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The Mormon Conflict Norman F. Furniss

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Book Review

Norman F. Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict: 1850-1859* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 311. \$5.00.

This short monograph about the Mormon conflict with the federal government in 1857-58 not only points up one of the most interesting periods of Mormon history, but it also carries much value as a political study in federal-territorial relations. The author is primarily interested in the history of the period, however, and his purpose is to cut away the myths and misconceptions about the conflict, leaving the naked truth of the events exposed—and well documented.

The book is well organized, giving the reader a rather adequate background in the events leading to the conflict, evaluating critically the causes, narrating interestingly the events of the "war," and summarizing satisfactorily the aftermath.

The author evaluates the possible causes of the conflict, *e.g.*, monetary gain for the contractors, political purposes of the Administration, public indignation about polygamy, the personal pique of territorial officials and mail contractors, the handling of Indian affairs, etc., and concludes that the Buchanan Administration was sincere in its belief that a state of rebellion existed in the territory and that the execution of civil law required the support of a military force. This basic conclusion to the study is not an apology for President Buchanan, the Administration, or the Democratic party, however, as the author is devastatingly critical of the government's bungling of the entire affair. On the other hand, he does not sympathize with the Mormons, as he indicts them on grounds of dictatorial policies, merging church and state, abusing and blackening the character of their opponents, indifference to constitutional guarantees in Utah, arbitrariness in court procedures involving Gentiles, obstructing the legitimate work of various territorial officials, and other acts bordering on lawlessness and sedition.

Mr. Furniss deserves commendation for the detailed documentation; the use of public documents, letters, and records available only in the National Archives and Americana collec-

tions in the east, which previously have been ignored; and the examination of the influence of Indian affairs in the Mormon conflict. Credit is also due the author for his objectivity. He is sensitive about the lack of objectivity in studies on Mormon history—including in his study an interesting bibliographical essay to assist the reader in evaluating the conflicting commentaries on this period. But his admirable detachment and objectivity are somewhat offset in his failure to grasp the essence of Mormonism. If the knowledgeable Mormon cannot write an objective history of the Mormons because of unavoidable bias, the non-Mormon who fails to comprehend the *élan vital* of Mormonism also will fall short in his quest for objectivity.

J. Keith Melville