

this book. It will profoundly reward any reader interested Mormon culture's subtleties.

Not Your Parents' Mormonism

Claudia L. Bushman. *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2006. 256 pp. Cloth: \$44.95; ISBN 0-275-98933-X

Reviewed by David X. Banack

Writing a one-volume treatment of modern Mormonism that avoids being overshadowed by the movement's gripping nineteenth-century history and focuses instead on what Mormonism is *today* is a challenge for any author. Bushman, a scholar who also writes from the perspective of a practicing Latter-day Saint, has produced the best attempt so far at painting the complex portrait of contemporary Mormonism.

First, I must acknowledge the difficulty of such a project. A one-volume survey lacks the clear narrative thread that guides a one-volume history. Moreover, Mormon readers likely take it for granted that they themselves know most of what there is to know about the modern LDS Church. Yet most who read this book will find that their own experience of Mormonism reflects only part of a larger picture. As Bushman herself notes, the LDS Church "encompasses large numbers of people with complex histories who join for many different reasons and have chosen to relate to Mormonism in many different ways" (xii). Spirited public discussion in the media, in symposia, and in rapidly multiplying online forums of every facet of LDS doctrine and practice makes this new diversity increasingly evident. The memorable events of 2008—the glare of publicity resulting from the Romney candidacy and the busy role that Mormons were asked to play in the fight over Proposition 8 in California—likewise signal that this is plainly not your parents' Mormonism.

While LDS readers will find familiar some material in the book, each chapter offers new information and commentary. In Chapter 3, "Families," Bushman spends five pages discussing the

oft-quoted but rarely analyzed *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, which may now be contemporary Mormonism's defining document. "Speaking against family disintegration, same-sex marriage, and abortion, declaring gender to be an eternal characteristic, the policy is more conservative than anything found in the Scriptures" (38–39). Conservative, yes, but strangely progressive at the same time, at least by Mormon standards. Bushman notes that the document carefully avoids mention of birth control and early marriage, two staples of yesteryear's counsel, and describes the ideal mother and father as "equal partners," not a term often heard from LDS leaders of prior generations. I have seen no other commentator discuss the progressive implications of the proclamation.

Chapter 7, "Gender and Sexual Orientation," surveys the tensions that cut across the evolving position of the modern LDS woman. Some see greater recognition and more opportunities to serve and lead. A convert and self-described feminist is quoted as saying, "I've never seen such active, liberated women as in the church. I've never been to any other church where women spoke equally with the men" (111). At the same time, some are dissatisfied with the roles assigned to women. Opinion spans the spectrum, really, and no simple statement can adequately describe what LDS women think. This is clear from Bushman's review of the results of a study sampling the reaction of LDS women in Utah to President Ezra Taft Benson's 1987 talk, "To the Mothers in Zion," in which he stated "a mother's calling is in the home, not in the marketplace." While almost half accepted the counsel as binding, some expressed anger and resentment, others read into the counsel exceptions such as financial need, and a few simply rejected the counsel as unrealistic (117).

Other topics covered in the book—the international Church, tensions with scholars and intellectuals, and Salt Lake City as the center of Mormonism and its City of Zion, for example—offer similarly enlightening discussions of current issues, developments, and challenges.

One feature I found rather forced at first but came to enjoy as the book progressed was the abundance of quotations and comments from rank-and-file Mormons. "It isn't easy being 26 and single in Happy Valley," wrote one young woman in Utah Valley

(37). A Chilean Mormon praising the 2002 Christmas Devotional in Spanish said, “I felt proud. . . . And it was wonderful to hear the Apostles speak Spanish” (105). The dozens of mini-profiles and quotations sketch a mosaic rather than a portrait, offering a truer reflection of the diversity increasingly present in the modern Church.

An unfortunate omission is the complete lack of photographs, charts, or maps. Certainly a map showing the distribution and density of Mormons across the United States or showing increasing numbers of Mormons outside the Intermountain West over time would be relevant and instructive. And surely the many photogenic Mormons who have achieved a measure of fame in sports, politics, and entertainment represent a relevant aspect of contemporary Mormonism. Could the beaming face of Ken Jennings, now known to millions, have been anything but LDS?

A natural comparison is to Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling’s *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise*, first published in 1999 (rev. ed., New York: HarperCollins, 2007). It is written by veteran journalists relying on interviews and publicly available sources, whereas Bushman writes as a scholar and employs statistical data when they are available. *Mormon America’s* first hundred pages recount LDS history and several chapters treat LDS doctrine and theology, whereas Bushman focuses more narrowly on the culture and practices of the modern LDS Church. Both books are informative, with *Mormon America* being an easier read and *Contemporary Mormonism* grappling more directly with issues confronting the Church and bringing better data to bear on those issues. The cover banner added to the 2007 edition of *Mormon America*—“The True Story Behind Their Beliefs, Rituals, Business Practices, and Well-Guarded Secrets”—signals an exposé rather than a serious treatment, which is unfortunate and largely undeserved.

Every reader, whether Mormon or not, will learn new facts about the life of modern Mormons and the expanding culture of Mormonism by reading *Contemporary Mormonism*. Would you have guessed, for example, that 40 percent of the recipients of the Perpetual Education Fund’s low-interest loans are women? (109). In the preface, Bushman wrote, “My aim has been to describe the evolving Church as it is experienced by members in a narrative

that others can also understand” (p. x). In this aim she has succeeded admirably.