

REVIEWS

Image and Reality in the Utah Zion

Polly Aird. *Mormon Convert, Mormon Defector: A Scottish Immigrant in the American West, 1848–1861*. Norman: Arthur H. Clark Company, an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2009). 320 pp. Illustrations, photos, maps, footnotes, bibliography, index. Cloth: \$39.95; ISBN 978–0–87062–369–1

Reviewed by Benjamin E. Park

Just as national histories are always written by the victors, religious narratives are often written by those who remain within the fold. The common tropes of conversion, devotion, dedication through trials, and faithfulness until death dominate Mormon historiography. Missing are those stories that diverge from the traditional storylines. In *Mormon Convert, Mormon Defector: A Scottish Immigrant in the American West, 1848–1861*, Polly Aird provides us with an account of her great-great-uncle, whose narrative significantly differed from the faith-promoting norm. Peter McAuslan embraced the Mormon faith in his native Scotland, made the arduous trek with his wife and children to Utah to live with the body of Saints, grew disillusioned with the faith he had once loved during the turmoil of the Reformation, and then decided to leave the Church and Utah. The McAuslans then established a new life—permanent this time—in California. While stories like that of Peter McAuslan are often quickly forgotten, they are crucial to enriching our understanding of the historical period, offering extratraditional views to complete our portrait of the past.

Perhaps Aird's most significant accomplishment is her ability to richly recreate the historical context for each of the different episodes McAuslan experienced. Utilizing numerous secondary sources, varied contemporary records, and the eclectic collection of McAuslan's writings, she introduces readers to the dynamic and disruptive environment of early nineteenth-century Scotland, the traumatic and tedious experiences of migration over land and sea (Aird's treatment of the British Saints' voyage should be particularly singled out for its vivid brilliance), and the rugged, difficult, and often unstable society of early pioneer Utah. Aird dedi-

cates many pages to this larger environment—perhaps, at times, to the extent of forgetting the biography’s central character—and the result is a text that is useful for understanding both McAuslan as well as the world he lived in. While ostensibly about a single individual, the book is really a group biography and microhistory narrating the circumstances of the many different groups McAuslan associated with: Scottish converts struggling to make a living in a tumultuous climate, immigrant Saints enduring the dangerous trek to Zion, and imported foreigners fighting to survive the rough Utah soil and even rougher Reformation rhetoric. By moving beyond the restrictions of traditional biography, Aird casts a much wider net enabling a much broader—and thus, much more relevant—narrative.

A specific thematic cycle permeates the entire text: the high hopes of idealist faith, and the painful disillusionment when those hopes cannot be reconciled with reality. McAuslan and his fellow Saints had high hopes when they set off to travel to Zion, yet the trip was filled with difficulties, sickness, and death. When they finally settled in Deseret—narrated in a chapter ironically titled “The Promised Land”—they were only met with difficult weather, crop-eating locusts, and a priesthood leadership more intent on reforming personal spirituality than on sympathizing with the toiling settlers. The unity of the kingdom of God that McAuslan originally pictured was replaced with discord and bickering. Attending general conference only five days after arriving, McAuslan witnessed Orson Pratt, previously the hero to Scottish Saints from his term as mission president over the British Isles due to his prodigious writings and publications, being reprimanded by Brigham Young for preaching doctrine contrary to Young’s own beliefs. Welcome to Zion, indeed.

The narrative becomes broadest during the chapters depicting McAuslan’s time in Utah. To fully explore McAuslan’s defection from Mormonism, Aird spends considerable time on the fiery rhetoric of the Mormon Reformation, especially the jarring discourses of Brigham Young. Readers may be taken aback by the domineering, insensitive, and extremist portrait that Aird paints of Mormonism’s second prophet—and indeed, she may at times be guilty of presenting a one-sided and simplistic caricature of a deeply complex figure. However, I found the depiction justi-

fied—at least to a certain extent—for a very important reason: caricature or not, it was the view that Peter McAuslan (and others) actually had of Brigham Young. Aird recreates the worldview encouraged by the Reformation’s shocking rhetoric, and Mormons’ inclination to take their leaders’ words *literally*—a trait not only justifiable but arguably to be expected, given Mormonism’s strong emphasis on authority and obedience. McAuslan’s story is a valuable cautionary tale about the potential effects of violent discourse in a religious culture.

One reason the themes of obedience and rebellion are key to Aird’s narrative is that the characters in this historical drama often seem limited in their agency. Peter McAuslan, his fellow Scottish workers, the poor Mormon immigrants, and the struggling settlers of Utah all appear to be more creatures of their environment than creators of their own destiny. Perhaps steeped in the social history that dominated the second half of the twentieth century, Aird’s presentation is more concerned with temporal survival than personal expression, more with societal requirements than with individual liberties. In this framework, deep theological answers have little merit for those striving to build Zion, and the spirituality of the story’s participants can be defined as—at best—apathetic. Though ironic for a narrative that focuses on a religious “convert” and “defector,” actual religious belief (at least more than just a superficial level) takes a back seat to practical issues in the story—a point that becomes a bit more jarring later in the text when McAuslan’s later writings reveal an individual deeply concerned with spiritual matters. Whether this gap is more a result of a dearth of McAuslan’s earlier writings or Aird’s authorial penchant, it seems like a significant shortcoming of the work.

Overall, though, Aird is to be commended for providing an important contribution to Mormon historiography. *Mormon Convert*, *Mormon Defector* helps us better understand nineteenth-century Mormon culture, a culture that we are beginning to appreciate as much more dynamic, heterodox, and multifaceted than previously understood. Only when Mormon history acknowledges these nuances in the LDS past—the countless examples of people like Peter McAuslan—can the larger picture become more complete.