

the Relief Society sisters, the opportunity to perform charitable acts under the guidance of divine inspiration remains—a somewhat ironic interpretation, perhaps, of the organization's "Charity Never Faileth" theme. The power of compassionate service is no trifling thing, and *Women of Covenant* reviews many inspiring examples of Relief Society women at the general and local level exercising ingenuity, initiative, and often sacrifice as well in the exercise of this great gift.

We comprehend the reasons for the great changes in the power and scope of Relief Society concern in recent years, and might even agree with Emmeline B. Wells's conclusion at the end of her life that "Nothing has been irretrievably lost." Still, in comparing the magnificent past with the present prospects of the Relief Society, I am reminded of Robert Frost's poem about flowers at the end of the summer that closes with a reference to "what to do with a diminished thing."

A History of Two Stories

Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society. By Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992).

Reviewed by Peggy Pascoe, professor of history, University of Utah.

THERE IS A MOMENT IN *WOMEN OF COVENANT* I find absolutely haunting. It comes at the end of chapter 6—or, put another way, at the beginning of the twentieth century—at a moment when Emmeline B. Wells, perhaps the best-known of all the Relief Society's long line of presidents, worried over whether anyone would remember her lifetime of work as a Mormon, a feminist, and a leader of women's organizations. In this rather discouraged moment, Wells tried her best to turn fear into hope. She wrote: "History may not have preserved it all, there may be no tangible record of what has been gained, but sometime we shall know that nothing has been irretrievably lost" (223).

Like generations of women before

her, Mormon and non-Mormon, Emmeline Wells realized that despite her many accomplishments her history was a precarious one. Whether her life story would be preserved depended on a leap of faith—her faith that women of future generations could and would remember and honor her. The academic field we now know as the history of women, a field that burst onto the scene in the 1970s, came into being through many similar acts of faith, as women of our own time set out to honor women of earlier days, some long forgotten, others whose life stories had been covered over by layer on layer of stereotype and misunderstanding. In *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher honor the legacy of women like Emmeline B. Wells, leaders they see as a part of their tradition of Mormonism.

I am not Mormon, but I too find something inspiring about Emmeline Wells, because Wells was the leader of the Relief Society who was most con-

cerned with—and most successful at—building bridges between Mormon and non-Mormon women. In her long and distinguished career, the highlights were moments when she was able to carry off this delicate balancing act. As Utah vice president of the National Woman Suffrage Association, Wells built coalitions with the best-known feminists of her day, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. As delegate to the National and International Councils of Women, she brought news of Mormon life to non-Mormon women most of whom were inclined to dismiss Mormon women as nothing more than deluded practitioners of polygamy. As editor of the famous *Utah Woman's Exponent*, she brought news of women outside Utah to her sisters in the state. In other words, Wells was what politicians of the 1990s might call a first-class coalition builder; she was the kind of person who always looked for common ground.

Common ground is something that has been in rather short supply between Mormons and non-Mormons. Nowhere is this truer than in the writing of Mormon history. Ever since news of Joseph Smith began to filter out of his small New York community in the 1820s and 1830s, there have been deep disagreements between Mormon and non-Mormon historians about how to tell the story of Mormonism. Relations between Mormon and non-Mormon women have been shaped by these dividing lines. But as the history of Emmeline Wells indicates, there have also been times, such as the first two decades of the twentieth century, when Mormon women leaders emphasized what they had in common with women in the outside society.

The LDS Relief Society is, I think, a particularly interesting group through

which to examine this history of conflict and common cause between Mormon and non-Mormon women. Despite its claims for uniqueness, the Relief Society had a great deal in common with more mainstream women's organizations of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century Relief Society not only supported the central feminist demand of the period—the fight for votes for women—it supported suffrage earlier and more forcefully than many other non-Mormon women's clubs. But in the twentieth century, the Relief Society found itself in a much different position: in the 1970s and 1980s it was almost alone among women's organizations in opposing the central feminist demand of that period—the Equal Rights Amendment.

The contrast suggests, I think, that there is a very interesting story to be told about what happened to the Relief Society between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The authors of *Women of Covenant* have provided a valuable service in giving us a way to get started. Immersing themselves in the records of the Relief Society, they have traced its development from its beginnings in 1842 to the present. Their account significantly expands our knowledge of the history of an organization which has until now been thought of by most historians (if they think of it at all) as a nineteenth-century phenomenon. In so doing, they have not only honored and preserved Emmeline Wells's history, they have given historians of women yet another reason to read more Mormon women's history. (A good starting point is Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Sisters in Spirit* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987].)

What I want to do is to read *Women of Covenant*, a story presented by church

insiders, from the perspective of an outsider, paying special attention to two themes: first, the rise and fall of common ground between Mormon and non-Mormon women; second, the long history of Mormon women leaders' conflicts with male church officials. I will start by putting things in context, describing how the nineteenth-century Relief Society fits into the larger pattern of the history of U.S. women's organizations, then I will move on to consider what I think of as the most intriguing question raised by the book: how to interpret the situation of Mormon women in the twentieth century.

Although historians of Mormonism tend to treat everything about the church as if it were unique, there is, I think, a good deal about the Relief Society that echoes the history of other nineteenth-century women's organizations. The most obvious parallel between the two is that both had their origins primarily in charitable activities. In setting out to care for the needy, the Relief Society echoed a pattern of women's organizations that had come into its own in benevolent and charitable societies started and run by women in the early years of the American republic. Sometimes these women's charitable organizations were local and sometimes regional, sometimes they were denominational and sometimes interdenominational. Seeking out the needy in their communities, women's organizations took it upon themselves to offer help. Often, their goals were expressed in their names, such as the New York Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, the Boston Society for Employing the Female Poor, the Seamen's Aid Society, and so on. As they gained experience and confidence in their abilities, they graduated from granting individual relief to building institutions, from

lying-in hospitals to homes for reformed prostitutes, from orphan asylums to juvenile reformatories. By 1900, women's organizations had established nationwide networks ranging from missionary and temperance groups to suffrage organizations.

One of the contributions the authors of *Women of Covenant* make is to show that the LDS Relief Society is part of this larger tradition. As they put it, the Relief Society has often played "the role of change agent, recognizing a need and demonstrating how it could be met by the Church at large" (108). The list of Relief Society innovations is long and impressive. In addition to providing relief to individual families, its nineteenth-century members organized stores in which women sold home manufactures on commission, started a silk industry, established and operated their own Deseret Hospital, and created a grain storage program that seems to me so innovative as to be almost unique in women's organizational annals. Its twentieth-century members opened the Cottonwood Maternity Hospital; they also administered a Department of Social Services that offered an employment bureau, an adoption service, foster home care, and an Indian child placement service.

By any standard I can think of, the turn-of-the-century Relief Society was an organizational success. By 1888, it had financial assets of more than \$95,000, a substantial sum for the day; by 1917, it had assets of more than \$750,000. The authors of *Women of Covenant* provide a snapshot of Relief Society activities in 1917: in that year the society's 45,000 members made 78,000 visits to sick people, helped nearly 6,000 families in need, prepared 2,311 bodies for burial, and dispensed \$53,000 to charity. In addition to its charitable activities and

financial achievements, the society also created (the word they used was "mothered") spinoff societies, including both the Young Women's Mutual Improvement Association and the Primary Association.

The Relief Society shared with other women's organizations a tradition of devotion to charitable activities, and it shared with them a characteristic style of speaking, a rhetoric heavily laced with notions of women as benevolent domestic beings devoted to family, community, and sisterhood between women. By 1900, this rhetoric had taken on a strong undertone of activism for women's rights. One evidence of this was the widespread support for women's suffrage; another was that women's organizations sponsored a whole variety of legal reforms. As the authors of this book demonstrate, during the first two decades of the twentieth century the Relief Society cooperated with non-Mormon women in a number of Utah reforms. Together, they worked to establish a juvenile court, to pass a minimum-wage law for women, to appoint a woman to the minimum-wage commission, and to pass a widowed mothers' pension law.

The reform victories in Utah, impressive as they were, were hardly unusual. One of the major contributions of the field of women's history is to show the extent and significance of women's charitable and reform networks across the nation. In fact, historians of women have shown that despite the fact that the typical women's organization depended on voluntary labor, scraped by on a shoestring budget, and turned up its nose at bureaucracy, it was the patient labor of women's organizations that laid the basis for what we now call the welfare state. It is, I might say in passing, more than a little ironic that

most Americans now identify the welfare state primarily with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "New Deal"—ironic, but typical of a long-term historical pattern in which women poured their heart and soul into women's institutions only to find that as soon as they became successful the institutions were taken over by men—and only at that point were they deemed significant enough to enter the historical record.

Those thoughts bring me to the third thing the Relief Society had in common with other women's organizations: its long history of losing control over its projects to male officials. To explain this dynamic, I must say something about a pattern which characterized most women's organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a dynamic I think of as the search for female moral authority. (For more information, see my *Relations of Rescue* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990].) As participants in the search for female moral authority, women tried to turn a pervasive Victorian stereotype to its best advantage. Living in a time when both men and women identified women primarily with domesticity, motherhood, and morality, women tried to turn this moral influence into real authority. In effect, they accepted a kind of Victorian bargain: yes, they said, women are more moral, more charitable, and more religious than men, so let women manage moral, charitable, and religious affairs all by themselves.

I call this dynamic the "search" for female moral authority because even in the largest and most independent groups, Protestant missionary societies, women never quite succeeded at turning influence into authority. The difference between influence and authority was significant. People with influence

are listened to politely, but may be dismissed, while people with authority have the power to enforce their opinions. And if Protestant women had a hard time making their claims to authority stick, women of the LDS Relief Society had an even harder time. Protestant women had, after all, an advantage, because Protestant men were so busy turning away from the church to concentrate on politics and business that they all but surrendered the field of morality to women. No such thing happened in the Mormon church, however, for Mormon men retained such strong claims to religious and moral authority that Mormon women had no real argument that women were better equipped than men to be moral arbiters of society. As a result, Mormon women had little bargaining power to use with church leaders.

Once we understand the situation Mormon women leaders were in, the history of the Relief Society ends up being two stories: first, the overt story of a proud tradition of impressive charitable and community achievements and, second, a much sadder story of women continually losing control over their work to men. The authors of this book would like to emphasize that Mormon prophet Joseph Smith intended from the beginning to give women "keys" (or authority) to certain aspects of church and charitable work, but whatever Smith's intentions may have been in theory, in practice it seems clear that Mormon women were expected to remain subordinate to the all-male priesthood. The pattern was clear as early as the 1840s, when Joseph Smith's wife Emma tried to use her influence as the first Relief Society president to encourage women to express their distress about the new system of polygamy. As the authors of the book comment, "In pit-

ting her authority against that of the prophet through whom her authority had come, and in planting disorder and disunity among the sisters, Emma Smith had erred egregiously" (62). Emma Smith quickly felt the consequences of her so-called error. The Relief Society was disbanded and would not be reconstituted for almost twenty years. When a new society did emerge, it was placed under the leadership of Eliza Snow, a woman notable for her willingness to adhere to the dictates of priesthood authority. Snow told her followers, "We will do as we are directed by the Priesthood," and under her leadership they did (62).

Once these general lines of lines of authority were established, most conflicts between Mormon women and men were played out over specific projects rather than on the larger issue of organizational autonomy. But whatever the issue the pattern remained the same: in a system in which men started out with more power than women calls to make sacrifices for the "unity" and "harmony" of the church inevitably meant that women would have to give in to men. In the name of unity and harmony, Relief Society women repeatedly closed projects that were judged unsuccessful and gave projects that were judged successful over to men. For now, one example will suffice. Nineteenth-century Mormon women pioneered in demonstrating the need for modern health care by opening the Deseret Hospital. But by 1896 the hospital had closed; when the LDS Hospital replaced it in 1905, Relief Society sisters were asked to provide its linens but offered no role in its management.

As I have tried to suggest, until about 1920 Mormon and non-Mormon women's organizations had a great deal in common. They shared a devotion to

charity, a language of female domesticity, and a continual, if usually unsuccessful, search for control over their work. In the 1920s, however, the two groups began to move apart.

In many ways, the 1920s were crucial years for the history of American women. Until the 1920s Victorian rhetoric about women had provided common ground on which to build not only charitable projects but also formidable arguments for social reform and women's rights. In 1920 the height was reached with the passage of women's suffrage. But if the surface story was one of success, just beneath the surface the ground was about to shift dramatically. Passage of women's suffrage created a dilemma for mainstream women's organizations: What should be done next? Some argued that the logical plan was to continue in the old path of women's charitable sisterhoods; others argued that women should devote themselves to the cause of world peace; still others insisted that the logical next step was to replace the old rhetoric of moral influence and female sisterhood with a new rhetoric of individual equality. Although it would take them until the 1970s to consolidate their victory, the advocates of individual equality would win in the end.

There were several reasons for the triumph of the rhetoric of women's equality. One is that the 1920s was the decade which marked the gradual disintegration of Victorian culture and its replacement with one version or another of what historians are now calling Modernist culture. The shift toward modernism eroded the influence of both Victorian morality and evangelical religion; accordingly, it left women who continued to emphasize female morality and piety with a dwindling audience. Another reason is that the 1920s

was a decade in which young women were caught up in one of the most notable of American generation gaps; they were far more likely to disdain tradition—especially Victorian tradition—than to follow in their mothers' footsteps. To young women of the 1920s, women's liberation was important, but it was more a matter of sexual expression and wage work than benevolence or social reform. As a result, women's organizations went through a substantial reorganization: those which survived and thrived (and those which pointed the way toward the future) were much less gender-conscious, much less moral and religious, and much less all-around "Victorian" than their predecessors.

All those, I should say, except for the LDS Relief Society. In the decade between 1910 and 1920, the Relief Society was, like other women's organizations, at the height of its influence. Under the presidency of Emmeline B. Wells, the Relief Society was enjoying its widest political influence and was enjoying its greatest cooperation with non-Mormon women. But like other women's organizations the surface success was deceptive, for the Relief Society too was about to be turned in a new direction. Oddly enough, though, its new direction would come from holding on to old values. As historian Lawrence Foster once aptly argued, in the twentieth century, Mormons tried to out-Victorian the Victorians ("From Frontier Activism to Neo-Victorian Domesticity," *Journal of Mormon History* 6 [1979]: 3-21). For the Relief Society, this meant that they held firm to the old notions of morality, religion, and domesticity for women.

In taking this path Mormon women had the support of Mormon men. Yet simply by holding on to their

traditional values both groups moved further and further out of step with the world around them. It is not, I think, too much to say that since the 1920s Mormon women and men have been on something of a collision course with the twentieth century. In interpreting these years, the authors of *Women of Covenant* tend to echo the rhetoric of Relief Society leaders of the period. In their eyes the 1920s was a time when church leaders tried to prevent "the moral fabric of the western world [from] unraveling" (240); World War II was a time when "efforts to strengthen family life became more urgent" (281); the 1960s and early 1970s were a time "plagued" by "discontent with the status quo" and "a time of ferment and dropouts, high ideals and bitter rebellion" (329). The only decade Relief Society leaders felt in harmony with was the 1950s, which, they said, was a hopeful, "halcyon" time (329).

I cannot disagree with this interpretation more. Like most U.S. historians, I am inclined to see the 1920s as the crucial beginning point of "modern" America and the 1960s as the formative decades of contemporary America. The 1950s seem to me to be the most exceptional of twentieth-century decades, and therefore the most dangerous to single out as either a model for the future or a focus for nostalgia. But despite this basic disagreement, I feel some empathy for the women of the Relief Society because as it turned out they spent much of the twentieth century in a defensive posture, trying to protect themselves from male church leaders' attempts to gain control over Relief Society enterprises.

Much to her dismay, the crucial first steps in this process were taken during the Relief Society presidency of Emmeline Wells. Significantly, church leaders

started by urging Mormon women to withdraw from cooperation with other women's groups. In 1914, for example, church president Joseph F. Smith told women he did not want "to see the time when our Relief Societies will follow or commingle and lose their own identity by mixing up with these woman-made organizations that are coming to pass" (218).

The second step was already in progress. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, church leaders announced a program of "correlation" that was supposed to bring efficiency and order to church programs. The authors of *Women of Covenant* have been polite in exploring the results of this program; they do their best to describe the changes as healthy adaptation to new challenges. Still, there seems little doubt that the Mormon Relief Society was one of the central victims of the campaign for church correlation.

The list of Relief Society losses is almost overwhelming. In 1915, for example, Emmeline Wells and the society lost control over its beloved grain storage program when church leaders directed the women to move their grain to "elevators owned and conducted by responsible parties" (181). In 1918, the Presiding Bishopric sold all the grain, then amounting to more than 200,000 bushels, to the U.S. government. They did so without even consulting the women, then added insult to injury by announcing the sale in a letter sent out in the women's names. When Relief Society leaders protested, the bishopric agreed to give women the interest (but not the principal) that would accumulate on the profit from the sale. In the name of harmony and adaptation, women acquiesced in this decision, then decided to use the interest money to finance a program of maternal and child welfare

work that was considerably less innovative than the remarkable grain storage project.

In 1921 Emmeline Wells had to endure yet another blow. She became the first Relief Society president ever to be relieved of her duties before her death. The Relief Society, of course, found new leaders, but the loss of control continued. In the 1930s church leaders redirected women's welfare work into priesthood channels; by 1939 they began mailing the interest checks on the wheat fund to bishops instead of to Relief Society presidents (260, 268). In the 1960s the Relief Society lost control of its home teaching programs. In 1970 the society lost its financial independence and turned all its assets—then totaling more than \$2 million—over to church leaders. Soon afterward, the *Relief Society Magazine* was condensed into a couple of pages in a larger church publication. In 1971 the society lost control over its membership when the church directed that every woman in the church would automatically be registered as a member (345). Although there were always plenty of Relief Society activities, the overall pattern of organizational losses cannot be denied. Between 1915 and 1970 there was only one significant exception to the rule: in 1956, after more than fifty years of planning, the women of the Relief Society were finally able to build their own building. No wonder they looked so longingly to the 1950s.

The history of the Relief Society I have been telling here is one with which I expect the authors of *Women of Covenant* would disagree. As church insiders, they record this litany of losses but tend to interpret them as inevitable adaptations to change, as triumphs for church unity and harmony. They look forward to what they call a "brilliant

future" (420). Unable to find much evidence for this contention in the actual record of male church leaders, they console themselves that "Women of the twentieth century, like their sisters of the nineteenth, have learned to reach for and receive the assurances of the Spirit that their service is accepted" (431).

I must say, though, that I think it is hard to tell the tale of the Relief Society in the twentieth century as a story of progress toward perfection. Indeed, I think the evidence suggests that the LDS Relief Society approached its sesquicentennial in 1992 in something of a crisis. One part of this crisis was the long history of losing control to male church leaders. Another was the estrangement between Mormon and non-Mormon women's organizations, which reached its worst point in the 1970s fight over the Equal Rights Amendment. But perhaps the most urgent part of the crisis was the growing number of Mormon women who seemed disaffected from the Relief Society. As the authors of *Women of Covenant* point out, the Relief Society has been "forced now, perhaps more than in any previous era, to be conscious of itself less as a charitable organization than as a group representing church attitudes toward women" (359).

Representing Mormon women of the 1990s is a task for which the central legacies of twentieth-century Relief Society history—the rhetoric of domesticity and the example of the 1950s—are simply inadequate preparation. I suspect that Relief Society leaders know this all too well. One of the most interesting things about the last chapter of *Women of Covenant* is that Relief Society leaders who once spoke of "strengthening the family" (in the singular) are now beginning to speak of "families" in the plural, to talk less about married women and more about women they

call "unmarried sisters," and to say less about women's shared experiences and more about women's diversity.

In writing *Women of Covenant*, Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher have done their best to honor the legacy of 150 years of the LDS Relief Society. Because of their efforts, Emmeline Wells,

for one, can rest assured that she will not be forgotten. Whether the church Wells loved so much will ever honor her hope that, as she put it, some day "The man and the woman will be equal" remains to be seen (179). It is a question about which the history of the Relief Society offers much food for thought.

Secrets under the Surface

Crazy for Living: Poems. By Linda Sillitoe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993).

Reviewed by Emma Lou Thayne, author, *Things Happen: Poems of Survival*.

JUST UNDER THE SURFACE OF THE OBVIOUS lie the secrets. Linda Sillitoe sees, hears, tastes them, feels where they lead, trusts them, takes us along. It is never a perilous journey. Rather, it resounds with understanding and connectedness.

As a journalist she sees beginnings and ends. Behind her observations is always the story. Images are accurate and suggestive of more: In "Driving to Work in Winter," she tells us "Possibilities appear before me like green semaphores." So do they in her poems.

In "Writing Copy" the grotesque in the news floods into a real day and "the sheepish guy in the parking/ terrace who waits in his warm car." Sillitoe's encounters with the otherwise hidden seep into her lines and into the consciousness of the reader. By some subterranean tug we follow "the journalist" "like our lost halos/ tipping us to/ who rolls our spotty dice/ in every game."

In "November's End, 1979," we see "women in a yellow room,/ and me seeing not the future/ but us where we

were/ like dew on a slick leaf/ in the murmurous night."

This musical maneuvering is the poet with a keen ear and eye interpreting disillusionment in "an elegy in lower case" as eloquently as transcendence in "sonnet for spring" or nostalgia in "During Recess."

In "Killer" the poet merges with the Navajo sun that attracts her deepest yearning and cleanses her of the nightmares of a murderer she has written about in her earlier *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, and concludes with deadly aim, "a sane man lives by his heart./ A crazy man lives in his head."

In Part II, "Journeys in Tandem," cadence flows undeterred by invasion of other forces than the different *two's* together, in "an intricate, slow unfolding" or crickets "violining melodies pitched/ between currents of our speech." She can explain on that enchanted lower level and sometimes in lower case the attachments, the arrivals, the leavings, full of the poignancy, the joys, the flailings—of family, lover, generations, the earth, even creation.

Armed with infallible instinct, Sillitoe is never dull—or without surprise.