are not readily apparent (p. xv).

On closer examination, it is clear that Foster has drawn heavily on his *Religion and Sexuality* in ways other than just organizational structure. Although he claims that the previously published portions of this current book have been "substantially revised" (p. xiv), in reality many paragraphs, and even pages, are close paraphrases of material from his earlier volume. For example, comparison with his previous book of sections concerning the difficulties faced by missionaries' wives (p. 131), historians' "head-counts" of Joseph Smith's wives (p. 136), the refusal of Smith's wives to identify the father of their children (p. 141), the account of James J. Strang's birth and childhood (p. 172), a description of Jane Snyder Richards (p. 183), and an analysis of the *Woman's Exponent* (p. 194) show few changes from the original wording. Indeed, a substantial amount of material regarding Mormons seems to have been taken from *Religion and Sexuality* and rearranged without significant revision.

Among the new information Foster does add is his hypothesis that Joseph Smith spent a great deal of time and energy establishing polygamy in the years before his death because he may have suffered from "manic-depressive disease," as did his son David Hyrum and at least six other of Smith's male descendants (p. 162). First alerted to this possibility by a Mormon psychiatrist, Foster examines Smith's expansiveness, grandiosity, and hyper-sexuality between 1841 and 1844, arguing that these characteristics could well have been symptoms of manic-depressive disorder (p. 165).