

limbs raised to the square  
 like some monstrous  
 authority—ghostly  
 branches that in 1820  
 might've been just what  
 a fourteen-year-old  
 prophet would swing on,  
 but now I can't reach.

The final line of the poem brings us to the present and the distance between that first foundational experience in the Sacred Grove and the contemporary challenge of rising to match it.

The title of the collection comes from an old proverb, “If you’re going to dine with the devil, make sure you have a long spoon.” In this collection, Christmas does indeed dine with the Devil (as well as with the Lord), but keeps his long spoon, just in case. In “The Philosophy of a Man (Mingled with Scripture),” as the narrator and his wife are preparing talks for sacrament meeting, his wife warns, “Don’t start confessing your sins,” to which he responds (to himself), “his struggle with sin / was the best part about him.” And so it is.

#### Note

1. “Confessional Poetry,” Art and Culture website, <http://www.artandculture.com/cgi-bin/WebObjects/ACLive.woa/wa/movement?id=548> (accessed October 14, 2006).

## Safe Haven for a Time

Thomas Cottam Romney. *The Mormon Colonies in Mexico*. 1938; rpt. with new foreword by Martha Sonntag Bradley, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005. 352 pp., \$19.95.

*Reviewed by Paul H. Wright, Dallas, Texas, who was raised in Texas among Tenneys, Pratts, Turleys, and Romneys*

The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) and its currently jailed leader, Warren Jeffs, recently established the

1700-acre Yearn for Zion Ranch in dry country northwest of San Antonio, amid alfalfa fields, oil wells, cattle, and, fittingly, goats.

It is the second time that polygamists revering the non-canonical 1886 revelation to President John Taylor—that polygamy was an irrevocable “everlasting covenant”—have fled to Texas. The first was in 1912, when Mormon colonists in northern Chihuahua retreated to El Paso to wait out the Mexican Revolution, reluctantly abandoning orderly homes, orchards, barns, and schools. Most of them never returned. Even worse, polygamy was dying, and it had been both the core of their religion and the reason for settling in Mexico in the first place. New marriages were out of the question; even cohabitating with the old wives was a scandal.

*The Mormon Colonies in Mexico*, first published in 1938 and now available in reprint with a sympathetic new foreword by Martha Sonntag Bradley, is an insider’s history. Its author, Thomas Cottam Romney, was only nine when, in 1885, he arrived with his mother, the third of his father’s five wives, to settle in the Sierra Madres. Tom was a hungry boy: “The food was coarse, consisting mainly of frijoles (beans), cornbread and molasses with an occasional piece of bacon thrown in, but what was lacking in variety of food was made up in appetite” (77). He would witness the entire colonial experience: the Saints’ early privations; sturdy faith; rise and expansion with children, produce, and livestock; and the sorrows of their precipitous exile. Romney speaks with the immediacy of one who has lived through the events.

Had he not ignored the actual practice of polygamy in the colonies, how compelling a story this might have been! What an enviable position from which to describe life inside the Principle—and what an opportunity lost! When Thomas Romney wrote, “Our family was an unusually large one and to feed and clothe them was a problem not easy to solve” (318), the man wasn’t exaggerating. His father had a quiverful of children, five wives, and many grievances to manage. Thomas’s mother, Catherine Cottam Romney, for example, was irritated by her husband’s attentions to his fifth wife, a widow with money whom he married seven years after the Manifesto, while Catherine was still birthing children. But you won’t read about it in this book. Polygamists, particularly women, have no voice in *The Mormon Colonies in Mexico*. It is a work of social history that mostly manages to avoid describing the one aspect of Mormon social life in the Mexican colonies, marriage arrangements, about which the reader is most curious.

Mormons first explored Mexico in 1875, according to Orson Pratt, “to look for places where our brethren could go and be safe from harm in the event that persecution should make it necessary for them to get out of the way for a season.”<sup>1</sup> The colonies were deliberately insular, the Spanish language and the Mexicans who spoke it a secondary concern. Settlements hugged the U.S-Mexican border, far from the state capital, Chihuahua City, and impossibly far from the population centers of the central Mexican highlands. In Romney’s view, “People having different social standards, resulting from radically different environments, will have more enduring friendships for one another if they do not become too intimate” (147).

Faced with crippling anti-polygamy statutes at home, Mormons sought, according to Bradley, “a stable or favorable political climate” for practicing their religion (Foreword, 4). That did not mean they intended to live within the law as much as they hoped to live free from harassment. Polygamy was not then, nor has it ever been, legal in Mexico or anywhere in North America. Intimate but ambiguous meetings with members of the Diaz cabinet provided cover for polygamy, but Mormon authorities always seemed to know they were skirting the law. They were more careful with the laws of Canada.

Was it racism? Romney repeats the now discredited claim, once taught in LDS Seminary, that “white and delightsome” ancestors of Amerindians built the Mayan glories at Uxmal, Palenque, and Chichén Itzá. Race was part of the colonists’ troubles in Mexico: “Genetically the two peoples differed. The Mexicans were predominantly Latin, by nature temperamental and given to intense emotionalism; inclined more to be theoretical than practical. On the other hand, the colonists were largely of Nordic extraction, less emotional than their neighbors and strongly inclined toward the practical, having a tendency to be cool and calculating and having a bent toward thrift” (146).

Like other Mormons, Romney emphasized that his own northern European bloodlines had produced civilization’s great legal, literary, and scientific advances. Did the progressive, democratic laws of Nordic Canada deserve more compliance than the laws of Mexico?

How many colonists practiced polygamy? Romney will only repeat that 4.5 percent of men Churchwide were polygamists, although such precise numbers obscure more than they reveal. Was the number closer to 40 percent in Mexico? Romney possibly thought that it was impolitic to discuss marital arrangements in his colonial home or that he had no special