

chilling accounts of dead bodies from the Donner party:

Passing down the mountain to the head of Truckee River. . .we came to a shanty built last winter, and about this cabin we found the skeletons of several human beings. I discovered a hand. It was nearly entire. It had been partly burned to a crisp. The little finger was not burnt. . . I judged it to be the hand of a woman. . . .

Bigler reports that his group found a cabin of bodies—some with limbs, ribs, or brains removed—and was told later at Sutter's Fort that "children were saved but not till after they had eaten of their dead parents."¹

Bishop's book is an easy, interesting, read. It is seldom that one finds such a rich source of American, Western, Utah, and church history in 160 pages (followed by an extensive bibliography). I finished reading wanting

more than Bishop had included. There are many fascinating tidbits such as the following:

"Because public polygamy could no longer be a demonstration of loyalty, the new agenda for the devout became an increased emphasis upon tithing [and] stricter observance of the. . .health code known as the Word of Wisdom" (144).

We also learn that men who practiced plural marriage prospered more than those living in monogamy (142). Bigler earned less than \$900 a year.

I heartily recommend Bishop's biography of Henry Bigler. Much research and work went into this book, and if it is true that "good things come in small packages," this certainly qualifies.

"A Happy, Go-Ahead People"

Mormon America: The Power and the Promise, by Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 454 pp., \$17.00.

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THE GENERAL PUBLIC'S KNOWLEDGE of Mormonism tends to be thinly mediated through certain stereotypical images: the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, well-scrubbed young missionaries, polygamy, large families, genealogy, sacred underwear, sentimental television commercials, upright (if not prudish) living. Thus *The Onion*, a satirical

magazine, can still count on laughs from the headline "Mormon Teen Loses Inhibitions after Third Benadryl." In a new book, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise*, the husband-and-wife team of Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling explore and explain the reality behind these images. Their lively and judicious account ensures that Americans will no longer have any excuse to be shallowly informed about the country's most successful homegrown religious tradition.

The authors are outsiders: Richard, one of America's most capable religion reporters and currently the Associated Press religion writer, and Joan, a freelancer, describe themselves as "conventional" Protestants. Building upon the interest generated by

Richard's *Time* cover story "Mormons, Inc." in 1997, the Ostlings have sought to deliver a "candid but nonpolemical overview written for non-Mormons and Mormons alike, focusing on what is distinctive and culturally significant about this growing American movement" (xi). They know their task is a tall one, for "no religion in American history has aroused so much fear and hatred, nor been the object of so much persecution and so much misinformation" (xvi).

Fortunately, their strategy throughout the book is to be forthright about any obstacles to writing a "nonpolemical" account. Any treatment of Mormonism presents several particular quandaries, and how authors resolve them usually provides a good index of fairness. For instance: what terminology will be used for the church? The official hierarchy prefers the whole name, the Church of Jesus Christ, or "the Church," disdaining other descriptions as erroneous and misleading, while outsiders comfortably refer to "Mormons" or "the Mormon Church." Though sensitive to the church's concerns, the Ostlings conclude that "the church is attempting to make water run uphill, so ingrained are these terms in modern usage" (xii). So despite the church's wishes, shorthand like "Mormon" and "LDS" appear throughout. Outsiders 1, Mormons 0.

The score evens quickly, however, as the Ostlings confront a different quandary: Are Mormons Christians? Many outsiders don't think so, and even estimable scholars like Jan Shipps argue that Mormonism is best understood as a separate religious tradition. But the authors explain rightly that "To the Saints the very question is offensive. The Mormons themselves. . . believe that they are not only Chris-

tians but the only *true* Christians" (xxv). This combination of candor and sensitivity characterize the entire book.

These qualities are on full display as the Ostlings spend the first six chapters on Mormon history. This is no small accomplishment: excavating Mormon roots presents another formidable narrative challenge. Just how will the faith's early history be told? Accounts of seer stones, visions, treasure hunting, and plural marriage sometimes seduce storytellers away from equally important tales of industry, self-sacrifice, and religious devotion. As well, Mormonism, secretive and controversial from its genesis, has always attracted more than its share of internal dissent and external criticism. What prominence and credence will these voices be given? When these questions become particularly thorny, the authors, always seeking fairness and comprehensiveness, rely heavily upon respected scholars—both insiders and outsiders—to thrust the narrative forward. The result is a lively and colorful but well-balanced account of the Mormon tradition.

Mormon America is not simply a history, to be sure. The Ostlings map an enormous amount of contemporary territory with substantial depth and clarity. In chapters on such complex and contentious subjects as race relations, family structure, institutional hierarchy, missionaries, dissenters and academic freedom, rituals, and scriptures, the authors clearly describe the issues at hand and the key players involved. A model of clarity is "How God Came to Be God," a chapter that avoids descending into the murk of abstract theological discourse while offering a clear sense of how Mormonism's distinctive doctrine of the divine relates to other Christian theol-

ogy. The section on "Faithful History" is particularly adept at offering insight into just why Mormon history provides fertile ground for controversy, both within the church and without. "There is a very real sense," the Ostlings explain, "in which the church's history is its theology" (245). No wonder, then, that the official church strives so mightily to maintain control over its own religious tradition.

Mormon America is not without flaws. A chapter on Mormon celebrities ("Some Latter-day Stars") feels superfluously fluffy. Occasional rhetorical questions masquerade as transitions and give the story a jerky, overly didactic feel (for example, 32, 41). Transitions continue to be a problem: though most chapters flow well internally, they are not always artfully integrated into the larger narrative. More editorial attention to that larger story might also have prevented noticeable repetitions: readers really do not need to be told more than once that the word Deseret refers to the honeybee (46, 114) or that sociologist Rodney Stark thinks Mormonism is the most important new world religion to arise since Islam (xvi-xvii, 217, 262, 375). As a result, readers may find the book more satisfying when digested in discrete, chapter-size chunks.

The Ostlings have supplemented their tale with a map of Mormon temples, a graph (strangely buried at the book's end), and eight pages of photographs. Joseph Smith's "King Follett Discourse," an important source for Mormon theology, appears in an appendix, and a second appendix explains how the authors estimated the church's finances. A brief but helpfully annotated list of resources for further reading completes the volume.

As visitors and reporters descend upon Salt Lake City for the 2002 Winter Olympics, Mormonism will have the public spotlight cast upon it as at no time since the nineteenth century. For this reason, *Mormon America* could not have arrived at a better time. Though breaking no new scholarly ground, the authors have proffered a responsible, accessible, and engaging account of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Ostlings succeed admirably in their aim of providing a frank but fair account of this dynamic American tradition. Their book, the best contemporary introduction to those whom President Gordon B. Hinckley calls "a happy, go-ahead people" (375), deserves a wide audience among church members and gentiles alike.

An Excellent Survey of the Headlines, But Not of the Heart

Mormon America: The Power and the Promise. By Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling (New York, Harper-Collins, 1999), 454 pp., \$17.00.

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MORMON AMERICA IS A comprehensive and instructive overview of Mormonism "for non-Mormons and Mormons alike" (xi). Its scope, tone and readability reveal the best of Richard