

that there are undefined boundaries between doctrine and speculation that may cause confusion among Church members (95). But Bergera also demonstrates the strength of this system, which allows Church presidents to abandon doctrines and practices, as well as their theological justifications, when it is necessary to protect the vitality of the Church.

Women in a Time Warp

Sheree Maxwell Bench and Susan Elizabeth Howe, eds. *Discoveries: Two Centuries of Poems by Mormon Women*, (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2004), 128 pp.

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Discoveries: Two Centuries of Poems by Mormon Women is a slim publication attempting to represent two hundred years of poetry by Mormon women. The anthology is divided into sections that portray the stages of a woman's life. In the preface the editors state, "We chose poems that revealed the life experiences of a Mormon woman from her birth to her death and into eternity" (xv). However, aside from a few poems that refer to leaders or organizations in the Church, most of the poems do not express a distinctly Mormon experience. Hence, the overall effect of the anthology is a collection of poems of uneven quality that does not show, as the preface claims, "how from its beginnings in nineteenth-century Mormonism, poetry has come into its own as an art form in Latter-day Saint culture" (xvi).

However, the anthology has a unique aspect that could have been showcased much more effectively. The early and contemporary poems are blended together in different sections in a way that creates an interesting medley of voices. While the intent may have been to imply that women of both centuries are joined as sisters by common faith, the impression is actually that the twentieth-century women's experience has been shaped by those of the nineteenth century. The effect is an odd time warp, as the twentieth-century women continue to look at their experience through a nineteenth-century lens. Perhaps this is how the anthology becomes distinctly Mormon. Unfortunately, this distinction is too subtle. The anthology would have benefitted from an arrangement and commentary that could have highlighted the relationship between the voices. Another characteristic that seemed prevalent particularly in the contemporary voices was a lack of an autonomous self. Many of the narrators presented themselves in relationship to another person or to a responsibility rather than as individuals.

The first five selections follow a development from a premortal existence to

childhood, adulthood, marriage and children, and old age. The first section, "Beginning," starts with the poem "Of the Beginning" by Susan Elizabeth Howe in which a woman's journey begins with a pre-mortal existence; this poem is one of the few that actually addresses Mormon belief. Two poems are particularly memorable in this section. "Blackberry" by Penny Allen is a sensuous imagistic poem about a modern-day Eve plucking blackberries as she recalls her loss of Eden. The poem itself combines a sexual pain and pleasure in the description of picking the fruit: "She wants it—enough to thread a careful hand / Through the thorns, etching a ragged red / Rivulet on the wrist and pricking tiny / Rubies where she wavers . . . / She plunks it into her wet mouth. / Delicious. More desirable than the first / Death she ate . . ." (4). This poem is remarkable in how it conveys the idea that Eden was sacrificed for a forbidden pleasure, yet the punishment is almost worth that pleasure.

"A Lullaby in the New Year," a sonnet by Linda Sillitoe, presents the dilemma of being a woman in both comforting and chilling tones. As a mother rocks her crying infant daughter, she provides a nurturing space for the baby against her body. However, the final lines present an irony: "We rock / And still you rage. I kiss your hair again. / All right, I whisper, accept, accept, and sleep" (8). The mother seems to be speaking both to herself and to the daughter: She is telling herself to accept the child's rage despite her motherly efforts to comfort her, and she is advising the daughter to accept her situation despite her instincts to rage against it.

The next section is "Childhood" and contains one of the most intriguing poems of the anthology, May Swensen's "The Centaur." This poem distinguishes itself as being one of the few in which the speaker (a young girl) is autonomous. However, she becomes autonomous by melding with another self—the imaginary horse she creates out of a willow branch. The "horse" is male and the girl carves him into existence by using her brother's knife. As she rides the horse, she crosses over to take on a more male identity—"The willow knob with the strap / jouncing beneath my thighs / was the pommel and yet the poll / of my nickering pony's head" (11). This transition becomes more apparent as she makes no distinction between herself and the horse: "I was the horse and rider, / and the leather I slapped to his rump / spanked my own behind" (11). It is only when she is off the horse that her skirt and disheveled hair—signs of her gender—come into focus. The "horse ride" is an escape from that confinement.

The childhood section is followed by "Reaching," a section that seems deliberately vague. I am not sure why it was separated out from the other sections. This group of poems represents a flaw in the book's arrangement. It would have been more effective to have dispersed these poems throughout the book, giving other sections more depth. There is nothing inherent in the poems individually or as a whole that would be considered Mormon.

The next sections continue on through sexual awakening (albeit, very pristinely), motherhood, loss, and aging. I was particularly impressed with a poem that poignantly challenges the struggles of aging. "Coming Apart Together" by Mary Lythgoe Bradford is a lovely poem about passion in old age. The inevitable decay of old age is countered by a kind of resurrected sexuality that has a creative power. In a subtle way, this poem's concluding lines allude to the Mormon notion of humankind evolving into gods.

So far I have discussed only the contemporary authors. Before discussing other contemporary poems, I must comment on the nineteenth-century poets. The discovery and publication of these women is the book's real coup. Their biographies are interesting to read. Many of their poems were ahead of their time. For that reason, the ideas expressed in these early poems contain more of a "Mormon" spirit—radical, nonconformist, questioning, enlightened—than the contemporary counterparts. Two poets intrigued me the most—Lucinda Lee Dalton and Louisa "Lula" Greene Richards.

Lu Dalton married into polygamy and struggled with her husband's alcoholism during her marriage. "An ardent suffragist, Dalton believed that women and men must work as partners on equal footing for all to progress, and this thesis was central to her writing" (96). Could there be a more "queer yoking" than the polygamist and the suffragist? In her amazing "Woman," Dalton refutes the traditional Christian view of woman's subservient position. She counters the Christian image of woman as the cause of humanity's fall from grace with the more enlightened "latter-day" view of woman as a divine daughter of God, as one who fell to "seek knowledge, the God-like prize." Her play on the notion of latter-day redemption continues to the end of the poem with the last two lines: "The Word has gone forth that when all is done, / the last shall be first forever" (6).

Lula Greene Richards was Utah's first woman journalist, officially called by Brigham Young to be the editor of the *Woman's Exponent*. "Her editorials argued for the right of women to vote, to obtain an equal education, and to choose their occupation" (99). In "Apology" a woman apologizes for her contemplative and leisurely nature that distracts her from more traditional domestic duties. However, by the end of the poem, she makes it clear that these duties should be secondary to developing one's creativity.

Two poems most effectively create the time warp between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "Alisa Leaves for Medical School" by Marilyn Bushman-Carlton and "Nellie Unthank" by Iris P. Corry. In the former poem a mother contrasts letting go of her medical-school-bound daughter with how she left her own mother and a small town to live in the big city. However, the modern-day daughter has opportunities denied to women of an earlier age because "their . . . lives [were] lost / in histories logged by men" (53). The mother concludes: "My daughter leaves, not tucked / in the rib of a husband's hopes / but

chasing her own, / less-accustomed dreams" (53). These lines address the question of how autonomous can the Mormon woman be if she is always seen in relationship to others—spouse, children, even God.

"Nellie Unthank," based on the life of one of the ill-fated Martin Handcart Company's victims, is a brilliantly stark contrast to the concept of sacrifice-compensated-for portrayed in "Blackberry." It tells of Nellie's life in such spare lines that no pity or pain are allowed, but neither is there room for joy. Her legs are amputated because of frostbite when she is a child; she later marries into polygamy. In contrast with the delicious sacrifice of "Blackberry," Nellie's sacrifice is bitter and harsh. The sensuality and thorn prick are replaced by frostbite and amputation, the pleasure of fruit by a compulsion to serve. This poem is unrelenting in both its silent rage and its acceptance.

In a class on Victorian literature at BYU, the professor commented that he saw many similarities between British Victorians and the Mormon Church, especially with regard to patriarchal attitudes and sexual prudishness. Of course, in Victorian literature rich contradictions roiled beneath that controlled surface. Unfortunately this collection, with a few exceptions, avoids addressing the complex identity of Mormon women. The majority of these poems had really nothing to do with the Mormon experience, only with the general experience of being a woman. None of the contemporary poets was born after the 1950s, thus limiting the portrayal of Mormon women's experience to two generations. These contemporary poets would have come of age when roles for women might not have been very different from those of their foremothers; however, the women's movement would also have had an influence.

As women experiencing a kind of hybrid coming of age—raised to believe one definition of a woman's role and then made aware of other possibilities—it seems that they could write from a unique, transitional perspective. However, they seemed to be writing as an extension of the nineteenth-century voices, not as voices in their own place and time. The collection of contemporary poetry could have been made far more eclectic by including women of more recent generations and of cultures other than white America.

Ironically, I got the impression that, if the nineteenth-century women were living now, they would have been on the forefront of the women's movement and would still be arguing for equality within the Church without apology. What has happened to the spirit of early Mormon women who used the revolutionary Church doctrine and belief to argue for equality? They did not seem to be stifled by the Church authorities. Rather they acted on a belief in their own authority. This anthology raises the question: Where is the feminist empowerment that governed so much of the early Church? It was crucial to the Church's early development. Why is it now seen as such a threat?