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*Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the
Claremont Oral History Collection*

Reviewed by Jana Riess

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fortunate that such a gifted historian as Turner dedicated so much time to place Young back into the center of nineteenth-century Mormon history. If millions will know Brother Joseph once more, after Turner, they will know, even if with a melancholy sigh, Brother Brigham too.

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Review of Claudia L. Bushman and Caroline Kline, eds. *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*. Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2013. 314 pp., with index. \$31.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Jana Riess

In the superb introduction to *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*, Claudia Bushman points out that although written accounts of Mormon women's lives have been encouraged for nearly two hundred years, "those from eminent women have, for the most part, been privileged" (p. xiv). The lives of female leaders, prominent pioneers, and the wives of General Authorities have assumed pride of place, while the life stories of ordinary LDS women are often not recorded. In an impressive effort to document such contemporary women's experiences, the Claremont Oral History Project has harvested more than 2,500 single-spaced pages of such women's interviews—and is gathering and transcribing still more. This volume of essays, coedited by Bushman and doctoral student Caroline Kline, is the first in what one hopes will be many books that mine the rich data of the Claremont project.

In addition to this collection's significance in forever capturing ordinary women's lives, it makes a contribution to Mormon studies by focusing on the late twentieth century, a period that has been oddly neglected in a corpus of scholarship preoccupied with the religion's nineteenth-century origins. These twentieth- and twenty-first-century interview subjects, it turns out, are to be considered pioneers in their own right, having made their mark not by crossing the plains but by navigating the oft-confusing terrain of Mormon assimilation in contemporary culture.

In fourteen topical essays, the book unveils how the interviewees—who seem to be primarily white, North American, and middle class—feel about their own opportunities, changes in the LDS Church and in society, and women's evolving roles. The first section of the book deals with family matters, including self-definition, fertility, singlehood, motherhood, and coping with adversity. Part 2 addresses life as a Latter-day Saint, with chapters on womanliness, callings, revelation, and missions; the final section includes chapters on women's relationships with the institutional church via agency, patriarchy, the Relief Society, Heavenly Mother, and Proposition 8.

It's interesting that the book is ordered in this way, with the first one hundred-plus pages devoted to roles that might be described as traditional for women. Primarily, the interviewees discuss being wives and mothers—or, in many cases, *not* being wives and mothers in a church that expects those roles to be fundamental and defining. As well, there is no section of the book devoted to women's work outside of church and home. While in the early chapters women discuss their decisions to stay at home with their children or to work at a job, the work itself is strictly offstage. However, perhaps that public aspect of Mormon women's lives was not a focal point of the interviews.

The book contains a generous range of women's experiences, its essays showing wide diversity in how Mormon women negotiate their lives and families. While the book offers many cogent themes, three are particularly salient: agency, personal revelation, and feelings of inadequacy.

Agency

Perhaps no other idea dominates these women's stories so much as agency, which Mormons would define as the freedom to choose to act rather than to be acted upon. Questions of authority, obedience, defiance, and autonomy come up in every chapter, whether women are deciding how many children to have or analyzing the Relief Society/priesthood manuals that have been used by the church since 1997. (These manuals appear to be generally unpopular; as one essayist surmises, "Women from the oral histories rarely point to this as a positive change." One reason mentioned was the shift away from lessons on parenting and practical skills to doctrinal "one-size-fits-all" curriculum for both genders; see pp. 117 and 248.)

It's interesting how few stories in the book are about women who obey church leaders despite personal misgivings. There are certainly some; one woman begged her stake president not to give her husband a demanding church calling soon after he was released from an equally demanding one, but she was resigned to being overruled. Another almost refused her own calling as Relief Society president but wound up grudgingly accepting, only to find that it was the best calling she ever had. And in the final chapter, a woman recounts how she obeyed the LDS Church's mandate for California members to canvass for and donate to Proposition 8 even though she did not personally support the measure. "I hope to heaven our prophet is following the Lord," she said. "I know he's still a man and he's not infallible. So I just have to trust that I'll be blessed for being obedient" (p. 290).

Far more common, however, are recountings of careful evaluations of individual conscience and patriarchal authority. Two remarkable essays in the collection—Amy Hoyt's chapter on agency and Lisa Thomas Clayton's on revelation—draw on recent work in feminist theory to problematize a simplistic and binary approach that many feminists have used to examine female agency. The thinking has been that women's agency is expressed in actively resisting patriarchal oppression wherever it is found. These theorists cherish the value of freedom, a freedom that is

demonstrated when women either oppose patriarchy from within their religious traditions or leave those traditions altogether (p. 152). Hoyt and Clayton argue for a more nuanced model, noting that women can also express agency by choosing to remain within patriarchal structures, upholding social norms instead of challenging them—or, as Hoyt aptly points out, doing both at the same time (pp. 198–99).

Mormon women’s agency in practice is not either-or. One story demonstrates this particularly well. A group of young married women, all friends, decided that as a Valentine’s Day present to their husbands each would create a private calendar of herself in twelve provocative poses. Although this photo shoot was decidedly not a church activity, somehow the stake president got wind of the plan and called someone in to explain it. He expressed his opposition to the idea and his concern that pornographic influences had infiltrated Mormon culture.

Many of the women were shocked when they realized that their activity was cause for concern and that the local Church leadership objected. What is interesting is that, although two women were questioned, the group decided to proceed with their original plans. Most of the women compiled their individual boudoir calendars and gave them to their husbands. (pp. 202–3)

These women were not blasé about the stake president’s concerns, but in the end they decided to privilege their own agency in policing their sexual behavior. Hoyt notes that not one of them “considered their ecclesiastical leader domineering or oppressive. . . . Rather, they simultaneously recognized his spiritual authority while maintaining that they were adequate judges of appropriate sexual behaviors within the bounds of their own marriages. This is an example of *simultaneous agency*, which includes a negotiation between many factors” (p. 204).

In another example of simultaneous resistance and acquiescence, this one from Hawaii in the 1970s, a local Relief Society was told that all of the money it had earned from its fundraising needed to be turned over to the bishop since the auxiliary organizations were all coming under the aegis of the priesthood. “No!” some sisters replied. “That’s our money.

We are not going to do that.” Instead of immediately obeying, they decided to spend the money before the date the account was due to be relinquished. They organized a day trip to Honolulu, a rare treat for many of the sisters, with “the best buffet” lunch they could find. They dressed up in their most “colorful muu muus, with large hibiscus flowers behind their ears, and draped with many strands of heavy shell leis. . . . They had the time of their lives” (p. 226). Essayist and volume coeditor Caroline Kline sees these sisters’ solution as a “compromise position” between male direction and their own sense of fairness. They did comply with the bishop’s request, but only after they had emptied the bank account of what they saw as their own organization’s money.

Personal revelation

If the interviews reveal many behind-the-scenes deliberations in these Mormon women’s lives, it is clear that they feel most empowered to express their agency when they have a strong personal relationship with God. Personal revelation is the wellspring of a kind of unmediated authority. For example, a direct encounter with the divine sustained a woman named Theresa during “very dark days” when she wanted to die:

A cloud of darkness seemed to close in upon me. I walked into the bedroom and threw myself on the bed. I had lost all desire to live. I wanted to die. And then I heard a small clear voice. It said, “Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians. In it he said, ‘Do not be worried and troubled. Pray and ask God for what you need, first thanking him for his good gifts. And peace will be in your heart!’” . . .

I slid from the bed to my knees. Tears flowed down my face. I thanked my Heavenly Father for these gifts and as Paul promised the Corinthians, I felt that peace. I got up from my knees, knowing full well that Heavenly Father loves us and is watching over us. (90–91)

In this story, a sister’s close discernment of the promptings of the Spirit led her to prayer and a renewed gratitude for the gift of life; she received spiritual consolation in the bleakest of circumstances. What’s

missing from the story is the presence of any intermediary. There is no priesthood holder, no authority figure, standing between her and direct access to God's strength.

In her essay, Sherrie L. M. Gavin finds that Mormon women's sense of spiritual empowerment comes from their own connection with God and "was not always associated with an organizational Mormon context. Although the women reported acting in callings and duties within the administrative Church establishment (and sometimes related a sense of spiritual direction in regard to the assignment), the sense of spirituality and individual spiritual direction was more often perceived to progress and develop [the] self" rather than merely help the individual better fulfill a church calling. Gavin notes that because the LDS Church lacks any kind of ecclesiastical measure of women's spiritual progress beyond the temple endowment, "individual, personal piety—usually through the act of prayer"—is the yardstick by which women measure themselves. In this, personal revelation is paramount.

Guilt and inadequacy

In addition to the themes of agency and personal revelation that run through these oral histories, there is a shadow side as well. Many of the interviewees express anxiety about not measuring up to the high expectations placed on Mormon women by the church and its surrounding culture.

Elizabeth Mott's essay on singlehood highlights the work of the late Chieko Okazaki, once a counselor in the Relief Society general presidency. Okazaki was committed to making *all* women feel valued in the LDS Church, whether married or single, mothers or childless, and she was "especially concerned about the needless shame Mormon mothers tended to carry around as if they were 'scapegoats' for the ills of society" (p. 64). Okazaki was "appalled at how many women were tormented by their responsibilities as mothers" and by their tendencies to blame themselves for any deviation their children might make from the Perfect Child Script.

Mott's observations about Okazaki occur near the beginning of *Mormon Women Have Their Say*, and later in the book there is a poignant reminder that Okazaki's concerns for Mormon women are just as pressing now as they were twenty years ago. In the chapter on missions, Elisa Eastwood Pulido notes:

Mormon women . . . hold themselves personally responsible for raising sons who will choose to go on and complete missions. Interestingly, no female narrator [interviewee in the Oral History Project] has yet attributed a son's lack of missionary service to a weak or unsupportive father. The responsibility to raise missionaries is communicated to women through scripture, song, and the speeches of Church leaders, who emphasize the power and influence of Mormon mothers. (p. 182)

In other words, not one interviewee blamed a Mormon father for a child's failure to serve a mission.¹ When blame was assigned, some pointed to the institutional church for alienating their children in some way (p. 185), but most held themselves responsible. One woman chastised herself for once forcing her son to attend a weekend youth conference when he didn't want to go, saying maybe she "was the one who turned him away from the Church" based on this single perceived misstep some years before (p. 186).

So in addition to the book's empowering stories of women's agency

1. Mormon women's total absolution of fathers when children, and particularly sons, fail to serve missions is distressing not only for the emotional burden these women carry, but because recent sociological research demonstrates they are wrong in blithely dismissing a father's influence. While having close relationships with both parents is significant in whether a child will fulfill religious expectations and stay in the religion of childhood as an adult, the relationship with the father is actually more important. In the forthcoming Oxford University Press volume *Families and Faith*, sociologist Vern Bengtson draws on thirty-five years of longitudinal data and finds, among other things, that "for religious transmission, having a close bond with one's father matters even more than a close relationship with the mother. Clearly the quality of the child's relationship with his or her father is important for the internalization of the parent's religious tradition, beliefs and practices. Emotional closeness with mothers remains important for religious inheritance, but not to the same degree as it is for fathers."

and religious development, the collection also points to Mormon women's fear of failure, particularly in upholding cultural ideals of motherhood. One woman, now in her sixties, wishes that LDS women would ease up on their perfectionism: "I think so many women in the Church are afraid to not be perfect," she says. "We hear that term so much. So many women really suffer because they don't measure up, and they are so stressed and anxious. . . . We are really, really hard on ourselves. We've got to have enough belief in ourselves to stand up for ourselves, to know within ourselves that we have so much ability and strength that we are the ones who make a huge, huge difference in the Church" (p. 55).

By collecting and analyzing Mormon women's stories, *Mormon Women Have Their Say* points, again and again, to that ability and strength.

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Review of Joanna Brooks. *The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of an American Faith*. New York: Free Press, 2012. 240 pp. \$14.00, paperback.

Reviewed by Zina Petersen

Book of Mormon Girl is first off an engaging and entertaining read. It is by turns sweet, thoughtful, funny, self-effacing, and challenging. Joanna Brooks's first trade book (she has scholarly works in connection with her profession as professor and chair of English at SDSU), the memoir traces her faith journey from her childhood in a secure and idyllically orthodox LDS family in Southern California, through the convergence of her own intellectual blossoming and disillusionment with conservative polemic in college to her problematic return to activity in the fold during the difficult