

## REVIEWS

### Utah Historians

*Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History*, by Gary Topping (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 368 pp.

Reviewed by Peter H. DeLafosse, Salt Lake City

BERNARD DEVOTO GAVE an impromptu lecture about the process of writing nonfiction at the 1955 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Conference Director Theodore Morrison described the lecture as "an exacting intellectual test for his audience. . . . He took his hearers all the way through the process of grasping, researching, and treating an ambitious subject. . . . As the central clue to his writing method, he invoked the word 'synecdoche,' the rhetorical figure that makes one thing stand for another or for a class."<sup>1</sup> Although DeVoto's western histories employ this literary device to great effect, the author of this important book asserts that DeVoto's storytelling method sometimes resulted in his overstating the importance of events and inaccurate portrayals of historical figures. Five Utah historians who worked primarily in the

period during and after World War II are included in this study which examines the strengths and weaknesses of each historian: Bernard DeVoto, Dale Morgan, Juanita Brooks, Wallace Stegner and Fawn Brodie.

Topping opens his study with an overview of the historical tradition these writers grew up with in Utah. From its founding, the Mormon Church has emphasized the importance of keeping records. A chronicle of people, places, and events can provide raw material for the historian to use, but the writing of history requires interpreting the material. These historians grew up with a tradition of record keeping and the avoidance of controversial subjects in the writing of Mormon history.

Topping's thesis is that these historians worked hard to establish a baseline of primary source material by using existing records and uncovering and publishing new records, but each had limitations when it came to interpreting his or her material. In particular, DeVoto, Brodie, and Stegner tended to overstate conclusions, while

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1. Theodore Morrison, *Bread Loaf Writers' Conference: The First Thirty Years (1926-1955)* (Middlebury, Vt.: Middlebury College Press, 1976), 82

Brooks and Morgan tended to let the material interpret itself.

An overview of the life of each historian is followed by a critical analysis of the historian's major works. In *The Year of Decision*, for example, DeVoto used the year 1846 to represent the broad themes of westward expansion (synecdoche), but 1846 was not the only important year in this history. Stegner portrays John Wesley Powell in *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* with contemporary conservationist sensitivities, but Powell probably would have approved of Glen Canyon Dam and the reservoir that bears his name. Joseph Smith is portrayed as an imposter in *No Man Know My History*, but Fawn Brodie does not provide any theories about Smith's motives. While Topping praises Juanita Brooks's *Mountain Meadows Massacre* as a pathbreaking study of this horrific crime, he challenges her conclusions that the Mormon participants were otherwise good people influenced by outside factors—war hysteria and provocative actions of the emigrants. In *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, Dale Morgan meticulously documented Smith's western travels, but "the book is the story of movement through space and time, with only the most perfunctory account of ideas, personality, and motives" (158).

Topping believes that the interpre-

tive flaws in these works are due to the influence of the culture these historians grew up in and to the fact that none had academic training in history. His judgments may appear harsh and negative, but Topping notes: "The books I discuss here invite criticism as much as praise, for they provoke our intellect, they stimulate our imagination, they enlarge our vision" (10–11).

Collectively the historians who are the subject of this book have left an important legacy and have influenced the contemporary New Mormon History and New Western History. *The Year of Decision*, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, *No Man Know My History*, *Mountain Meadows Massacre*, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*, and many other books by these writers have remained in print over a half century since their publication—a testament to their quality of scholarship and to their popularity with readers.

*Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History* is a meticulously researched and thought-provoking book about the process of writing history. The arguments are well reasoned, and the author succeeds in providing a fresh look at this classic body of work. Readers may not agree with all of Topping's conclusions (and they shouldn't), but this is a book that I shall return to frequently.

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