

Mormon Modernity

David Walker. *Railroading Religion: Mormons, Tourists, and the Corporate Spirit of the West*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 343 pp. Paper: \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-4696-5320-4.

Reviewed by Dmitri Brown

Railroading Religion is a welcome addition to the influx of timely scholarship published in anticipation of the 150-year anniversary of the Golden Spike ceremony. The tensions between religion, geography, and history provide a thought-provoking backdrop to David Walker's well-argued account of the making of Mormon modernity in the railroad era.

Anti-Mormon founders of Corinne, Utah believed that railroads and modernity spelled the end of Mormonism. They were wrong. As president of the Union Pacific Railroad Charles Francis Adams Jr. noted, Mormons were good for business. For their part, leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints realized that railroads could ensure the security of Mormonism in the West. Walker's work shows how Church leaders effectively responded to "Corinnethian" (a play on Corinthians used by the town's founders) attacks against their religion, society, and practices.

Corinne was established north of Salt Lake City in 1869. Town boosters believed they could extinguish Mormonism in Utah provided the Union Pacific and Central Pacific selected Corinne as the connecting hub between the two lines. As historian Richard White has argued, corporate failure was the stuff of transcontinental railroading in the West.¹ Along similar lines, Corinne failed to become a preeminent non-

1. Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

Mormon settlement by the end of the nineteenth century. As Walker points out, the town's founders misjudged Mormon adaptability and resilience. Using their enemies' weapons against them, Church leaders bent railroads and industry toward their own economic goals—the Union Pacific and Central Pacific agreed on Ogden as their hub over Corinne. Church officials used tourism to maintain relevance in national conversations on religion and guide outside perceptions. Even an intra-Mormon schism afforded the LDS Church time to modernize and adopt industrially favorable policies. Persevering through Corinne's failures, Mormonism demanded a place in modern America's narrative and history; Mormon modernity was not an oxymoron.

Railroading Religion shows how iron tracks and ironic twists steered nearly every attempt of anti-Mormon settlement or legislation to Mormon advantage in Utah. Brigham Young, other Church leaders, and railroad agents often shared priorities and interests. In the expanse between the Midwest and California, Mormons held productive land, sizeable population, viable markets, and political will, all of which encouraged transcontinental railroads. Though occasionally disappointed by the transcontinentals' decisions, Church officials recognized how the railroad age could ensure the success of Mormon culture. Corinne had little choice but to accept the appeal of Salt Lake City and cater to patrons' ambiguous curiosity rather than to show outright hostility toward Mormon culture. Walker describes how Corinne had tried to profit from negative perceptions of Mormonism by sponsoring "atrocious tourism" that showcased supposedly degraded Mormon life. That strategy backfired. Eventually regional tours found demonstrations of "the shortfalls of modern western urbanity" in Corinne (182).

Through tourist reports and railroad guidebooks, Mormonism grew as a subject of national conversation and religious debate. Mormon leaders, tour guides, and museum curators recognized a version of P. T. Barnum's dictum—there was no such thing as bad publicity, if properly managed (Barnum himself makes a cameo in Walker's book, attempting

to sell oddities to Salt Lake City's Deseret Museum). Mormons repackaged their religion, successfully marketing to railroads and the tourists who rode the lines. Walker does not go so far as to characterize tourism's effects on Mormonism as a "devil's bargain," historian Hal Rothman's phrase to describe the sacrifice of cultural identity for the sake of economic opportunity.² Instead, Mormonism accommodated touristic gazes and encouraged the religious discourse these encounters produced. Church leaders guided visitors to certain viewpoints and followers to certain practices. They increasingly emphasized industrial production and by 1890 had officially renounced polygamy. Walker demonstrates that if railroads presented Mormonism with a Weberian "iron cage" that restricted, rationalized, and modernized its policies and options by degrees, Mormons found ample space within this cage and even ways to bend it to their benefit.

Modernity is an analytic key in *Railroading Religion*. However, the term is somewhat elusive—intuitive and discursive rather than concrete. Walker's primary sources only mention the concept indirectly through terms like "civilization" and "progress." The discrepancy between the language of Walker's analysis and the language of his primary sources speaks to a larger point of the book: modernity, its meaning, and its relationship with religion were (and are) debatable. The term "modern," which is distinct from but related to "modernity," is instructive when it appears in Walker's sources. In one telling example, the Deseret Museum exhibited artifacts from both "ancient as well as modern races" of Indians (171). Walker argues that such exhibits reflected Mormon curators' own position and security within modernity. They also served as a response to paranoid theories that Mormons and Native Americans would conspire to thwart more normative American settlement in the

2. Hal Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

West. Mentioned throughout the text, Native American populations on the peripheries of Utahn settlements play an interesting if understated role. American perspectives at times pinned both Native Americans and Mormons as backwards, depraved, and other. Yet the possibility of Shoshoni or Ute modernity lies beyond the scope of Walker's analysis, leaving the reader to wonder perhaps if that idea is a contradiction.

Alongside iron tracks and ironies, linguistic ploys in *Railroading Religion* invite further reflection. Walker holds Protestant anti-ritualism against the "ritual" of Western settlement. He showcases railroad platforms as platforms of religious discourse. He juxtaposes "Morrill"—of land grant and anti-bigamy legislation fame—and its homonym (moral), suggesting the intertwining bureaucratic and religious scopes of Western settlement. Each chapter builds toward the central question of the next, and each is comprised of often cleverly titled, bite-size sections—an organizational pattern that offers readers frequent opportunities to pause. Walker supports his metaphors and arguments through a variety of archival sources. He encourages scholars to pay greater attention to land grants, railroad guidebooks, and tourist scrapbooks as constitutive elements of religious discourse. For those seeking to broaden the field of comparative religious studies, *Railroading Religion* provides a useful model in its analysis of original sources, clarity of argument, and theoretical engagements.

Religion deals with meaning beyond history, with the eternal. Walker's text raises the question: how well is academic scholarship equipped to handle questions of the sacred? The answer depends on the extent to which we view the substance of religion, sacredness, and the eternal as human constructs that exist in temporal and spatial contexts. Humans have imbued Utahn landscapes with meaning for millennia. The idea that a landscape or geography may be inherently sacred is ahistorical but resonates in Mormon, Shoshoni, and Ute conceptions of the land. Materialist logic, cartographic reason, rationality, and

efficiency justified corporate railroad interest in Utah, but these are not mutually exclusive of geographic predestination. Walker effectively demonstrates the influence of railroads on religion, but his work does not negate the possibility of spiritual realities.

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