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Among the Mormons by William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen

Lyman Smart

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Among the Mormons. William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958. 482 pp., \$6.75

Virginia Woolf once observed that "few people ask from books what books can give us. Most commonly we come to books with blurred and divided minds, asking of fiction that it shall be true, of poetry that it shall be false, of biography that it shall be flattering, of history that it shall enforce our own prejudices."¹ If Miss Woolf is right, many Latter-day Saint readers who are used to hagiography and polemic instead of biography and history will not enjoy William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen's documentary *Among the Mormons*. Those readers, both within and without the Mormon Church, who believe that the discovery of truth is the aim of scholarship should be delighted.

The use of a collection of "historic accounts by contemporary observers" as a way to report the history of a group and a period is very effective, as long as the people and the period are restricted enough in size so that the few selections a volume can conveniently hold are able to represent them honestly and adequately. Happily, the Mormons, appearing only a hundred and twenty-eight years ago, and living compactly in one rather restricted area of the world, can be fairly pictured in this fashion.

Even so, there are dangers. The anthological approach to history perhaps allows the past to speak for itself with less of

the personality of the historian intruding, but we sometimes miss the guiding hand of a narrator to help us interpret. Readers of this volume not rather familiar with Mormon Church history may be puzzled or may misinterpret. For example, the Word of Wisdom, perhaps the most compelling shibboleth of modern Mormonism, is only obliquely referred to in the book; the development of the temple cultus among the Saints is not referred to at all; and most serious of all, no reference is made to that most important corollary to the doctrine of gathering to Zion, colonization outward from Great Salt Lake City to southern Utah, Idaho, Nevada, and Arizona. The brave battle against the elements by Mormons "called" to settle away from the comparatively fertile Wasatch front is a saga that rivals the trek across the plains for sheer heroism, and is extremely important to the understanding of Mormonism historically.

Despite these few drawbacks, and a couple of editorial lapses (some readers would like to know who wrote what selections without turning back to the table of contents), the book is a landmark in Mormon scholarship. Non-Mormon readers will get a more sympathetic and more accurate picture of what the Mormons are like. Mormon readers should be relieved to be reminded again that they and their forebears are after all "human beings by birth and saints only by adoption."

One of the major reasons that the book is valuable is that it is effectively and attractively presented. The use of Biblical analogues for divisions of the material (Genesis, Exodus, Chronicles and Judges, Lamentations, and Psalms) helps to give a unity to the work which anthologies often lack. Many of the selections are not readily available in other places. Particularly noteworthy are the several long-forgotten newspaper accounts and letters by the young converts Martha Haven and Sarah Scott, as well as the letters and memoirs of such Gentile observers as Charlotte Haven, Eliza Cummings, the Thomas L. Kanes, and most of all, the hitherto unpublished letters of a lascivious lieutenant, Sylvester Mowry, who spent some time in Salt Lake in 1854-1855 with Col. Steptoe's troops and was remarkably candid about his success as a lover among the young women of the city.

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The commentary on the selections provided by the editors is accurate, concise, unobtrusive and stylistically excellent.

Lyman Smart

1 *The Common Reader*, First and Second Series; New York: Brace and Company, Inc., 1948, p. 282.