

and *J. Arrington Mormon History Lectures* will appear, providing equally illuminating insights into the state of scholarship of the New Mormon History.

Peer-Reviewed Genealogy

Val D. Rust, *Radical Origins: Early Mormon Converts and Their Colonial Ancestors* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 253 pages. \$35.00.

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I have a distant relative who is an avid genealogist. She is fond of joking that, whenever two people talk about genealogy, one of them is bored. If this quip has any truth to it, Val D. Rust has scored quite a coup. Rust, a professor of education at UCLA, has turned what began as a “quest to gain some perspective on the radical religious roots of my own family” (165) into an intellectually stimulating and highly readable argument that Mormonism “is grounded” in America’s “early colonial period” and that it “springs more from the tradition of radical religious content than from mainstream Puritanism” (xi). *Radical Origins* manages this feat largely because Rust reaches beyond his own family and examines the genealogies of 583 early (pre-1835) Mormon converts in an attempt to create a genealogy of a belief rather than of an individual family. Yet despite this expansion of scope, Rust’s book ultimately suffers from a selective emphasis that leaves it unable to account for all of Mormonism’s radical origins.

Rust does provide much support for his claim that “those who were drawn to the message of Joseph Smith, Jr., especially in the earliest years, likely had family and community histories” of radical religious involvement “that predisposed them to resonate with that message” (5). This legacy of New England radicalism is at least plausible because, as Rust documents, “approximately 20 per cent of the 1650 population of New England were direct-line ancestors of LDS converts” (27) and because most of those ancestors did not live in Puritan Boston but in more doctrinally heterogeneous places like Rhode Island. If this radical religiosity were transmitted intergenerationally, Mormonism would have been attractive in part because the “new convert had likely grown up hearing tales . . . filled with accounts of miracles, spiritual experiences, privations, and persecutions that distinguished the family as religious radicals” (21).

Rust also does an admirable job of presenting this argument to two distinct audiences. Academic experts in colonial American history will appreciate Rust’s engagement with the relevant scholarly literature. Those approaching the text from other perspectives who may not have a strong background in early American

history—such as those interested because their families are discussed—will enjoy Rust's succinct reconstruction of the religious and political realities of the New England colonies and explanation of the doctrines of now-obscure groups like the Antinomians and Gortonists.

Ultimately, however, Rust's argument is more compelling than convincing. As Rust himself admits, he is often forced to argue from propinquity or to extrapolate because most of the records he works with are little more than "birth, marriage, and death dates and places" (52). Consequently, Rust is often unsure if an ancestor of one of the LDS converts in his dataset was actually involved in the radical religious movements present in their hometowns. Readers are thus presented with assertions like Rust's claim that William Cahoon "was surely influenced by . . . Anabaptist religious radicalism" (48) because he lived in Swansea, a village on the Rhode Island border. Rust is probably right about William Cahoon since it is difficult to be completely insensitive to one's surroundings. Still, we have no way of knowing the degree of that influence or whether that influence was positive or negative. After all, William Cahoon may have disliked the Anabaptist influence in Swansea and transmitted a very different message to his descendants than Rust's thesis implies.

Another gap in Rust's argument is the distance between the supposed actors in the radical critiques of Puritanism and their descendants who converted to Mormonism. Passing down a radical religious orientation over five generations would be difficult; but if it did happen, there should be some evidence: diary entries, records of fourth-, third-, or second-generation ancestors participating in radical sects, statements of the LDS converts indicating that their decision to become a Mormon was influenced by the unconventional religious attitudes of their ancestors, etc. However, Rust presents his readers with little direct evidence of how the radical religious beliefs transcended this not-inconsiderable historical and cultural distance. To his credit, Rust openly acknowledges this difficulty and dedicates his penultimate chapter to addressing it, but he is able only to trace a persistent transgenerational influence in two of the 583 LDS converts studied.

The most problematic aspect of Rust's thesis is his attempt to make totalizing claims about Mormonism from evidence provided by a relatively small and localized sample. Rust's thesis does not make sense unless, as he argues, the "message of the early LDS Church was so radical that it demanded a certain spiritual predisposition to resonate with it" (20). By choosing to limit his sample to those "baptized between 1830 and the end of 1834" (10), Rust implies that there was a formative "early church" period that ended on or about January 1, 1835, and that, by the end of this early period, the church had become less radical and its doctrines more broadly appealing. If this were true, it would be one way to account for the increase in growth the Church experienced in the years following 1834. Indeed, Rust's own figures indicate that there were only about 1,500 mem-