

REVIEWS

Possibilities, Problems and Pitfalls

Newell G. Bringhurst and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Excavating Mormon Pasts: The New Historiography of the Last Half Century* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2004), 408 pp., \$39.95.

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More than thirty years ago, I made a decision that seemed simple enough at the time but that would have a far-reaching impact on my professional career. I became an archivist at the LDS Church Historical Department. I came to that position during one of the most exciting periods of intellectual ferment in the Mormon experience. It was here I first learned the possibilities, problems, and pitfalls inherent in any study of the Latter-day Saint past.

Looking back, I am not sure I fully realized the extent of what was going on around me in those years. If I had, I might have paid more attention, kept a better diary, perhaps reflected more on what I was witnessing. Those were heady times, and my colleagues and I were simply caught up in the moment when the professionalization of the Historical Department occurred in the 1970s. And, to avoid any parochialism, it is also clear that this ferment was not confined to the Historical Department alone, as scholars elsewhere were producing significant studies.

In the years since then, I have gone on to other professional challenges, but the excitement and turmoil of Mormon historiography that I first encountered in those years has continued. Indeed an explosion of scholarship—labeled the New Mormon History—has burst upon the scene. It is problematic for some because it seems to challenge earlier assumptions about Mormonism's origins and development, while others like Charles S. Peterson have suggested that it has created an "exceptionalist" view that is not always accurate or useful. Still as co-editor Newell Bringhurst notes, it is a "historiographical fact" that a "body of scholarship has emerged in Mormon studies that differs in a significant way from its predecessors." The "sheer volume" of that scholarship has been one of its "distinctive characteristics" (ix). Beyond the amazing outpouring, Bringhurst suggests that the New Mormon History is also characterized by the professional training of its practitioners, a strong reliance on new or previously unavailable sources of data and synthesis, an openness to a variety of techniques and methodologies, and a conscious quest for objectivity.

Moreover as the other co-editor (and author of a provocative chapter titled

"Fictional Pasts: Mormon Historical Novels"), Lavina Fielding Anderson, observes, the practitioners of this New Mormon History were of two generations. The first group was "for the most part, survivors of World War II, educated by the G. I. Bill, and thus part of the greatest achievement in mass education in American history." The second group consisted of "baby-boomers born immediately after World War II who went on to college as a matter of course in a variety of academic fields." Eventually many of the college-trained historians of this second group worked under the tutelage of Leonard Arrington and others from the first group, applying their skill and training "to the task of conceptualizing and constructing Mormon history" (389).

For Bringham and Anderson, this volume, which has been several years in the making, was conceived as a means "to critically evaluate the general body of recent Mormon scholarship" published since the end of World War II, providing a "general overview of what has been accomplished, while at the same time noting areas in need of further exploration" (xii). Moreover, the editors set a high bar for their collection, envisioning a work intended not solely for those directly involved in the research and writing of Mormon history, but also as a "basic, readily accessible reference guide for scholars in the large fields of American studies, the history of the American West, and the history of religions" (xiv).

Admittedly ambitious in scope, the excellent essays in this volume in large measure succeed in attaining those goals. The collection brings together a fine cross-section of some of the best chroniclers of Mormonism, especially from that second group. These scholars capture the excitement of the explosion in Mormon studies I previously mentioned, while also illuminating large and important themes in Mormon studies. Two important introductory essays, both broadly conceived, offer an excellent starting point. In them, Klaus J. Hansen and David L. Paulsen provide differing assessments of the way scholars have viewed Mormon origins and its interface with the larger themes of nineteenth-century America.

Beyond that general framework, several chronological examinations provide important context as well. For example, Roger D. Launius, Stephen C. LeSueur, and Glen M. Leonard examine the historiography of the beginnings of the Mormon experience, tracing the accounts of the Saints as they moved from New York to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Similarly, Craig L. Foster, M. Guy Bishop, and Jessie L. Embry update scholarship on the story of the Latter-day Saints once they established themselves in the American West generally and in the Great Basin specifically. In summing up this history, Embry offers an important observation, noting that a religion started by a "young man with a vision" is now "run by leaders who match the Victorian ideal more than the Mormons who lived in the early nineteenth century. As radical as the early Mormon Church may have appeared, by the end of the twentieth century it had swung completely to the other side.

Even though the LDS Church seems out of step with the post-modern world, it continues to grow—not in spite of—but because of its conservatism” (198).

In addition to these broad examinations, a number of scholars look at specific aspects of the Mormon story. Among these are fine essays on post-war internationalization by Kahlile B. Mehr, with Mark L. Grover, Reid L. Nelson, Donald Q. Cannon, and Grant Underwood; dissent and schisms in the early church by Danny L. Jorgensen; and, Mark A. Scherer’s overview of historiographical developments in the Community of Christ faith tradition. At the same time, excellent overviews of specific aspects of the New Mormon History are provided by three of the finest scholars in the field. These include Todd Compton’s examination of the sources of women’s experience in the Mormon tradition; Martha Sonntag Bradley’s survey of writings on polygamy; and Newell G. Bringhurst’s consideration of biographical accounts.

One of the most important contributions comes from Davis Bitton, a member of that first group identified by Anderson and one of the assistant Church historians to Leonard Arrington. Bitton cautions that the term New Mormon History has been sometimes “carelessly” used to mean recent scholarship, noting that, when more carefully used, the term ought to “have reference not to the fact of being produced recently but to distinctive approaches and questions asked.” In this sense, Bitton suggests, the best of the New Mormon History is grounded in the larger new social history which developed roughly during the same time period. The characteristics of this approach which should animate future examinations of Mormon history include the following: it has been analytical rather than primarily narrative; where appropriate it has been quantitative; where possible it has been interdisciplinary; it has focused on several demographic concerns; and it has shown “a heightened awareness of class, ethnicity, and gender” (351).

Beyond the essays themselves, one is struck by the sense of community represented here. In Anderson’s phrase, a “network of connections” exists, bringing together the relatively small number of observers of the Mormon experience. Indeed, my own roots in the Historical Department, combined with my graduate studies, brought me into contact with many of the essayists in this volume, and most of the scholars they chronicle. It is also true that, at least for a time, the scholarly circle was broadening to include new participants, some of whom were tied to Mormonism directly, with others coming from the outside. While many have been concerned in recent years with the simultaneous tightening of attitudes toward history and the “graying” of its practitioners, I am more optimistic than I was a few years ago that a third generation of scholars—Mormon and non-Mormon alike—is continuing the tradition of those who set a course over the past three decades.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of this collection is the extensive and helpful index. Accounting for nearly fifty pages of text, the index is organized