Personality and Motivation in Utah Historiography

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BEGINNING IN THE 1930S UTAH HISTORIOGRAPHY began to grow rapidly in sophistication. Although the causes of that maturation have yet to be studied closely, it seems clear that federal relief programs for writers under the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—particularly the Historical Records Survey and the Federal Writers' Project—which provided a new generation of historians with an immense body of previously inaccessible source material and paid them to use it in writing history, was one of the primary causes. Juanita Brooks, who organized and led the vigorous project of collecting original historical material in southern Utah, and Dale L. Morgan, who worked his way up through the Writers' Project, were two of the most notable beneficiaries of the federal programs.[1]

They were joined by others unaffiliated with the WPA and whose motives for writing history were diverse but who shared a similar historiographical orientation. Charles Kelly, a printer whose avocational interest in western trails and outlaws and whose ferocious antireligious bias conspired to keep him in Utah (because Mormons made convenient targets for his blasts), began researching and publishing Utah history in the late

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1. The major works of Brooks and Morgan include Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1950); *John D. Lee: Pioneer Builder—Zealot—Scapegoat* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1961); *A Mormon Chronicle: The Diaries of John D. Lee*, 2 vols. (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1955); *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout, 1844-1861*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964); and Dale L. Morgan, *The Great Salt Lake* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947); *The Humboldt: Highroad of the West* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1943); *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1953); and his posthumously published fragmentary history of the Mormons, John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

1920s. Two less prolific members of the group were Stanley Ivins, in his day the most profound student of Mormon polygamy, and Roderic Korns, whose passionate interest in historic trails across Utah would be brought to posthumous publication by Morgan.[2]

Peripheral to this group, though working with various members of it with varying degrees of closeness, were Bernard DeVoto, Fawn Brodie, and Wallace Stegner. Though each of these three wrote books of importance to Utah, local history never contained them to the degree it did the others, and all made their greatest mark outside of Utah and in other fields than Utah history.

One of the factors uniting these historians was their lack of formal, academic training in history; none of them held so much as a bachelor's degree in the field. In fact, the only graduate degrees in the entire group were those held by Brooks, with a master's, and Stegner, with a Ph.D.— both in English. In time, though, the trend toward historiographical maturity spread into the academy as young scholars, primarily Mormons and to a considerable degree, no doubt, inspired by the critical and scientific spirit of those named above, began leaving Utah to gain Ph.D.s and return to teach in the state. This group included such scholars as David E. Miller, LeRoy R. Hafen, Brigham D. Madsen, Everett L. Cooley, A. Russell Mortensen, and Leonard J. Arrington.

As this process of maturation spread into academia, its historiographical unity became less tight, though its roots in the work of the original group were still discernible. The historiographical orientation of that group was generally toward a strong preference for the scientific, critical use of original sources over the received wisdom of Mormon church-sponsored secondary accounts. Their work also tended to be closely confined to concerns of chronology and geography—in short, to a narration of surface events. The history of ideas, of literature, and even of religion in its theological and philosophical content, and of the psychology of personality and motivation did not loom large in their conception of history.

The books written by this group have achieved the status of standard literature in Utah history; they are the foundation upon which subsequent literature has built. To a large degree they defined what the important topics in Utah history were and showed the proper way to deal with those topics. They established a tradition within which, for better or for worse, subsequent Utah history has been written. Finally, as Charles S. Peterson

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2. The major works of this trio are Charles Kelly, *Salt Desert Trails* (Salt Lake City: Western Printing Co., 1930); *The Outlaw Trail* (Salt Lake City: Western Printing Co., 1938); Stanley S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," *Western Humanities Review* 10 (Summer 1956): 229-39; and J. Roderic Korns, "West from Fort Bridger," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 19 (1951).

has pointed out, they broadened Utah and Mormon history by relating their materials to regional and national themes.[3]

Yet for all the work accomplished in that tradition, its narrow focus on chronological and geographical narrative has sometimes blinded its authors to rich potential in their sources and has even at times masked egregious interpretive biases. There are many instances of this problem, but three examples from the works of Dale Morgan, Juanita Brooks, and David E. Miller demonstrate, by comparison of the original sources to what the historian did with them, that the scholar's preoccupation with the chronological and geographical surfaces of historical reality has led to imperfect exploitation of the sources.

THE ENIGMATIC TRAPPER

The career of the mountain man Jedediah Strong Smith has attracted several historians, but few have ventured beyond an account of the external facts of his life. While one may regret in each instance the lack of probing into Smith's psychology, for the materials to support such a probing are rich, the disappointment is greatest in the case of Dale Morgan, whose reconstruction of Smith's life is otherwise the most complete.

Maurice S. Sullivan, to whom history is indebted for discovery and publication of the diaries of Jedediah Strong Smith and for the first full biography of that mountain man, paints an engaging literary picture of Smith's winter camp on the Wind River in 1829-30.[4] Among the details in his description, two are significant. The first is a detail of omission, for unlike most of his colleagues in the fur trade, Smith was never known to take up with an Indian woman in the winter, and upon that and other personal idiosyncracies hang much of Smith's character. The other is the presence of a half dozen baby beavers wandering around the camp, one of which wore a red collar and was Smith's special pet. Their presence in the camp of one whose explorations had accounted for the destruction of many thousands of their species is unusual enough, but in this case they are important as symbols, for Smith's life was taking an abrupt change of course. He was leaving the mountains the following summer and planned to take the little beavers east to remind him, presumably, of the source of the considerable wealth he had won in the mountains.

Perhaps those symbols of his past, his future, and his atypical nature

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3. Charles S. Peterson, "Beyond the Problems of Exceptionalist History," in Thomas G. Alexander, ed., *Great Basin Kingdom Revisited: Contemporary Perspectives* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1991), 142.

4. Maurice S. Sullivan, *Jedediah Smith: Trader and Trail Breaker* (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1936), 1-3; 198-200.

were not lost upon him, for he was clearly in a reflective mood regarding each of those matters. To take advantage of the fact that William Sublette was leaving for the East on Christmas Day and could deliver letters for him, Smith wrote several: one was a lengthy report to William Clark of his recent explorations and tribulations at the hands of Indians, one was to his parents, and one was to his brother Ralph.[5] Perhaps the lengthy recitation of his record in the mountains helped trigger his reflections on its meaning, for the two family letters attempt to reveal an inner Jedediah Smith—his character, his motives, his attitudes toward civilization, and the civilized obligations of a free-ranging trapper. Together with another letter to his brother the next year, they offer the potential of almost the only sustained look into the inner life of one of the most enigmatic personalities in the history of the fur trade. Instead, historians who have tried to deal with Smith's personality have found that they only deepened the enigma, and so scholars have largely failed to resolve the puzzle of that unusual man.

The character of the typical mountain man has become one of the stereotypes of western history: the hard-living, hard-playing fatalist who wrested a perilous livelihood from icy mountain streams under frequent risk of Indian attack only to blow it all in a week of riotous release at the annual rendezvous and return for the fall hunt with a newly mortgaged outfit. The mystery of Jedediah Smith is that he excelled at the mountain man's virtues while exhibiting none of his vices. His deep Methodist faith kept him from drinking, smoking, swearing, and consorting with women. If the licentious life held no lure for him, then, what was it that sustained him through the three greatest Indian massacres in the history of the trade, near death on a waterless crossing of the Great Salt Lake Desert, and untold other risks and privations? Men have endured that much for money, but Smith never hints that material gain was an end in itself.

Instead, his letters are filled with religious regrets and remorse, and the desire soon to quit the mountains to take up once again a life of regular religious observance. "I feell the need of the wa[t]ch & care of a Christian Church," he wrote to his parents, "—you may well Suppose that our Society is of the Roug[h]est kind, Men of good morals seldom enter into business of this kind—I hope you will remember me before a Throne of grace." And to his brother, "As it respects my Spiritual welfare, I hardly durst speak[.] I find myself one of the most ungrateful; unthankful, Creatures imaginable[.] Oh when Shall I be under the care of a Christian Church? I have need of your Prayers. I wish our Society to bear me up before a Throne of Grace." Finally, after informing his brother that "Providence has made me Steward of a Small pittance" (it was in fact a rather

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5. The text of these letters is conveniently available in Appendix B of Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 350-60.

considerable fortune), Smith gives instructions for dispensing that money for the benefit of his family and Dr. Titus Gordon Vespasian Simons, his old teacher. Then Smith offers the following explanation for his tribulations as a mountain man:

> It is, that I may be able to help those who stand in need, that I face every danger—it is for this, that I traverse the Mountains covered with eternal Snow—it is for this that I pass over the Sandy Plains, in heat of summer, thirsting for water, and am well pleased if I can find a shade, instead of water, where I may cool my overheated body—it is for this that I go for days without eating, & am pretty well satisfied if I can gather a few roots, a few Snails, or, much better satisfied if we can affo[r]d our selves a piece of Horse Flesh, or a fine Roasted Dog, and, most of all, it is for this, that I deprive myself of the privilege of Society & the satisfaction of the Converse of My Friends![6]

What to make of all this? There is much in it, to be sure, to tempt the psychohistorian: the man driven by religious guilt, courting privation, suffering, and perhaps even death to expiate some unspecified sin. But for any biographer, seeking the marrow of the man, these passages are frustratingly oblique, yet arresting in their frankness and passion, and one would think the literature of the fur trade would be laden—if not overladen—with ventured analyses of this enigmatic trapper.

As a matter of fact, no scholar to date, including Dale Morgan, author of the most complete biography of Smith, has attempted to penetrate much beyond the surface of the man. In Morgan's *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, the subtitle is the tail that wags the dog, for he is much more interested in plotting, as it were, every last hoofprint of Smith's horses in exploring the American West than he is in probing for the reasons that drew—or drove—Smith there in the first place. With few exceptions, the

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6. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*, 350-53. Smith's narrative of his 1826-27 journey to California also offers interesting evidence of his psychology and motives that include no religious element. Instead, his statement near the beginning of that account focuses on a spirit of adventure and exhibits even a touch of egotism. Unfortunately, that narrative was not discovered until after the appearance of Morgan's biography. "In taking charge of our S[outh] western Expedition," Smith wrote, "I followed the bent of my strong inclination to visit this unexplored country and unfold those hidden resources of wealth and bring to light those wonders which I readily imagined a country so extensive might contain. I must confess that I had at that time a full share of that ambition (and perhaps foolish ambition) which is common in a greater or less degree to all the active world. I wa[nted] to be the first to view a country on which the eyes of a white man had never gazed and to follow the course of rivers that run through a new land." George R. Brooks, ed., *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith: His Personal Account of the Journey to California, 1826-1827* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1977); rprnt. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 36-37.

book is the story of movement through space and time, with only the most perfunctory account of ideas, personality, and motivation.

After quoting quite fully, for example, the letters excerpted above, Morgan ventures a scant two paragraphs of general observations and speculations about Smith's personality, without ever really explicating the passages themselves and wrestling with what they might indicate about the man and his motives. "There was a sternness and austerity to his life," Morgan observes flatly, citing as evidence Smith's lack of interest in women, liquor, and tobacco, and his cleanliness in body and speech. "He may have been entirely humorless," Morgan continues, but adds that there was honesty, directness, and openness that won him friends in spite of it. Finally, Smith had courage and survival skills, but those were commonplace in that place and time, and Smith stood apart by adding to those qualities a high level of intelligence that, Morgan observes, "has never been commonplace, in the West or anywhere."[7] And with that, Morgan is back in the next paragraph to his narration of Smith's travels.

In fairness to Morgan, one must note that he is not the only student of Jedediah Smith to fail to rise to the bait of Smith's introspective passages. The poet John G. Neihardt, for example, regards Smith's religious faith as simply a source of comfort in tribulation:

> There'd be a freshness in his face and eyes
> When he came striding from a spell of straying
> Off trail somewhere. I know now he'd been praying.
> You'd swear he knew a spring along the way,
> And kept it for himself! . . .[8]

Without denying the comforting power of prayer, one might find it even more compelling to place Smith in the company of the great saints throughout history, for whom faith was as much a driving, even a tormenting, force as it was a comfort.

Maurice S. Sullivan quotes extensively from Smith's letters as well, but fails to venture even a sentimental explanation of them as Neihardt offers. He even compounds the sin by listing the books found in Smith's possession after his death and speculating that Smith may have read them in the evenings to illiterate companions—as we know literate trappers often did—but fails to analyze the values contained in them that may have shaped Smith's personality and character.[9]

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7. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, 312-13.

8. John G. Neihardt, "The Song of Jed Smith," in *The Mountain Men* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1961); rprnt. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 31.

9. Sullivan, *Jedediah Smith: Trader and Trail Breaker*, 200-202.

Only Harrison Clifford Dale, among the major students of Smith's life, makes even a tentative effort to probe beneath the surface and sentimental aspects of Smith's religion. "His letters," Dale observes, "express his spiritual longings and the crushing sense of his own sin and unworthiness. . . . The same sense of unregeneration and of unsatisfied groping after spiritual justification" in the environment of western New York during Smith's youth that led another Smith—Joseph—to establish the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[10]

Morgan's *Jedediah Smith* is an acknowledged classic of western history and biography. Its careful narrative of Smith's travels and measured assessment of his place in the history of the fur trade and western exploration are, given the sources available to Morgan at the time, definitive. But in another sense it is a curiously shallow book, for Morgan chose to lavish his formidable analytical talents on geography rather than on psychology, and one lays down the book with a sense of emptiness, a feeling that one has encountered action, but not the actor.

THE CONVERSION OF A ZEALOT

Stylistic sophistication was a hallmark of all of the historians considered here, but one of the most dramatic passages in their works is Juanita Brooks's account of the conversion of John D. Lee that appears at the outset of her biography of him. Sitting beside the corpse of his two-year-old daughter, Lee in his emotional distress resumes reading the Book of Mormon, which he had begun during her illness. He is engrossed by the book and reads all night, but his emotion reaches its apex when he comes upon the passage in the book of Moroni, chapter 10, that enjoins readers to ask God sincerely for confirmation of the truth of what they have read. The words on the page appear to Lee to have a "lifted, bold, three-dimensional look," and he drops to his knees to follow their injunction. It is a moment of blinding revelation: "Suddenly he was filled with a joy that was a mixture of exhilaration and peace. He knew! Beyond all shadow of a doubt, he knew!" It is important to note that Brooks emphasizes the irrationality of the experience: "Other men might dissect this book, argue as to its geography, search it for evidences of fraud, compare it with contemporary

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10. Harrison Clifford Dale, *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822–1829* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1918), 300. Novelist Don Berry, in his popular history of the fur trade, states but does not develop the thesis of Smith's religion as a torment instead of a comfort: "Smith was a haunted man; his letters to his family constantly reiterate his tremendous feelings of guilt in religious matters" (*A Majority of Scoundrels* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1971], 74).

publications, but Lee brushed all these aside. For him, there was but one answer. The book was true!"[11]

It was obviously the crucial experience in Lee's life. Brooks says his wife was also converted when he told her the next morning what had happened, and they immediately began planning to move to be with the Saints. All the drama and tragedy of the rest of his life are contained in that moment: his membership in the Danites and the Council of Fifty, the westward migration of the church, the arduous colonization of southern Utah, the Mountain Meadows massacre, Lee's Ferry, the arrest, trial, and execution. What forces and events brought him to this crisis? One need not be much of a sociologist or psychologist—or historian, for that matter—to know that such episodes, unforeseen though they may be, always have their antecedents.

Having captured the reader's attention with that dramatic opening, Brooks then flashes back to Lee's birth in 1812 to fill in the more mundane details that brought him to the conversion crisis. It is a pathetic story of orphanage, child abuse, and physical and emotional hardship through which Lee was able to persevere only by a capacity for hard work assisted by a "proud, perverse streak in his nature" that enabled him to keep external circumstance from getting the best of him. His pride and perversity alienated him from a fiancee who unwisely demanded that he give up a gambling habit as a condition of their marriage. Lee intended to give up the habit anyway, but he required that the initiative come from himself rather than from anyone else. Marriage to another came in time, as did three children and a certain modest prosperity as a farmer.

So much for the external facts of his first twenty-six years and something on the development of his personality. Brooks's sketch of Lee's religious background is much more brief; in fact, it is virtually nonexistent. Religion entered Lee's life, by her account, only the previous fall when he had met a Mormon missionary named King. Elder King lodged with the Lees for a time, but Lee forbade him to preach within his hearing. Lee was nevertheless impressed with King's sincerity and character, and his curiosity was piqued by the unusual hostility Mormon preaching provoked in members of other churches. In time, Lee's friend Levi Stewart, whose wife had become a Mormon though he himself was yet holding out, gave Lee the copy of the Book of Mormon that, with little apparent peripheral support, effected his conversion the night of his daughter's death.

Brooks's sketch of Lee's early life is a masterpiece of the kind of persistent search through fugitive local sources—family histories, genealogies, local public records—that is the hallmark of her best work and made

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11. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 17-18.

available to her insights that eluded less diligent scholars. But those insights rarely penetrated very far beneath the surface, so that when she faced the necessity of explaining a psychological and spiritual revolution in a man's life, she found herself out of her depth.

Her response to that dilemma was to retreat to stereotype. Her account of Lee's conversion presents it as an almost completely adventitious event of the kind dear to missionary mythology: the gospel as presented in the Mormon scriptures is so true and so compelling that any reasonable person encountering it will be converted. External agencies of persuasion, the subject's background and psychology—all are scarcely even secondary in importance to the blinding truth of the gospel.

Furthermore, Brooks's retreat to stereotype in the face of her lack of confidence in dealing with psychological and spiritual themes forced her to ignore potentially fruitful material in her sources and even to falsify facts that did not fit the stereotype. Admittedly, if the sources for the external facts of Lee's early life are fugitive and meager, the sources for his interior development are even more scanty. And they are tainted as well: the only significant primary source we have is Lee's own *Mormonism Unveiled,* the autobiography written while awaiting his execution for his role in the Mountain Meadows massacre. The title betrays its bias. Written in the full fury of his wrath over his betrayal by his church, prompted in its creation by anti-Mormon zealots who sought to use Lee as a tool for discrediting Mormonism, and forced to draw upon memories staled by a half century or more of elapsed time, it is anything but the type of source the historian would like to have. Nevertheless, it contains the seeds from which a somewhat more accurate and psychologically persuasive account of Lee's conversion could have grown rather than the one Brooks presents.

In the first place, Brooks mentions no religious affiliation in Lee's youth, but in fact there was a strong background in Roman Catholicism. "My father and mother were both Catholics," Lee relates, "were raised in that faith; I was christened in that Church. William Morrison and Louise Phillips stood as my representative god-father and god-mother. It is from that Church record that I could alone obtain the facts and date that referred to my birth."[12] Lee gives no account of the extent of his participation in the Catholic church, but he does indicate that one Catholic teaching, at least, became deeply rooted in his personal values: "My life was one of misery and wretchedness; and if it had not been for my strong religious convictions, I certainly would have committed suicide, to have escaped from the miserable condition I was in. I then believed, as I do still, that for the crime

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12. John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled . . .* (St. Louis: M. E. Mason, 1891), 37.

of suicide there was no forgiveness in this world, or that which is to come."[13] Somewhere along the line, Lee abandoned whatever formal belief and participation he had ever given to the Catholic church, with the exception of a sort of residual, though creedless, Christianity. On the eve of his conversion to Mormonism, he says, "I was not a member of any church, and considered the religion of the day as merely the opinions of men who preached for hire and worldly gain. I believed in God and in Christ, but I did not see any denomination that taught the apostolic doctrine as set forth in the New Testament."[14]

Lee's conversion, then, grew not from the religious void Brooks seems to think existed in Lee's mind, but rather from one religion that had grown cold and amorphous to another that seemed to fill a religious hunger that had developed in him. And that religious hunger began to gnaw at him a good while before the crisis of his daughter's death. The fires of revivalism burned brightly on the Illinois frontier, and Lee's large house was often both lodging and pulpit for traveling preachers of a variety of persuasions. Brooks's story of Lee's initial coldness toward the Mormon missionary, Elder King, is in fact the exact opposite of Lee's own account, which says that he not only allowed King to speak, but actually invited him to do so one evening following a Methodist sermon, and was so impressed that he ceased allowing any other preachers to speak there.[15]

If Lee's conversion had none of the abruptness of Brooks's account, neither did it have the cataclysmic emotional content she describes. In fact, in a place and time when cataclysmic emotional conversions were quite common, Lee's conversion seems to stand out by its very deliberateness and rationality. "I reflected," Lee said, "I determined, as every honest man should do, to fairly investigate his [King's] doctrines, and to do so with a prayerful heart. The more I studied the question, the more interested I became." So great was the rationality of Lee's approach to conversion to Mormonism that he rejected an opportunity to attend a Mormon meeting where speaking in tongues and other divine signs would be proof of the truth of Mormonism. "I want no signs," Lee told his companions. "I believe the gospel they preach on principle and reason, not upon signs—its consistency is all I ask. All I want are natural, logical and reasonable arguments, to make up my mind from."[16]

By the night of his daughter's death, the crisis on which Brooks hangs his entire conversion, Lee's conversion was already nearly complete. He indicates that he had by then "left off [his] frivolity and commenced to live

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13. Ibid., 38-39.
14. Ibid., 51.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 54.

a more moral life,"[17] and whatever remained to be done that night seems to have been little more than a reading for himself of the Book of Mormon, the source from which King had been drawing his doctrines, and confirming that they were indeed what Lee wanted to believe. "The night she lay a corpse," he says, "I finished reading the Book of Mormon. I never closed my eyes in sleep from the time I commenced until I finished the book. I read it after asking God to give me knowledge to know if it was genuine and of Divine authority."[18] There are, in Lee's account, no words standing out on the page; there is no specific mention of the passage from Moroni on which Brooks hangs so much, only a general prayer for enlightenment that one would expect from an inquirer into any religion, and that before he had even reached the book of Moroni. There is no dropping to the knees, no emotional exclamations. Instead, there is the matter-of-fact statement that "by careful examination I found that it was in strict accord with the Bible and the gospel therein contained."[19]

One would like to be able to defend Brooks's account of Lee's conversion on grounds of literary license. Her literary instinct is sound, for Lee's conversion was indisputably the decisive event of his life, even more so than the Mountain Meadows Massacre, for it was the fierce nature of his conversion to Mormonism that led to the massacre. But I suggest instead that her alteration of factual materials and her invention of others, whatever its scholarly ethics, deprived her of the opportunity to construct an accurate and persuasive picture of the personality that perpetrated the greatest tragedy in Mormon history. If it is true, as the Catholic writer Thomas Merton has said, that the Nazis were able to effect atrocities on such a hellish scale not because they were insane, but rather because they were so ruthlessly consistent in their sanity,[20] then perhaps something similar could be said about personality characteristics of John D. Lee first revealed in his conversion narrative. On the eve of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the Paiutes applied the nickname "Yawgetts" (crybaby) to Lee for the way he wept as he pled for the lives of the emigrants.[21] That the man had a tender, emotional side is well attested by family and friends who often benefitted from his kindness. But once the plan was set and the orders given at the Mountain Meadows, it was not Yawgetts who prevailed, but the man of unshrinking commitment to cold, hard reason.

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17. Ibid., 52.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Thomas Merton, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 45-52.

21. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 210-11.

THE UNSAINTLY SAINT

The subtitle of David E. Miller's *Hole-in-the-Rock: An Epic in the Coloni-zation of the American West* contains the earliest indication of the author's attitude toward his subject. If one misses the message there, the dedication to the Hole-in-the-Rockers themselves, "whose valiant efforts brought American culture to one of the remotest regions of the United States," makes it even more explicit. Finally, in the preface, Miller states in almost the most naked terms possible his admiration for those pioneers:

> In all the annals of the West, replete with examples of courage, tenacity and ingenuity, there is no better example of the indomitable pioneer spirit than that of the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition of the San Juan Mission. No pioneer company ever built a wagon road through wilder, rougher, more inhospitable country, still one of the least-known regions in America. None ever demonstrated more courage, faith, and devotion to a cause than this group of approximately two hundred fifty men, women, and children
> . . . . They proved that virtually nothing was impossible for a zealous band of pioneers. The story of the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition is an excellent case-study of the highest type of pioneer endeavor that broke the wilderness and brought civilization to the West.[22]

In the face of this genuflecting admiration, then, what is one to make of the direct contradiction on the next page, where Miller says that his "sole objective in this study is to present a true and unbiased narrative of this outstanding pioneer venture"?[23] The sentence itself contains the contradiction: if one believes the venture was "outstanding," how can one claim to be presenting a "true and unbiased narrative" of it? Miller believed in scholarly objectivity, yet at the same time objectivity had its limits. What was his conception of the relationship of the historian to his or her material, and what kind of history did that relationship produce?

Well before Miller began his research on the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition (or "The San Juan Mission," its official title), the episode had already become enshrined in the Mormon mind along with such events as the Haun's Mill massacre, the handcart journeys, and the sea gulls and the crickets, as one of the fundamental historical myths that defined Mormon identity.[24] Each of those myths had its message, and the message of this

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22. David E. Miller, *Hole-in-the-Rock: An Epic in the Colonization of the American West* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959), ix.

23. Miller, *Hole-in-the-Rock*, x.

24. I use the term "myth" in two different ways: to indicate "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image," without regard to empirical truth of that image; and to indicate a historical untruth. The context should make the meaning clear. The first usage was defined by Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The*

one was that dogged obedience to counsel can work miracles. Those who had persevered through the Hole-in-the-Rock tribulations were accorded a status, at least in southeastern Utah, analogous to that of a *Mayflower* descendant in Massachusetts. As the Hole-in-the-Rock legend grew, fact became encrusted with myth while descendants vied for position in the Hole-in-the-Rock hierarchy. Who drove the first wagon through the Hole? Whose wagon was it? Even the identity of the members of the expedition became clouded as latecomers struggled for a place in the pantheon.

History, then, for Miller meant something similar to what it meant for Morgan and Brooks: establishment of a simple factual record. Accordingly, one of the fundamental results of his research appears in Appendix I, where he presents his arduously compiled list of the members of the mission. Miller's research is impressive. Very few diaries and other primary sources were publicly available when he began his work, and even official church records had not been carefully studied. Miller gained the confidence of Hole-in-the-Rock descendants who had such materials, which he published for the most part in their entirety as appendices. And Miller always regarded his field work as his methodological hallmark; there was no part of the route from Escalante to Bluff that did not bear several sets of Miller's footprints.

To an observer less enchanted than Miller with Hole-in-the-Rock hagiography, his preoccupation with simple factual narrative punctuated by adulatory flights regarding personality and motive results in an unsatisfying product. For one thing, to a skeptic who knows something of the geography and subsequent history of that country, the San Juan pioneers can easily appear as obstinate dupes to a misguided scheme that should reasonably have been abandoned. Two much better routes from southwestern to southeastern Utah, one of them scouted by the Hole-in-the-Rockers themselves, were already known, and two more better ones—Hall's Crossing and the "Dandy Crossing" at Hite—were discovered shortly after 1880. One easily reaches the conclusion that a little less urgency, a little less eagerness to suffer for the church, and a little better scouting would have rendered the Hole-in-the-Rock tribulations unnecessary.

Miller's bias, moreover, blinded him to material in his sources that could have led to a much more realistic assessment of individual personalities and motives than the pious stereotypes he gives us. One wishes in Miller, as in Morgan and Brooks, for a little deeper probing, a little less satisfaction with surface narrative, and a little more sensitivity to individual uniqueness.

There is, for instance, good evidence that some of the Hole-in-the-

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Rockers fell short of the saintly image of Miller's stereotype. The figure of Amasa Barton, who comes to light a few times in the history of San Juan County, forces Miller into tortured interpretations of his sources in order to keep Barton among the faithful.

Barton first appears in the record at the Cheese Camp where, with Parley Butt, James Dunton, and another unnamed partner, he quarreled with the rest of the party over the large herd of horses the four were driving to the San Juan to trade with the Indians. The horses were eating most of the already meager grass that the jaded wagon teams needed. It was a serious conflict, for those with wagons were ready to spill blood if necessary to ensure their safe passage. The Cheese Camp crisis was only the culmination of friction that had infected the expedition from the beginning. Miller ignores perhaps the most fundamental source of the friction: the divergent goals of Barton and his partners from those of the rest of the company. Barton, a single man with no family and, as time would show, no love for farming, was motivated by simple capitalistic gain rather than the noble goal of establishing an agricultural outpost of Zion.

Mediation by Platte D. Lyman, *de facto* leader of the mission, averted disaster by getting Barton's group to move on speedily with their horses, thus leaving behind enough feed for the other animals. Miller quotes Charles Redd to the effect that "many in the company were bitterly sorry when a compromise was made. . . . Some of the party never quite forgot this incident, and never quite forgave the men." But he pulls his punch by observing that it was amazing that more such conflicts did not develop, considering the stress the party was under and "the fact that the emigrants got along so well together under the trying circumstances demonstrates that high-caliber citizens composed the body of the company."[25]

Even after being sent on ahead, Barton continued to haunt the main party. Lyman's diary a week later, as the pioneers were building the road off Grey Mesa, reports that "the constable of Escalante and 2 other men came into camp looking for stolen stock went ahead to see some stock that had been taken on a few days ago." Two days later, "the constable and party returned today having found 2 stolen horses in the herd of Jim Dunton & Amasa Barton." Once again Miller finds a favorable interpretation for the event: "This does not say that Dunton and Barton had stolen the horses in question. It is very likely that the animals had strayed into the herds of the expedition as the latter passed through the Escalante region. The fact that no arrests were made would tend to indicate that no man was actually accused of stealing."[26]

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25. Miller, *Hole-in-the-Rock*, 127.
26. Ibid., 167, 177-78n78.

Perhaps. But there were already hard feelings between the Hole-in-the-Rockers and the people of Escalante from the past fall, when the latter had charged exorbitant prices for supplies, and one has to wonder if Barton and his partners were not simply giving themselves a rebate, thinking they would be taking the horses a long ways over rough terrain and selling them quickly, perhaps before they were missed in Escalante or could be recovered. And the constable, facing four horse thieves with only two deputies to back him up in a very remote spot, might well have decided that two stolen horses were not worth the danger of trying to make arrests and considered himself lucky just to get the horses back. Charles Redd told Miller that Barton already had a reputation as something of a rough customer: "Amasa was a big, husky, somewhat belligerent young man and thought that he could take care of himself in any company. Both he and Parley [Butt] were somewhat stiff-necked."[27] The truth, of course, cannot be known from the scanty available evidence, but the point is that Miller does not seem to grasp the darker potential of his sources.

Barton reappears in San Juan County history one last time. After the establishment of Bluff, Barton's wanderlust chafed under the stability required in Mormon colonies, which asked that the community stay together and each member either farm or ply his trade in town. For a time he worked as a cowboy for the big non-Mormon LC outfit, but he reappeared in the San Juan settlement to marry Parthenia Hyde, schoolteacher daughter of pioneer William Hyde. Perhaps remembering the profits he and his partners had made in horse deals with Indians, Barton went back into the trading business with his new father-in-law at Montezuma Creek. The treacherous San Juan River rose, though, and wiped them out. Hoping still to continue as a trader, Barton and his wife built another trading post a few miles downriver from Bluff near the foot of San Juan Hill.

The belligerence and obstinacy Charles Redd reported in Barton's character were the wrong personality for an Indian trader, who needed to be firm but reasonable, and brought him to a tragic end. Miller wrote a version of the story as a feature article for the *Salt Lake Tribune*.[28] According to him, Barton and two Navajos got into a dispute about the amount owed on pawned jewelry belonging to one of the Indians' wives. The Indian tried to cheat Barton by refusing to pay the amount previously agreed and offered instead a broken pistol in payment. The argument became violent, and Barton attempted to throw out the Indians. One of them got a rope around him and tried to shoot him with a pistol in the other hand, but

27. Charles Redd to David E. Miller, 27 Dec. 1954, Miller Papers, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

28. Miller, "Murder at the Rincon," *Salt Lake Tribune,* 23 Mar. 1958.

Barton's struggles threw off his aim and he instead shot his companion. Eventually, though, he killed Barton and fled.

Miller's account of the shooting is accurate, but his version of the source of the conflict is completely wrong. Historian Charles Kelly, who knew the true story from Barton's widow who was present at the murders, protested to Miller, and Miller had to admit that other people who had first-hand knowledge of the incident had also objected, and he agreed that "I just didn't check carefully enough."[29]

The true story was told by Gladwell "Toney" Richardson, a Navajo trader turned writer and a friend of Kelly. Never one to let facts interfere with a good story, Richardson nevertheless determined in this case that truth was better than fiction. Writing as "Maurice Kildare," he took the material Kelly had gotten from Barton's widow and told the true story in *Frontier Times*.[30] According to this version, the altercation involved no unredeemed pawn. Instead, a young Navajo boy had been stealing small amounts of wool from Barton by inserting a stick with a frayed end between the cracks in the log walls of Barton's wareroom and twisting the wool around it. When Barton discovered him, he beat the boy almost to death. The boy barely made it back across the river, but two of his relatives returned for revenge.

Miller's research on Barton's murder, as one might expect, was impressive: in his letter to Kelly he listed several sources presumably unknown even to Kelly. The problem was that he wanted so badly to be able to believe that Barton had at least met an honorable death that he consulted only sources that would support that end. And he ignored other sources that offered other views of Barton. Charles Redd, for example, warned Miller that "It was at one time said in Bluff that Amasa Barton would never have lost his life at the hands of the Navajos if he would have obeyed counsel [thus remaining with the rest of the community at Bluff]."[31]

Morgan, Brooks, and Miller, then, tended to focus on creating an accurate factual narrative of events to the neglect of history's less tangible elements such as ideas, psychology, and personality. By default, those elements are simply ignored and eventually governed by unconscious biases that coexist incongruously with the otherwise sophisticated level of

29. Charles Kelly to Miller, 31 Mar. 1958; Miller to Kelly, 30 Apr. 1958, Miller Papers.

30. Maurice Kildare (Gladwell Richardson), "Murder at Rincon," *Frontier Times*, May, 1971, 26ff. The "rincon" is an abandoned meander of the San Juan River near the trading post which was used to identify its location. The Charles Kelly file in the Richardson Papers at Northern Arizona University contains a page of notes on Barton sent by Kelly and concluding with the suggestion, "I think you can expand this to make a good yarn."

31. Redd to Miller, 27 Dec. 1954, Miller Papers.

their work. It would be tempting to ascribe these tendencies glibly, in the case of Morgan and Brooks, at least, to their lack of academic training in history that might have sufficiently broadened their focus to include such elements as psychology and personality. But that thesis will not work in Miller's case, and in the case of Morgan and Brooks, we might well recall that Melchizedek was not a Levite, and they succeeded so embarrassingly well at other aspects of the historian's craft that one suspects they had the capability of teaching themselves this one as well. There were certainly plenty of models available to them in the field of psychohistory, for example (though that is only one possible method of dealing with personality in history), including Fawn Brodie's provocative though controversial biography of Joseph Smith.[32]

A better explanation seems to be that they were imprisoned in the historiographical tradition they created. So long had factual accuracy been submerged in Utah historiography by faith-promoting legends that they considered it a daunting enough task merely to establish what those facts were, while letting the less tangible aspects of personality and motivation take care of themselves. In the light of the magnitude of their achievement within the scope they set for themselves, it is an easy enough shortcoming to forgive. Those who wish to continue to build on that tradition, though, will have to lift their eyes to a broader historiographical vista.

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32. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945). Some of the leading works in this field are surveyed by David Hackett Fisher, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 188-89; and Peter Loewenberg, "Psychohistory," in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 408-32.