

REVIEWS

Mormonism in Daniel Walker Howe's *What Hath God Wrought*

Daniel Walker Howe. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848*. In THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES series. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2007. 928 pp. Cloth: \$35; ISBN 13: 978-0-19-507894-7

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Recently, six major American historians reviewed Daniel Walker Howe's Pulitzer Prize-winning *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* on the H-Net discussion group for historians of the Early Republic, each examining the book from his or her respective specialties, including economics, politics, communications, women and gender, Indians, slavery and race, and religion and reform. Although some of the reviewers criticized Howe for his interpretations, all agreed that Howe had succeeded in crafting a narrative that is inclusive, pays attention to detail, and reflects a solid understanding of the questions historians are asking in their subfields.

Mormon historians would likely agree that Howe's treatment of Mormonism fit these criteria as well.¹ Unlike previous synthetic works, Howe not only features Mormonism prominently within his narrative, but he also gets the details correct and generally relies on the best of recent scholarship. Mormonism appears prominently in Chapter 8 ("Pursuing the Millennium") with other millenarian groups in the Early Republic and in Chapter 18 ("Westward the Star of Empire"), which includes Nauvoo and the trek west within the wider contexts of Manifest Destiny, California, Oregon, and the Mexican-American War. There are also a handful of other scattered references throughout the text.

Chapter 8's section on Mormonism covers the 1820s through the 1838–39 Missouri expulsion and reflects Howe's broader assumptions concerning the place of religion within American society. Howe's previous work on American cultural, intellectual, and religious history leads him to see religion, not as the cynical product of market forces and class, but rather as a vibrant element of

culture that shapes how people see the world. While Charles Sellers in *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) posited that Mormonism was a prime example of the farming and working classes' opposition to market changes in contrast to the merchant classes' embrace of evangelicalism, Howe sees the millenarianism of American religion as primary. He sets Mormonism alongside William Miller's movement, utopian experiments, Catholicism, and Nat Turner's slave uprising as exemplifying the driving urge toward *improvement* in American culture during the period. On this reading, millennial strains within these disparate groups are a salient and unifying feature of Chapter 8, as each group sought improved social, economic, and cultural landscapes in America.

In his bibliographical essay, Howe distinguishes between believing and non-believing historians of Mormonism, a contrast he explores further in Chapter 8. For example, Howe refers readers to the "Mormon accounts" found in Terryl Givens's *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Richard L. Bushman's *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), likely an implied contrast with John L. Brooke's Bancroft Prize-winning *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of a Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994) "non-Mormon" account (314 note 72). Howe likewise notes that "to the Latter-day Saint, this [the Book of Mormon] is scripture, a supplement to the Old and New Testaments. To the unbeliever, it is a fantastic tale invented by the imaginative Joseph Smith" (314).

Howe's treatment of the Book of Mormon narrative reveals Bushman's impact on mainstream historical discourse on Mormonism, especially Bushman's argument that the Book of Mormon is an intricate work of American literature. Howe states: "True or not, the Book of Mormon is a powerful epic written on a grand scale with a host of characters, a narrative of human struggle and conflict, of divine intervention, heroic good and atrocious evil, of prophecy, morality, and law. Its narrative structure is complex" (314). Howe's reliance on Bushman is further apparent when he (Howe) admits that, although the Book of Mormon reflects some elements of nineteenth-century culture (like anti-Ma-

sonry), the book's primary themes are biblical, prophetic, and patriarchal, not democratic or optimistic. Howe concludes: "The Book of Mormon should rank among the great achievements of American literature, but it has never been accorded the status it deserves, since Mormons deny Joseph Smith's authorship, and non-Mormons, dismissing the work as a fraud, have been more likely to ridicule than read it" (314). Howe acknowledges his debt to Bushman: "The leading Mormon historian Richard Bushman, if I understand him correctly, credits the prophet's literary skills as well as his divine inspiration" (314 note 73). The fact that Howe relies on Bushman's arguments almost uncritically is noteworthy.

Another striking feature of Howe's description of the Book of Mormon narrative is his decision not to ascribe to the book itself the racializations later attributed to it by Latter-day Saints in regard to Native Americans. Again, Bushman's hand is apparent here. Rather, Howe waits until later in the chapter, when Smith sends missionaries to Indian Territory in the winter of 1830–31, to discuss Mormon applications of a Lamanite identity to American Indians: "The Book of Mormon never explicitly asserts that the Native Americans of modern times are descended from the Lamanites; however, readers of the book invariably drew that conclusion, and Joseph Smith himself evidently shared it" (317). Howe then contextualizes early Mormon racial discourses within the then-prevalent Lost Tribes-as-Indians theories and argues that many Mormons believed that, "when the Lamanites converted en masse, [as] the Book of Mormon promised, they would once again become a 'white and delightsome people' as their Hebrew ancestors had been" (317). Howe (like Bushman) therefore separates the text of the Book of Mormon from the interpretations later ascribed to it and from the genetic, geographical, and racial issues associated with those interpretations.

Chapter 8 also wades into controversial historiographical debates on the socio-economic makeup of early Mormon converts.² Howe notes general class characteristics, like the fact that many Mormon converts were small farmers and workers, while many of Charles Grandison Finney's followers were middle class. Howe then moves beyond economic determinism to discuss culture:

Although it is tempting to try to fit them [early Mormons] into theo-

ries about premillennialism appealing to the disinherited of this world, the first generation of Mormons were actually defined more by their culture than by socioeconomic attributes. They tended to be people of New England birth or heritage, carrying the cultural baggage of folk Puritanism (as distinguished from Calvinist theology): communalism, chiliasm, identification with ancient Israel, and the practice of magic. Often they had been involved in other Christian restorationist movements, but no particular denominational background predominated. The prophet and his followers perpetuated traditions of a culture, Richard Bushman explains, “in which the sacred and the profane intermingled and the Saints enjoyed supernatural gifts and powers as the frequent blessings of an interested God.” Many people shared this culture, among them some jealous neighbors who tried to steal Smith’s golden plates. Seeking to build a new Zion, Mormon missionaries claimed to be “looking for the blood of Israel”: They assumed their converts would be descended from one of the tribes of Israel. They meant it literally, but one may also see “the blood of Israel” as a graphic, physical metaphor for the inherited biblical cosmology that predisposed converts to accept the Mormon gospel. (315–16)

Howe also argues that Smith appealed beyond this culture, relying on Marvin Hill to contend that like Smith, many converts were young, male, and mobile.³ Unchurched Seekers comprised many early followers, looking for religious authority in a culture that doubted its existence. Howe, likely following his former student Grant Underwood, also contends that Mormonism not only appealed to the working people of the United States, but also those in Britain and Scandinavia (316). Howe is smart to include both class and culture as reasons for conversion to Mormonism, as a common tendency is to deny one while highlighting the other, when it is apparent that both were influential.

In contextualizing Mormon history within the western migration in Chapter 18, Howe again shows careful attention to detail. He omits crucial texts from his footnotes—for example, Glen M. Leonard’s *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002) and Richard E. Bennett’s *We’ll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus: 1846–1848* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997). Still, Howe’s treatment of this period remains nuanced and balanced. For example, in his discussion of Nauvoo’s founding, Howe states that the name is “a word that he [Smith] (correctly) informed his

people meant 'a beautiful place' in Hebrew," a conclusion that Howe reached by consulting a Hebrew dictionary as well as a rabbi (723 note 49). In another place, Howe refers to Smith as "Joseph," explaining in a note that "Mormons usually refer to the prophets Joseph Smith and Brigham Young by their first names, and historians also often follow this practice" (725 note 58). Although Howe's discussion of groups that did not follow Young west is brief, he mentions Joseph Smith III and notes that "the Reorganized LDS Church changed its name to the Community of Christ. They no longer call themselves Mormons" (727 note 61; the name change became official on April 6, 2001).

Howe also gives special attention to Mormon women in Chapter 18. He quotes an Eliza R. Snow poem to describe the Saints' reaction to the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith and provides a short biography of Snow (726). He later notes that, during the exodus, "the women cooked, washed, and gathered buffalo dung for fuel" (728). Although Howe neglects Kathryn Daynes's *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), in his discussion of polygamy, he does rely on Todd Compton's *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), Lawrence Foster's *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991), and Claudia L. Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (1976; rpt., Logan: Utah State University, 1997). He concludes:

Evidence of dissatisfaction with their situation among plural wives is less widespread than we might expect. Some women enjoyed their independence when their husband was living with his other families; others resented having to rear their children largely by themselves. Some felt jealous of the other wives, but sisterly affection was also common. Plural wives could divorce their husbands more readily than their husbands could divorce them; Ann Eliza Webb divorced Brigham Young. (731)

Rather than sensationalize polygamy, Howe chooses to portray the institution with nuance and complexity.

Howe concludes the Mormon section of Chapter 18 by noting the irony of Mormon history: "The Mormons who sought to escape from the United States ended up playing a role in extending

the United States. Their way of life, originally a millenarian critique of the larger society and a collectivist, authoritarian dissent from American individualistic pluralism, now impresses observers as 'the most American' of all. How that transformation came about, however, is another story" (731).

My primary dissatisfaction with Howe's treatment of Mormonism is the lack of attention given to race and gender, a confusing omission since Howe essentially characterizes Jacksonian democracy as the efforts of white males to consolidate power. Perhaps the paucity of quality monographs on these topics in Mormon studies is partially to blame, but I think it may reflect a tendency on Howe's part to be perhaps over-sensitive toward religious people. While most Mormon readers (myself included) are no doubt grateful for this sympathy, it obscures crucial ways that Mormons interacted and intersected with the dominant culture. As noted, Howe comments on race in the Book of Mormon but does not connect Mormon Indianism with the development of white Mormon identity. Although black and Native converts to Mormonism prior to 1848 were few, their stories deserve to be told, if only to illuminate how early Mormonism was born in a milieu of whiteness. Of course, white women comprised perhaps 50 percent of early Mormon converts, and I suspect that historians of Mormon women would have appreciated a more critical analysis of the gendered structure of early Mormonism.

These complaints aside, Howe's *What Hath God Wrought* is a remarkable analysis of Jacksonian America, and the place of Mormons in it. Students of Mormon history would do well to become familiar with the work.

Notes

1. See, for example, John C. Thomas's review of Howe in the *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 208–13.

2. For a summary and critique of this literature, see Stephen J. Fleming, "'Congenial to Almost Every Shade of Radicalism': The Delaware Valley and the Success of Early Mormonism," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 129–64.

3. For a recent critique of this view, see Stephen J. Fleming, "The Religious Heritage of the British Northwest and the Rise of Mormonism," *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 77, no. 1 (March 2008): 73–104, esp. 76–77.