

Bernard DeVoto and the Mormon Tradition

Leland A. Fetzer

"The mountains, the mountains, the mountains, were in everything he thought and felt." — Tolstoy (THE COSSACKS)

The career of Bernard DeVoto, the foremost writer and one of the greatest intellectual forces whom Utah has produced in this country, was conspicuously marked by achievements and honors. He wrote five novels, three books devoted to the history of the West, a classic study of Mark Twain, a stimulating study on the relationship between history and literature, another on the interdependence between psychology and literature, three volumes of essays which may serve as a chronicle of the issues dominating American life for twenty-five years (1930-1955), hundreds of reviews and articles on an astonishing range of topics, a monthly column for more than twenty years in America's most widely read serious journal (*Harper's*), and introductions to many books by other authors. He was an editor of both the *Harvard Graduates' Magazine* and *Saturday Review of Literature*, and a redoubtable partisan for civil rights and conservation. He received the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize for *Across the Wide Missouri* in 1948 and the National Book Award for *The Course of Empire* in 1952. He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Literature from Middlebury College (1937), Kenyon College (1942), the University of Colorado (1948), and Northeastern University (1948). In short, he was a remarkably creative writer and a major figure in the intellectual life of America from about 1930 to his death in 1955.

Much of his creative energy was expended in writing about what he knew best: the Mormon tradition. He wrote the first serious novel dedicated to aspects of Mormonism (*Chariot of Fire*), the most poignant tribute ever written to a Utah Pioneer ("The Life of Jonathan Dyer"), the standard reference biographies of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young (in the *Dictionary of American Biography*), one of the first and most striking attempts to summarize the history of Mormonism ("The Centennial of Mormonism," 1936), the most popular and moving account ever written of the Mormon exodus (in *The Year of Decision; 1846*), two novels which explore as no one has ever done the experience of growing up in a town below western mountains (*The Crooked Mile* and, in part, *Mountain Time*) and another which attempts to embody in fiction a theory of the settling of the West (*The House of Sun-Goes-Down*). This long inventory makes it clear that DeVoto had a great attachment to his native state and its people and that this provided a major stimulus for much of his creative work. He was indubitably a Utah writer shaped by the Utah experience.

But DeVoto has never found the recognition he deserves among the people of Utah nor from its scholars. DeVoto's papers now rest in the Stanford University library, 800 miles from his native state in a region for which he felt no affection and indeed which he did not even consider to be part of the West.¹ No university in Utah ever granted him an honorary degree. Publications associated with the state which might have been expected to demonstrate an interest in him have been, with a few exceptions, silent. Since its inception in 1928, so far as I have been able to ascertain, the *Utah Historical Quarterly* has devoted one brief article to DeVoto, and that was a eulogy after his death in 1955,² and the *Western Humanities Review* has published only one article on DeVoto, a brief review of his novel *Mountain Time*.³ As far as I know the only other piece of research and writing on DeVoto to come out of Utah is a University of Utah Master's thesis by Raymond Gene Briscoe.⁴

Why has DeVoto failed to receive the recognition which he so richly deserves in his native state? Why have there been so few studies made by those who should feel a special attraction to this outstanding Utah writer? Why has the individual who served as the major interpreter of Utah and its history for the greater audience in the United States and abroad in the first half of our century been so ignored on this home ground? I would like to suggest two reasons for this unhappy state of affairs. First, there is a wide-spread misapprehension about

¹It is ironic that DeVoto's personal papers, if we can assume that they traveled by rail from his home in Cambridge to Palo Alto, must have crossed the piece of ground that he loved more than any place on earth — his grandfather's farm in the mouth of Weber Canyon. I leave one question for future historians: did the train stop in Ogden?

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the San Diego State College Foundation towards the expenses connected with the writing of this paper. I would also like to thank the staff of the Stanford University Archives for their courtesy and cooperation. My gratitude is extended also to Wallace Stegner who found time from his biography of "Benny" to talk with me at length. I would like to dedicate this essay to Professor Francis J. Whitfield, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley.

²Darrell J. Greenwell, "Bernard A. DeVoto, Recollection and Appreciation," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 24 (January, 1956), 81-84.

³T. C. Bauerlein, "Mountain Time" (Review), *Utah Humanities Review*, 2 (January, 1948), 85-86. It should be pointed out in all fairness that according to Wallace Stegner DeVoto was invited by Brewster Ghiselin to participate in a Writers' Conference in Utah, but declined.

⁴*Bernard DeVoto: Historian of the West* (1966). Other works on DeVoto in order of importance are Catherine Drinker Bowen, Edith R. Mirrielees, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Wallace Stegner, *Four Portraits and One Subject: Bernard DeVoto* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1963), which includes the standard bibliography of DeVoto's work; Robert Edson Lee, "The Work of Bernard DeVoto, Introduction and Annotated Check List" (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1957), with an invaluable annotated bibliography; Orlan Sawey, *Bernard DeVoto* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969); John Melvin Gill, "Bernard DeVoto and Literary Anticriticism" (Ph. D. dissertation, New York University, 1964). In 1938 at the time when DeVoto's interest was shifting decisively from fiction to history, Garrett Mattingly, DeVoto's friend and a Harvard historian, wrote a brief volume entitled *Bernard DeVoto: A Preliminary Appraisal* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938), which still retains its value, particularly for its interpretation of DeVoto's early novels and short stories, now much ignored. At the present time Wallace Stegner is writing the definitive biography of DeVoto, drawing upon his long friendship with DeVoto and the DeVoto Papers at Stanford University.

This paper is concerned essentially with DeVoto's published opinions about Utah and the Mormons; consequently, little attention is devoted either to the facts of DeVoto's life or to his extensive private correspondence in which he sometimes expressed himself more vehemently than in his published writings. We must await Wallace Stegner's biography for a full treatment of DeVoto's private life.

DeVoto's early years in Utah, his family, and particularly his religious affiliation. Second, there is a general misconception about DeVoto's published opinions on his native state and Mormonism which fails to take into account the variety and evolution of his expressions and, in spite of occasional private outbursts, what I believe to be his fundamental sympathy with the Mormon tradition. This misconception shows DeVoto to be a life-long defamer of his native state and its dominant church.

In this essay I would like to examine these misunderstandings in the hope of clearing away some of the confusion, the dimly felt prejudices, and the unexpressed distaste which otherwise informed Mormon readers and scholars have for DeVoto and his works. He was a major figure in our times and a keen interpreter of Mormonism and its place in the West and he deserves more than the essential silence he has received.

* * *

DeVoto was not, as many have supposed, a Mormon. The child of a Mormon mother and a Catholic father, both of whom were born in Utah, he was raised as a Catholic and received a Catholic elementary education. Although DeVoto openly acknowledged his Catholicism, it seems to have been essentially unimportant in his writing and largely irrelevant to his world view.

Had DeVoto possessed a Catholic orientation, his writings would have been profoundly different. He would have written on Mormonism from a clearly defined point of view, interpreting Utah and Mormonism if not from the point of view of Catholic dogma in the narrow sense, at least as an outsider looking in. This would have made his work more accessible, less ambiguous, and infinitely less interesting, because one of the great appeals of DeVoto's writings on Mormonism is the inner struggle between his status outside of the Mormon Church and the great emotional attachment which he felt towards Mormonism as an institution with a remarkable historical tradition and admirable principles of social coherence.

It is also remarkable that although DeVoto was deeply concerned with the search for the roots of his existence — and this interest explains his great love for both the western landscape⁵ and the western past reflected in his many historical studies — he was concerned only with his American and in particular his Utah tradition. Although three of his grandparents were born in Europe, he appears to have been indifferent to any foreign tradition.⁶ For him it all began when his grandfather, Samuel Dye, broke the virgin soil on his farm at Uintah. DeVoto knew and loved his grandfather who appears thinly disguised in one of his novels (*The Crooked Mile*), and DeVoto wrote a touching tribute to him. He was deeply impressed by his grandfather's feat in carving out a home and productive acres where none had been before:

⁵See, for example, his almost mystic preoccupation with terrain and onomastics in *Beyond the Wide Missouri* and the striking role played by the mountains above the city in his Ogden novels.

⁶With the exception of a few brief trips across the Canadian line adjacent to New England, DeVoto never left the United States. Oddly enough, he wrote extensively about the Mexican War (*The Year of Decision: 1846*) and Canada (*The Course of Empire*), but in spite of his insistence on accuracy of detail he never troubled himself to visit either of these areas. In my opinion a broader understanding of European and world affairs might have been useful in restraining some of his exuberant rhetoric on western expansion.

The earth was poisoned, and Jonathan made it sweet. It was a dead land and he gave it life. Permanently. Forever. Following the God of the Mormons, he came from Hertford to the Great American Desert and made it fertile. That is achievement.⁷

There is no question that the hours which DeVoto spent with his grandfather and the reading of his diary (now in the DeVoto Papers at Stanford), were of extraordinary importance in determining his identification with the Mormon tradition. For the rest of his life DeVoto was to seek his own origins neither very far away in space from his grandfather's farm nor very distant in time from the year of his grandfather's arrival in Utah.

DeVoto published three accounts of a happy childhood in the 1930s when he first turned seriously to the study of Western history.⁸ In them he described his childhood and early adolescence and the formative years in which he found his own place in a divided world:

Ogden, as the railroad center of the State, had an actual majority of Gentiles and so had achieved a working compromise, a forced equilibrium, long before the rest of Mormonry. The violence of neighbors at one another's throats, calling upon God, morality, and the national sovereignty for vindication, had subsided, and very little strife found its way to children. Mormon and Gentile, we grew up together with little awareness that our fathers fought in hostile armies. The child of a Catholic father and a Mormon mother, I myself was evidence of the adjustment.⁹

DeVoto asserts that he enjoyed an intellectually stimulating childhood — this is the whole point of his essay "A Sagebrush Bookshelf" — and that he was welcomed in both his mother's and his father's churches without apparent strains or antagonism:

The Irish priests of my own communion never preached against the heretics. Protestant ministers were less amiable, but it was only an occasional Gantry in the evangelical sects who bellowed excerpts from the filthy and preposterous anti-Mormon literature of the earlier age. We even mingled in Sunday School without shock. A Mormon meeting house was the place of worship nearest my home, and I was sometimes sent there for instruction until I was about seven, when Rome idly exercised its claim.¹⁰

Anyone who reads these passages must be struck by the idyllic life DeVoto describes of tolerant acceptance, of a child who moved back and forth between

⁷"The Life of Jonathan Dyer" in *Forays and Rebuttals* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936) pp. 3-24. First published in *Harper's*, 167 (September, 1933), 491-501, under the title "Jonathan Dyer, Frontiersman." This essay was also reprinted in *Rocky Mountain Reader* (New York: Dutton, 1946), 60-76.

I am not the only admirer of this sketch. Garrett Mattingly in his study of DeVoto wrote: "But the jewel of the collection [the collection of essays with the title of *Forays and Rebuttals*] is "The Life of Jonathan Dyer" [DeVoto's pseudonym for Samuel Dye], the simple biography of one frontiersman who gave his blood and sweat to America. There is no better statement in concrete terms anywhere of the meaning of the far Western frontier. It is a little classic. No one who read it can have forgotten it." (p. 51)

⁸These are "Fossil Remnants of the Frontier: Notes on a Utah Boyhood," *Harper's*, 170 (April, 1935), 590-600, reprinted in *Forays and Rebuttals*, 23-45; "My Dear Edmund Wilson," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 15 (February 13, 1937), 8, 20; expanded and reprinted as "Autobiography: or As Some Call It, Literary Criticism" in *Minority Report* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1940), pp. 163-189; and "A Sagebrush Bookshelf," *Harpers*, 175 (October, 1937), 488-496.

⁹Fossil Remnants," in *Forays and Rebuttals*, p. 31.

¹⁰*Ibid.*



a Mormon chapel and a Catholic church without hindrance or knowledge that there might be anything contradictory in his behavior. This was the world of a child raised as a Catholic who never denied his religion, but who also felt an undeniable emotional attachment to his mother's tradition. But significantly enough these autobiographical writings do not continue his life story into the stormy years of late adolescence and early manhood which were to lead to his decision to abandon Utah and the West to take up a career in teaching and writing.

When he made that decision he was employed on a ranch in the Raft River Valley; the opportunity to leave came in the form of an invitation to teach Freshman English at Northwestern University. Between the years of childhood and the time when he found himself working on a hay rig he had undergone a tumultuous year at the University of Utah, transferred to Harvard, served in the Army as a marksmanship officer after volunteering in 1917 when the United States entered World War I, returned to complete his B.A. at Harvard, and made the fateful decision to return to his home town. In retrospect it seems obvious that sooner or later this enormously ambitious Harvard Phi Beta Kappa would eject himself violently, explosively, from this town of 30,000 and its environs. Two years were required for the accumulation of sufficient pressure to trigger the cataclysm. There is much that remains unknown about those years of adolescence and early manhood, but one thing is clear: when DeVoto left

Utah he was in a period of violent reaction against his childhood and would resort to almost any means in order to carve out a place for himself in literature, even if it meant subordinating reason to the cause of sensationalism. In the next few years among his other writings¹¹ he was to write three essays expressing his aversion to the Mormon tradition in which he used sarcasm, exaggeration, derision, and incongruous juxtaposition for dazzling rhetorical effects. They were brilliant and maddening essays; they were also eminently unfair, and DeVoto came to regret them deeply.

In the first of these, "God—Litterateur," which appeared in an obscure little magazine called *The Guardian*, DeVoto turned for the first and last time to the writings of the Mormon Church, specifically to the *Doctrine and Covenants*. He resorted to sarcasm in criticizing the literary style of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, which he satirically took to be the literary style of the Creator:

The contributions of God to American literature have never been adequately surveyed. Altogether the bulk of His writings during the past three centuries on this continent must be enormous. And in Utah at least, [as] the critic who approaches this field will discover, God has long been and continues to be the favorite author.¹²

Next he jeers at those passages which deal with commercial transactions such as land ownership and the construction of hotels and other buildings, denouncing what seemed to him to be one of the most negative aspects of contemporary Mormonism — its close involvement in economic affairs.

In the second of these vitriolic articles, "Ogden: The Underwriters of Salvation," DeVoto wrote about his home town, emphasizing as was his inclination its historical origins, including the emigration of the Mormons to Utah and their colonization of the state. As in the case with "God — Litterateur" DeVoto's attitude towards Mormonism was sharply critical and sarcastic, although there are grudging concessions to the role of the Mormons in creating a society in the desert. The scurrilous tone and verbal pyrotechnics of the essay may be judged from this, its last paragraph:

Wherefore some day all cities will bend their heads in its direction while the skies open to sudden thunder and St. Brigham and St. Joseph Smith Jun., sharing between them Helen of Troy and all dead, aphrodisiac ladies, come down to chain the devil and populate the earth with Mormon robots.¹³

¹¹If space permitted, this would be the appropriate place to discuss DeVoto's novel of 1924, *Chariot of Fire*. This novel is a variation on William Dean Howells' *Leatherstocking*, which was also devoted to frontier revivalism. DeVoto introduced a number of elements in his novel from Mormonism, such as a Mormon-like hierarchic system and the enmity between a frontier sect and its neighbors leading to the martyrdom of its prophet and its exodus to the western desert; but in other respects the story differs from the actual course of events in Mormon history. The entire question of the novel's genesis, its relationship to Howells' novel on one hand and the facts of Mormon history and frontier revivalism on the other, is a complex one which cannot be treated here. Mention should also be made of DeVoto's review of M. R. Werner's *Brigham Young*, which appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, 1 (June 27, 1925), 853, under the title "The Odyssey of Mormonism." This review is consistent with, if more moderate than, the three Mormon essays of this period.

¹²1 (March, 1925), 188-197; 189.

¹³This is an essay in the anthology *The Taming of the Frontier*, edited by Duncan Aikman (New York: Minton, Balch, and Co., 1925); (ten pieces by different authors dealing with the passing of the frontier in ten western cities and towns), p. 60. Within the collection DeVoto's essay is remarkable for its power, virtuosity and virulence.

Had DeVoto written only these two obscure articles on Mormonism, which are remarkable for their burlesque but which differ little in content from many anti-Mormon writings, he would never have received the reputation as the most damning critic of Mormonism. They would have been forgotten by all but the specialist and DeVoto's reputation among the Mormons would have been significantly different than it is today. But H. L. Mencken, the famous American iconoclast, was attracted to DeVoto's undeniable writing talent and accepted for his *American Mercury* DeVoto's article entitled "Utah"¹⁴ which was widely read all over the United States, including Utah. To one who approaches the article by the way of "God — Litterateur" and "Ogden" it appears relatively restrained, but to the ordinary inhabitant of the state it must have burst like a bomb-shell.¹⁵ It purports to be a brief survey of the state's history and a description of contemporary life in Deseret. Unlike his procedure in earlier articles DeVoto does not single out the Mormon Church or its tradition for criticism, as much as he denies the existence of anything worthwhile in the state. The impression that the article conveys is one of utter unrelieved Philistinism reigning in a state which is the product of an ignominious past. No exceptions.

The Mormons were staid peasants whose only distinguishing characteristics were their servility to their leaders and their belief in a low-comedy God. They had flocked to the Church from localities where civilization had never penetrated. Then, with an infallible instinct, they had recruited their numbers from the slums of English factory cities and from the bankrupt crofter-districts of Scandinavia. The Gentiles were less fanatical than the Mormons and less ignorant, but they were also less robust. They represented the unfit of the frontier, those who had fallen by the wayside along the trail to glory. . . .

* * * *

Such was the old Utah, a frontier State. . . . A state peopled by frontiersmen — ruddy, illiterate herb-minded folk. A State where the very process of survival demanded a rigorous suppression of individuality, impracticability, scepticism, and all the other qualities of intelligence.

* * * *

Those who have no interest in social or intellectual or artistic life may live there [in Utah] as well as anywhere else in this best of all possible Republics. The difference is merely this: should they ever, for a moment, want to enter or observe such life or feel the need of anything that springs from it, they would be at a dead stop. Civilized life does not exist in Utah. It never has existed there. It never will exist there.¹⁶

Almost twenty years after this episode DeVoto wrote a letter about these early articles to a friend in Ogden which so impressed the friend that with DeVoto's permission he had it published in *The Rocky Mountain Review* under

¹⁴*American Mercury*, 7 (March, 1926), 317-323. One explanation for the excesses of DeVoto's early Utah articles was his eagerness to break into literature to satisfy his high personal ambition. Under these circumstances it is understandable that he may have emphasized the scandalous at the expense of his good judgment.

¹⁵Wallace Stegner describes one such violent reaction to the article in his essay on DeVoto in *Four Portraits*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁶"Utah," pp. 319, 321, 322.

the meaningful title "Revaluation."¹⁷ This letter is a remarkable document in many ways. It is first of all a superb example of DeVoto's vigorous and expressive epistolary style; it supports the contention that some of DeVoto's most durable writing may well be in his personal letters. It is also remarkable for its humility, honesty and candor.

Many years have passed since I would have attempted any justification what of my early two articles on Utah. [DeVoto omitted reference to "God-Litterateur" probably because of its limited publicity]. They were ignorant, brash, prejudiced, malicious, and, what is worst of all, irresponsible. They were absolutely in the *Mercury* mood of illegitimate and dishonest attack. They represented the only occasions in my career when I yielded to that mood. I have spent practically all my literary life attacking other manifestations of that mood, and I have always regarded my yielding to it on those occasions as an offense which can be neither justified nor palliated.

There was, and doubtless remains, much in the life and culture of Utah that could be legitimately criticized. Some of the things I said in those articles made points which would have been legitimate criticism if I had said them fairly and objectively — and if the entire mood and atmosphere of the articles had not been atrociously offensive. It was, and doubtless remains, thoroughly possible to oppose some of the tendencies and manifestations of civilization in Utah on reasonable, empirical grounds. But that consideration is irrelevant, since my criticism and opposition were embodied in a lot of prejudice, irresponsible humor, and a general yanking out of shirt-tails and setting them on fire.¹⁸

Then DeVoto asks, "Why did I write them, and write them as I did?" In answer he identifies his youth and his intoxication with the privilege of publication. But more than that, he says, "In some degree they were acts of self-vindication, in some degree acts of revenge."¹⁹

They were the fruits of his indignation at his home town which refused him the recognition to which he believed his talents entitled him. But regardless of his motives, which are understandable if not defensible, and regardless of the revaluation which he declared and perhaps was pleading for, during the remainder of his life DeVoto had to contend with the widespread conviction that he was blindly critical of Utah and its Mormon tradition. And in spite of his statements to the contrary, I believe he was deeply wounded by this critical attitude.

The misunderstanding is all the more regrettable because DeVoto by no means abandoned his interest in Mormonism and in fact wrote extensively on the subject during the next twenty-five years. In addition, his writings in those years display a significantly different attitude towards the subject: while still critical of some aspects of the Church and its tradition, DeVoto is more scrupulous in his judgments, more concerned to provide evidence for his assertions, and far less prone to succumb to the rhetorical devices which characterized his earlier writings. He shifted his interest from the negative aspects of the Church, for the most part, and began to single out for praise those aspects of the Mormon

¹⁷10 (Autumn, 1945), 7-11. This article was reprinted in the *Improvement Era*, 49 (March, 1946), 154, 164. The *Era* editors deleted about one-fifth of its contents and bowdlerized it slightly. The result was to blunt some of the sting of the original and to remove some of its color as well, but its major points for the most part were left unimpaired.

¹⁸"Revaluation," p. 7.

¹⁹"Revaluation," p. 8.

tradition which he considered of positive value. His writing increasingly emphasized the Mormon contribution to the settling of the West.

When did this change of attitude occur? There is some evidence that in the late 1920s DeVoto was reconsidering his attitude towards Mormonism, perhaps because of the outcry over his "Utah" article. But I prefer to think that such a change was inevitable, even if there had not been such a furor, because a man of DeVoto's intelligence, wide reading, historical preoccupation, and social awareness could not fail to comprehend that his early writings on Mormonism were superficial and unscholarly; the Mormon heritage (and DeVoto, thanks to his childhood experiences, was keenly aware of this) was too important an aspect of the frontier to be dismissed by glib phrases, no matter how amusing they might be. It appears, too, that his more serious attitude towards the Mormon tradition was part of his increased interest in history which was to bear fruit as *Mark Twain's America* (1932) and his historical trilogy on western America which he was to begin in a few years.²⁰

If we accept the theory that DeVoto's work on Mormonism can be divided into an early negative period (which immediately achieved infamy at least in his native state) and a later more mature and objective period, then the essay "The Centennial of Mormonism" which he published in 1930²¹ occupies a middle ground. In it DeVoto does the following: (1) He relates the major historical facts of the founding of Mormonism in 1830 in a mock serious manner worthy of his earlier writings, but he ends with the question: "Why has Mormonism survived when hundreds of other sects from the same period have perished?" (2) He complains about the lack of sound historical studies on the origins of Mormonism and introduces his own theory that the founder of the church was patently paranoid and then supports the conjecture that he plagiarized the *Book of Mormon* from Solomon Spaulding's *Manuscript Found*. (3) He asserts that the fortuitous martyrdom of Joseph Smith saved the Church from dissolution and provided the stimulus for the essential emigration to a place of refuge. (4) He describes the character and contribution of Brigham Young, whom he describes as the greatest religious leader the nation has produced. (5) He surveys the present prosperous state of Mormonism and what appears to DeVoto to be its unhealthy involvement in business enterprises in the West.

That the article is an improvement on the "Utah" article can be seen even from this brief summary. DeVoto has abandoned his blanket condemnation of

²⁰Robert Edson Lee discusses the change in DeVoto's attitude towards Utah on pages 116-117 of his thesis cited above. As part of the preparation for his writing Lee visited Utah and there talked with Levi Edgar Young about DeVoto's attitude to Mormonism. The passage is worth quoting for the additional light which it might shed on our problem: "Note, however, that the earliest Mormon writings of DeVoto are the most unfair, that in his middle years DeVoto was more nearly judicial, and that in his last decade he approached apology [Footnote reference to DeVoto's article "Revaluation" discussed above]. Credit for the decline of DeVoto's maliciousness must belong to Levi Edgar Young, President of the First Council of Seventy, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the Thirties President Young, then a Mormon missionary studying at Harvard [sic], introduced himself to DeVoto, rebuked him more his attitudes to [sic] the Mormons, and attempted to reform him. Any arguments he may have won must have been won by the example of his personality, his kindness, patience, and tolerance. Although DeVoto's books in the Mormon Archives at Salt Lake City are kept in a section with thousands of books by 'the people who don't like us,' DeVoto has at least one honorable Mormon friend [Footnote reference to Lee's interview with Levi Edgar Young]."

²¹*American Mercury*, 19 (January, 1930), 1-13.

the Mormon tradition and its accomplishment, but more often than not his manner is plainly sarcastic. For example, these sentences appear on the first page of the essay: "For the scene of this Restoration Jehovah selected a mangy Fayette . . ."; "The house of one Peter Whitmer, in Fayette, was the setting selected by Omnipotence . . ."; "Jehovah, though not present in the flesh, inspired the evening's agenda. . . ." Throughout, the article is marred by such concessions to satire for its own sake, and in general there is a subjectivity which makes it difficult to take seriously. It is neither history nor a personal essay, but history interpreted by a man of strong convictions with a weakness for pungent phrases.

But approximately five years later DeVoto revised and reissued the essay. The changes are remarkable; it was now much longer, it was pruned of many of its excesses (for example, the four sentences quoted above are either deleted or modified, so that Fayette is not "mangy," but "obscure"), and controversial issues are now examined from a number of vantage points. There is less dogmatism and a much greater receptiveness to variant theories. Assertions made baldly in the early version are now buttressed with supporting information, and distracting diversions are eliminated. The result is an essay which is much more effective and far more deserving of attention than any of the works which DeVoto had written on Mormonism up to the time, and it clearly marks the beginning of a new period in DeVoto's attitude towards Mormonism, an attitude which was radically different from his early period and foreshadowed by his "Centennial of Mormonism" essay of 1930.

It is rewarding to examine in greater detail the two versions of "The Centennial of Mormonism." The later version is approximately three times longer and contains eight sections (rather than the five of the early version), as follows: (1) Utilizing the same technique of reported speech as in the early version, he recounts the early history of the Church, but removes the jarring incongruities which he introduced for humorous effects in the early version. Once more he asks seriously: "How is it that Mormonism survived and flourishes in our day?" (2) He surveys the studies of Mormonism, deplores their paucity, and appeals for more serious studies:

Apart from the doctrinal aspect, everything is rudimentary, infrequent, and mostly wrong. The story of the Mormons is one of the most fascinating in all American history, it touches nineteenth-century American life at innumerable points, it is as absorbing as anything in the history of the trans-Mississippi frontier and certainly the most varied, and it is a treasure-house of the historian of ideas, institutions and social energies.²²

(3) He believes that the reasons for the survival of Mormonism are (a) the peaceful interlude provided by the move to Utah; (b) a succession of powerful leaders; (c) a series of historical accidents; (d) the inclusiveness of Mormon doctrines; (e) the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph. (4) He discusses the role of Joseph Smith in the history of the Church and formally renounces his support for the theory that Joseph Smith plagiarized Solomon Spaulding's *Manuscript Found* and concludes that there was a "rhythm of alternation" in Joseph Smith's behavior between insanity and lucidity. (5) He devotes a lengthy passage to

²²"The Centennial of Mormonism" in *Forays and Rebuttals*, p. 82.

Brigham Young whom he describes as Mormonism's great man. (6) He sketches the post-Young period of Mormon history and concludes that it is marked by the emergence of a hereditary ruling class but one which also accepted individuals who excel. (7) He theorizes that one major element in the success of Mormonism is its combination of faith and economic endeavor. (8) He concludes that Mormonism is the most successful of the numerous nineteenth century Utopian movements and the only one to survive to our day, with a few minor exceptions.

This brief survey does not begin to do justice to the seventy pages of the essay, but it does briefly summarize DeVoto's basic positions on Mormonism, and indicates both his misgivings and his enthusiasms. It is a document which bears the imprint of a mind which sought to establish the place of Mormonism in the larger setting of the United States during its entire one-hundred-year history, as I think no one had ever done before. Some of DeVoto's insights are striking in their clarity and argumentation as, for example, his analysis of the situation of Mormonism in the Mississippi Valley and what he considered to be its inevitable collision with its non-Mormon neighbors. He touches upon the appeal of Mormonism and some of his most cogent passages are those in which he analyzes the success of Mormonism both in the United States and abroad. He perceptively estimates the role of polygamy in the Church and finds it to be less significant than nearly all previous students had considered it to be. He deals with the problem of how the leadership of the Church came to choose Utah as the new home of Mormonism, and pays ample tribute to Brigham Young's acumen, good judgment, and administrative skills.

The essay is not, however, without bias and unique emotional coloration which reflect its author's point of view. Some of these inclinations are, I believe, minor and indispensable to DeVoto's personal style, while some are much more extensive and subject to debate. Of these, the most important by far is DeVoto's attitude toward Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.

DeVoto has no sympathy for Joseph Smith as a man; he is suspicious of his contribution to the establishment of the Church, and he concludes that in his final years he was in fact an actual danger to the Church which he had founded. By contrast, DeVoto grew increasingly enthusiastic about the contribution made by Brigham Young to the history of Mormonism and he rarely missed the opportunity to express his admiration for Brigham and his contempt for Joseph.²³ Such a preference is completely consistent with DeVoto's often stated aversion to theory and abstraction, which he voiced energetically in his essay "Autobiography: Or, As Some Call It, Literary Criticism," and which forms one of the *leitmotifs* of his campaign against Van Wyck Brook's critical methods during the 1930s and 1940s. There is also ample evidence that he was strongly attracted to active public figures. DeVoto admired the accomplishments of Mormonism, both in the settling of the West and the organizing of an effective society under

²³There seems to be a tendency for writers on Mormonism to identify with one of its two great leaders, and consequently to denigrate the other. Is it perhaps because they represent two human archetypes which necessarily stand in opposition to each other? Is one the dreamer, the visionary, the instinctive seeker after truth and enlightenment, while the other is the organizer, the man of this world, the materialist, and the realist? Must the student of Mormonism inevitably feel himself drawn to one of these poles? This certainly appears to be so in DeVoto's case. DeVoto's preference for Brigham Young is evident also in the biographies of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young which he wrote for the *Dictionary of American Biography* (1935).

harsh conditions; he felt no attraction whatsoever to Mormon doctrines or its founder.²⁴

"The Centennial of Mormonism" of 1936 stated DeVoto's fundamental attitude towards Mormonism, an attitude which was complex and rich with emotional overtones. While it contained elements of both revulsion and attraction, it was fundamentally sympathetic with the Mormon experience and its dominant strain was affirmative and positive. To the end of his life DeVoto was to retain this attitude in his printed opinions. It is apparent, for example, in the lyric passages which he wrote in 1938 after a visit to Palmyra, New York.

. . . Here was a story which I had known all my life, which I knew better than any other in American history. It held as much as any novelist could ask of farce and tragedy, melodrama, aspiration, violence, ecstasy — the strongest passions of mankind at white heat; the Kingdom of God and mob cruelty and martyrdom; bigotry and superstition and delusion; mystical exaltation and the purity of faith; ambition and its overthrow, persecution and social revolt — and all bound up, even more completely and comprehensively than Oneida [which he had just visited], with the sweep of a full century of American life.²⁵

And he concludes that the story of Mormonism is so overwhelming that no novel could begin to do justice to it.

DeVoto's infatuation with the Mormon tradition which illuminates this passage is also apparent in the major work on which he was engaged at the time, *The Year of Decision: 1846*, the first and what I believe to be the best of his historical trilogy devoted to the West. In this book he traces the complexity of events in that fateful year which were crucial in America's transition to a continental nation: the Mexican War, the conquest of California, and the beginnings of the great westward migration to Oregon, to California, and to Utah. Therefore it is appropriate that a considerable portion of the book is devoted to the ruin and evacuation of Nauvoo, the sad, slow march through Iowa to the Missouri, with a postscript from 1847 concerning the move of the One Hundred and Forty Three from Winter Quarters to the Valley of Great Salt Lake. It is a magnificent story and DeVoto does it full justice, quoting amply from diaries and evoking the sufferings, the miseries, the deaths of men, women and children in makeshift shelters in blizzards and incessant rains. He also devotes considerable space to the Mormon Battalion in the book, noting its role in opening the southern trail to California, but markedly subordinating it to the stirring events in Iowa and to the west.

The one-sixth of the volume (approximately seventy-five pages) which is dedicated to Mormonism recounts the events of 1846 and 1847 with only a few pages devoted to the origins of the Church. Consequently DeVoto had full rein to express his admiration for Brigham Young who dominated those years, while neglecting, as the situation allowed, the earlier contribution of Joseph Smith.

²⁴Another aspect of "The Centennial of Mormonism" of 1936 which needs investigation is the question of the influence of the ideas of Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) on DeVoto's thinking. For a discussion of this issue see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s essay on DeVoto in *Four Portraits*, in particular pages 49-51. DeVoto was sufficiently enthusiastic about Pareto to write four articles about him (see items C 178, C 179, C 180, C 183, and C 185 in the *Four Portraits* bibliography, p. 152). Pareto's contribution to "The Centennial of Mormonism" appears to be the idea that the development of Mormonism in the form it took was inevitable.

²⁵"The Easy Chair: Vacation," *Harper's*, 177 (October, 1938), 559.

His preference for Brigham Young is, if possible, even more marked than in "The Centennial of Mormonism" (1936). To Brigham he devotes a lengthy and moving tribute. He is "the foremost American colonizer," with a "genius of leadership of foresight, of command of administration, of effective will." "He was a great man, great in whatever was needful for Israel." To Joseph he pays little attention, scorning him as "crazed"²⁶ and stating repeatedly that the dissolution of the Church would have been inevitable had it not been for his death.

Although DeVoto writes with conviction and sympathy about the Mormon migration, he at times interrupts the prevailing tone of his account with outbursts of petulance and poor taste. Such, for example, are his references to the "smugginess" of the Mormons and his sneers at the origins of their Church, their "hair-trigger martyr complex," and, finally, to "holy union suits,"²⁷ a term, first employed in his 1925 "Ogden" essay, which would surely offend the sensibilities of most Mormons. While it was at least consistent with the one of the "Ogden" essay, in *The Year of Decision: 1846* it sounds a dissonant note which could only detract from the serious purpose of his history. But drawing a balance, I believe it is fair to say that in *The Year of Decision* DeVoto's admiration for the accomplishments of the Mormon settlement of Utah is unquestionable, and aside from its occasional lapses, this account is one of the most eloquent tributes ever written to the Mormon pioneers. DeVoto himself believed this to be so. In his "Revaluation" he said:

There can be no questions whatever that that book [*The Year of Decision*] contains the most sympathetic treatment of the Mormons ever published by a Gentile. Any dispassionate mind need only compare it with, say, Linn or Werner. It is packed full of the most flagrant and even fulsome praise of the Mormons, condemnation of their oppressors, admiration of their achievements, sympathy with their suffering, patient exposition of their point of view.²⁸

While DeVoto is overstating his case, there is no question of his emotional, if not intellectual, sympathy in this book with his mother's and grandfather's tradition. There is more evidence for DeVoto's attachment to his home place in a remarkable, illuminating, and entirely unexpected lyric outburst in this book, which perhaps more than anything else he ever wrote expresses his yearning for the lost years of his Wasatch childhood. He is speaking of the land which the Mormons had chosen for their new home:

It has its hideousness, it has its beauty, nor are they separated in the depths of any mind that has known them. A hard, resistant folk had found a hard, resistant land, and they would grow to fit one another. Remember the yield of a hard country is a love deeper than a fat and easy land inspires, that throughout the arid West the Americans have found a secret treasure. . . . There is one who remembers it below the Atlantic fall line, to whom east is always the direction where you will see the Wasatch ridge and west the house of the sky where the sun sinks into the lake. The cottonwood leaves flutter always beyond the margins of awareness. The streams come out of the mountains to a plain that was greener when one was young than when Orson Pratt found it. March starts the snows withdrawing up the peaks that have not changed much, sagebrush is a perfume

²⁶*The Year of Decision: 1846* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943), pp. 443-454; 79.

²⁷*The Year of Decision*, pp. 82, 324, 325.

²⁸"Revaluation," pp. 9-10.

and a stench, and at midnight there is a lighter line along the ridge where the sky begins. A stern and desolate country, a high bare country, a country brimming with a beauty not to be found elsewhere.²⁹

Is it any wonder that Robert Edson Lee can say that "he writes at times like a Westerner in eastern captivity?"³⁰

In the last ten years of his life DeVoto was to write other, briefer statements about his home state and its Church.³¹ Of these the most interesting is a passage which occurs in his *Harper's* "Easy Chair" column in 1955. The statement was occasioned by the prominent roles which two Utah Mormons had achieved in American affairs in the 1950s, Senator Arthur Watkins, who had emerged as the leading Congressional opponent of Joseph McCarthy, and Ezra Taft Benson, appointed Secretary of Agriculture by President Eisenhower. This led DeVoto to comment on the place of Mormonism in American life, and as usual he chose to approach the topic from the historical point of view, surveying briefly, sympathetically, and warmly the development of the Mormon tradition:

... The Mormons are a vigorous, industrious, kindly people, who against great odds, have succeeded in building the most stable society in the West. Everyone who knows them likes and respects them. We have lately seen, under a powerful spotlight, an example of the qualities that Mormon leadership at its best can display. Senator Watkins is typical of that leadership, just, judicious, honorable, courageous, not to be deterred from doing his duty . . .

If the Mormons have a compulsion to tell everyone at great length they have been persecuted, it is explained by the fact that for three-quarters of a century they were shamefully persecuted. They were robbed of their property, a lot of them were murdered, a lot more of them died of the hardships that followed. After they got to Utah the federal government afflicted them with some of the scurviest officials that have ever been appointed to pay political debts. In the late 1880's it set out to break up their political organizations by attacking their religious organization, jailing such of them as it suspected of polygamy, subjecting others to a test oath, and confiscating the Church property . . .

For an ugly period lynch law was federal policy. And all this time a lot of lecturers, writers, and people who called themselves religious reformers made a fat living by lying about the Mormons — libeling them with every conceivable kind of false accusation.³²

This passage was DeVoto's last public statement on Mormonism. We may well ask how sincere it was, since DeVoto at the time was involved in the McCarthy controversy and it is obvious that he is drawing a parallel between the Mormons in the nineteenth century and the victims of the McCarthy purges —

²⁹*The Year of Decision*, pp. 466-467; DeVoto's ellipses. "A plain that was greener when one was young than when Orson Pratt found it" was, of course, the land made verdant by the labors of DeVoto's grandfather, Samuel Dye.

³⁰"The Work of Bernard DeVoto," p. 121.

³¹See, for example, his review of Fawn McKay Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, "The Case of the Prophet, Joseph Smith," *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 22 (December 16, 1945), 1, in which he insisted on his own theory that Joseph Smith was "A paranoid personality in process of becoming a paranoiac," but added, "—and this wholly without prejudice to his personal magnetism or his religious teaching." He also wrote fond and nostalgic articles for mass circulation magazines about Utah, such as the significantly titled posthumous sketch devoted to Ogden, "A Good Place to Grow In," *Lincoln-Mercury Times*, 7 (March-April, 1956), 1-3.

³²"Current Comic Strips," *Harper's*, 210 (May, 1955), 8-9, 12-15.

both, he makes clear, suffered from unscrupulous demagogery. But even with this reservation, I believe that DeVoto is declaring that the war is over and he is signalling his desire for a reconciliation. Some of DeVoto's private expressions, such as his letter to a Mr. Kostbar of December 26, 1951,³³ might cause some to question how deeply felt this desire was, if it indeed existed. We do not know if DeVoto intended to write again on the Mormon tradition, for within a few months of the time he wrote these lines he was dead as the result of an unexpected heart attack.

* * * *

It is apparent that DeVoto's attitude towards Mormonism was very complex and cannot be neatly summarized. It is my contention that there is a substratum of good will and deep affection for the Mormon tradition in all but his earliest published writings. He was profoundly impressed by the accomplishments of Mormonism which he had seen personally in the good works of his grandfather. He was aware of the enormous contribution that the Mormon communal method of settlement had made to the colonization of the West. He knew that the Mormons had peacefully brought a productive life to the desert where nothing had been before, in sharp contrast to much of the West where violence and blood-letting were the rule. But he was never a believer in Mormon dogma any more than he was profoundly inclined to any system of belief. He was sceptical, rational, positivist, and suspicious of any undemonstrable truth; this is obvious in everything he wrote whether fiction, personal essay, history, or literary criticism, and it is strikingly so in his writings on Mormonism where he rarely failed to express his aversion to the origins and doctrines of the Church. He also succumbed in his writings to the temptation to employ colorful phrases, which, although they are insignificant in the presentation of his ideas, are unfair and irritating to the reader. He was aware of this and regretted it. In his "Revaluation" when speaking of his two early pieces on Utah he wrote:

Why did I write them and write as I did? Well, for one thing I was a young buck, intoxicated with the newly achieved privilege of publication, full of wild and yeasty irreverence, and obviously gifted at burlesque and extravaganzas. (That last, I may say parenthetically, is an embarrassing, occasionally dangerous gift. It has recurrently thrown me throughout my career and even now sometimes prods me into writing passages which react against the serious intention of my work. We have been told that a sense of humor is fatal to a career in politics. It is a handicap to any career in literature and an extremely serious handicap to a career in social criticism.

³³This letter is a good example of the complexity of DeVoto's attitude toward the Mormons, for it partakes very much of the spirit of his earliest negative statements. It would be interesting to know the context in which it was written, for it was obviously dashed off in a white heat. The letter begins with DeVoto discounting the culture of the Mormons much as he had done in the *Mercury* essay. He then evaluates the scholarship on Mormonism, and in doing so betrays a surprising lack of critical objectivity. He next talks about his early writings and the letter to Thurston. He goes on at length about the use of alcohol and tobacco among the Saints and launches into a tirade on the missionary program. His concluding statement is perhaps indicative of his deep-felt ambiguity about the Mormons:

The Mormons are an admirable people, kindly, open-hearted, hospitable, bigoted, in terror of things that happened a hundred years ago, with a tremendous inferiority complex, and they have made a hell of a lot of money, and they have performed one of the prodigies of American sociology. But their doctrines are simply preposterous. Anybody who can believe any of them can believe any nonsense that human idiocy could invent.

It has joined with a habit of using concrete words to keep my stature in contemporary letters considerably smaller than it probably would have been if I had expressed myself solemnly and abstractly. In beautiful letters, the light touch is dangerous.)³⁴

But making allowance for his lapses of judgment and the excesses of his early defiance, I remain deeply convinced that DeVoto made an irreplaceable contribution to the study of the Mormon tradition. He understood the power of its appeal, he knew the importance of its place in Western history, he wrote powerfully of its significance in the lives of the settlers of Utah. His study of "The Life of Jonathan Dyer," his deeply moving account of the Mormon flight from Nauvoo in the *Year of Decision*, his exposition of the place of Mormonism on the frontier — all have enduring significance. Moreover, he was a poet who better than anyone else who has yet appeared in Utah wrote poignantly and evocatively of his home country, capturing in his books the sweetness of its air and the color of its mountains. I, for one, would forgive him much for that.

³⁴"Revaluation," p. 8. The passage in parentheses is omitted from the version in the *Improvement Era*.

