

Old Words, New Work: Reclamation and Remembrance

John Russell. *The Mormoness; Or, The Trials of Mary Maverick: A Narrative of Real Events*. Edited and annotated by Michael Austin and Ardis E. Parshall. *The Mormon Image in Literature*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016 [1853]. 114 pp. Paperback: \$12.95. ISBN: 9781589585072.

Alfreda Eva Bell. *Boadicea; The Mormon Wife: Life-Scenes in Utah*. Edited and annotated by Michael Austin and Ardis E. Parshall. *The Mormon Image in Literature*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016 [1855]. 151 pp. Paperback: \$15.95. ISBN: 9781589585669.

Nephi Anderson. *Dorian: A Peculiar Edition with Annotated Text & Scholarship*. Edited by Eric W. Jepson. Annotated by Mason Allred, Jacob Bender, Scott Hales, Blair Dee Hodges, Eric W. Jepson, Sarah C. Reed, and A. Arwen Taylor. El Cerrito, Calif.: Peculiar Pages, 2015 [1921]. 316 pp. Paperback: \$21.99. ISBN: 9780991189236.

Reviewed by Jenny Webb

The continual rising interest in all things Mormon, whether they be historical, cultural, social, doctrinal, or even theological, has led to a number of interesting publication projects. The texts gathered in this review represent a particular focus within this broader interest: the recovery and re-examination of the various historical forms of the “Mormon novel.” The books on their own are not necessarily remarkable. They hold some significance as examples of a particular genre or a particular thematic interest, but their real value today lies in their ability to provide insight into the various ways in which the emergent Mormon religion was culturally received and aesthetically appropriated.

On the surface, the two series represented here appear fairly similar. Each takes a text that, for a variety of reasons, has languished in recent publication history and essentially been unavailable or difficult to locate in a decent edition. The original text is carefully and faithfully reproduced in a modern typesetting, and the editors provide a series of explanatory annotations along with various critical components such as a historical introduction to the text, appendices with additional contemporary texts provided for comparison, and in some cases, critical essays on the author or work itself. And yet there are distinct differences between the focus of Kofford's *The Mormon Image in Literature* series and that of *Peculiar Pages*: the scope of a "Mormon work." Compare the series descriptions:

The *Mormon Image in Literature* reprints important literary works by and about Mormons—from the sensational anti-polygamy books and dime novels of the Civil War era to the first attempts of Mormon writers to craft a regional literature in their Great Basin kingdom. Each volume contains a critical introduction, helpful annotations, and multiple appendices that enlighten and enliven the text. These volumes have been designed for both Mormon and non-Mormon readers who want to understand the cultural importance of Mormonism during the first Latter-day Saint century.

Peculiar Pages presents new editions of vital Mormon texts alongside overdue critical analysis. These carefully edited volumes bring deserving artistic works back to public attention.

Questions of genre (literary texts? how does one define a "Mormon text"?), authorship (Mormon authors? or authors writing about Mormons?), and audience (both ostensibly hedge their bets toward an expanded audience—essentially anyone interested—but their mutual emphasis on creating some sort of critical text indicates an underlying academic orientation) provide a sense as to the underlying complexities involved in reprinting and updating past texts for modern consumption. The editors involved in each series are well aware of these challenges, and are to be commended for their efforts here. While the Church Historian's Press has

certainly undertaken the most visible republishing effort of Mormon documents in recent years, both Kofford and Peculiar Pages demonstrate the breadth and depth of the available field. These texts may not possess the same doctrinal heft as the documents in the Joseph Smith Papers, but their ability to demonstrate a particular cultural reception of and response to popular Mormonism is significant in many ways, not the least of which is a demonstration of the reception of these theologies from both within and without the boundaries of Mormonism itself.

In *The Mormoness* and *Boadicea*, editors Michael Austin and Ardis E. Parshall have taken great pains to provide an informed, thorough, and yet accessible introduction to each volume. Both novels are written by non-Mormons, and both relate the story of a Mormon heroine battling a distinctively Mormon trial—persecution and polygamy, respectively. Austin and Parshall’s helpful contextualization allows the reader to understand the important differences between the two projects: while it is tempting to lump these novels together along with other early novels anxious to capitalize on the cultural otherness of the Mormons, the approach and methodology of the original authors as outlined by Austin and Parshall lie at opposite ends of the literary spectrum.

John Russell, author of *The Mormoness*, was a thoughtful, educated man whose approach to the topic ultimately sought to illustrate the underlying Christian impulses of forgiveness and mercy as integral to the Mormon experience. When his heroine serves the man who murdered her family, she is both fully Mormon and fully Christian (xv), and in this conceptualization of his heroine Russell displays a sensitivity and nuance regarding Mormonism that would not surface again in popular literature for many years.

On the other hand, Austin and Parshall explain how Alfreda Eva Bell (a pseudonym for, they argue, Arthur R. Orton) wrote *Boadicea* quickly with an eye to potential financial profits rather than as a factual depiction of polygamy in the lives of the early Utah Mormons. The novel seeks thrills—it most closely aligns with early efforts at sensational

crime drama—and its twists and turns demonstrate the text’s “curious place in the history of both publishing and Mormonism. . . . Its author has figured out how to make a lot of money by presenting sensational crimes as true stories to an unsophisticated audience” (xvii).

The distance here between Russell and Bell demonstrates both the challenge of this series—disparate approaches bound together by the happenstance of historical proximity abound!—and the value in its approach. By placing these early works on Mormonism together, Austin and Parshall illustrate in their conception of this ongoing series the wide variety with which Mormonism itself was received within the early American cultural context. For some, the strange religion provided an opportunity to reflect upon the tenets of religious faith, examining and ultimately expanding the borders of Christianity itself. For others, the very otherness of the Mormon experience proved a plentiful site for profitable entertainment. These responses, which I will broadly characterize as the religious and the economic, are at root fundamentally American. They display the quintessentially American modes of response to what was, at that point, an essentially American religion, and the interplay between product and context is fascinating at our present historical remove.

This same interplay is at work in Nephi Anderson’s coming-of-age novel *Dorian*, although in a decidedly more limited context. The editor of the present edition, Eric W. Jepson, describes Anderson as “the grandfather of Mormon literature,” calling *Dorian* “his best work” (iv). As a Mormon author, Anderson is clearly coming to his text from a distinctly different place than that of Russell and Bell (note the nearly seventy-year span between the earlier works and this later work as well). And as an author, Anderson is clearly writing for his contemporary Mormon audience: his vocabulary, his emphasis on doctrinal speculation/philosophizing at the expense of the plot, and his ultimate laser-like focus on conventions of redemption—each points toward a Mormon audience sympathetic to the protagonist’s difficulties. Young Dorian struggles to

learn and think, ultimately wanting to produce some kind of systematic synthesis of scientific and religious thought. Along the way, he negotiates the pitfalls of love, loss, and forgiveness, emerging as heroic due to his ability to accept his love, a “fallen woman.”

In some ways, the historical remove seems even farther in *Dorian* than in *The Mormoness* or *Boadicea*, simply because, as a Mormon reading a novel by a Mormon about a Mormon, I approached the text with muffled expectations of identification and recognition. And there were certainly lines that provoked thought. For example, the mentor Uncle Zed characterizes the Doctrine and Covenants as “the most wonderful love story ever written” (38). While the continuing text makes it clear that Uncle Zed provides this assessment due to the revelation on eternal marriage, as a singular assertion, the line proves potent: What *would* it mean to read the Doctrine and Covenants as a love story? But there were also plenty of moments where the cultural recognition was painful. For example, when Dorian’s female friend Carlia asks him about a sermon Uncle Zed gave earlier, she says “Try to tell me, Dorian. I need to know. I’m such a dunce” (81). Frankly, my reaction to this seemingly stereotypical depiction of gender was a literally-out-loud “Ugh!”—admittedly a specific modern reaction due to my own beliefs, but it is telling: I’m the kind of generalist Mormon reader (trained in literature, but not history) curious enough to pick up the book, but also a bit unsettled at this literary heritage.

From this reaction, it’s no surprise that the argument Jepson constructs through his editorship of this edition faces several difficulties. First, Jepson makes the case that Anderson was himself an important author worth considering in his own right due to his efforts at cultivating a Mormon literature. And second, the case is also made that *Dorian* itself represents the high point of this effort due to its attempts at what I would term a literary Mormon theology. Jepson addresses these issues both in his own introduction, but also in his construction of the volume as a critical text: there are full notes on each chapter, a series of six critical essays by contemporary readers and scholars (which do a good job of taking up topics raised by Anderson and placing them within the

modern critical discourses of canon, gender, economics, science, etc.), and two further essays by Anderson himself, “A Plea for Fiction” and “Purpose in Fiction.” The appendix provides deleted material curated by Scott Hales as well as contemporary notices of *Dorian*’s arrival in Mormon publications. And it is difficult to imagine work on the historical emergence of a Mormon literary tradition that would not take up Anderson in some way. For this work, then, this edition of *Dorian* provides ample orientation to Anderson, his aesthetic, his thematic approach, and, of course, *Dorian* itself.

It was impossible to read these three works without noting the various methodological and editorial choices. And there were distinct advantages and disadvantages that became apparent with each approach. Austin and Parshall displayed a certain facility working within the historical approach that was not as readily visible in Jepson’s volume. At the same time, Jepson’s efforts to provide not only historical contextualization, but also a framework for further literary interpretation gives the reader ready access for reflection upon the themes and motifs developed by Anderson throughout the novel. The actual text of each novel has been reproduced faithfully, though I have a slight preference for Austin and Parshall’s method of providing corrected spelling or punctuation in square brackets when the original contains an error. There were several instances in *Dorian* where it was unclear if the typo originated with Anderson or Jepson—for the record, they were all Anderson and were simply being reproduced as promised.

Luckily, I’m not being asked to pick a favorite, and the conceptual differences between the two series display the strength, breadth, and available intellectual space in this emerging field. For all their differences, the volumes here produced something in me that I had not anticipated: genuine excitement.

There is something going on in these texts, regardless of author, plot, or compositional intent. Together, they begin to paint a picture of the landscape of literary Mormonism with its interior reflections, exterior observations, and general evidence of multiplicity. There is no

one historical Mormon experience, literary or otherwise, and these texts readily demonstrate this fact. But there is a certain Mormon textuality that emerges from these pages: experimental, provocative, heartfelt, and profoundly human. It is this essential humanity that lies at the root of Mormonism both as a lived religion, but also as a cultural experience within the larger narrative of American history. The fact that we are at a vantage point from which we can reflect on Mormonism's broader cultural impact in a specific national context demonstrates the ways in which our current assumptions surrounding Mormonism itself are challenged by notions of national identity. Contemporary Mormonism exceeds national and cultural boundaries in ways that ultimately place these texts firmly within the historical past. They connect with a historical Mormonism precisely because, upon reflection, we realize how far we've come. The process of reflection initiated in each of these series is part of a central Mormon theological gesture: the turning of the hearts.

We turn toward those who came before us as we read their words with an eye to their historical moment and cultural context. We turn toward those who are coming after us as we recognize the changing attitudes in reception, circulation, and interpretation. We enact memory through a re-membering—a reconceptualization of the body of Christ as constituted by a multitude of members: fingers and toes, arms and legs, down to every hair on the head. These projects of textual reclamation resonate with Mormonism's foundational impulse to restore, and I cannot wait to see where they take us next.