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Quest for Empire Klaus J. Hansen

James R. Clark

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Klaus J. Hansen. *Quest for Empire*. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1967. p. 237. \$6.50.

(Reviewed by James R. Clark, who is a professor of religious education at Brigham Young University. As Dr. Clark states in his review, his study has taken him over much the same subject as the book treats.)

This is a review of reviews, a sort of postmortem.

Not that the book is dead. It is very much alive! But there have been so many reviews of this book since it was published by the Michigan State University Press in 1967 that to now write a review would seem almost like picking the bones of last year's Thanksgiving turkey. All of the reviewers seem thankful that Klaus Hansen wrote the book and seem to be agreed that its publication constitutes a definite contribution to Mormon Americana.

The book has been reviewed widely across the United States in such prestigious history journals as *The Journal of American History* (formerly *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*); the *New York Historical Society Quarterly*; *Ohio History*; *Michigan History*; *Arizona and the West*; *Journal of the West*; *Pacific Historical Review*; and *Dialogue*. Its reviewers and their professional qualifications in the field of history are equally impressive.

Davis Bitton, who wrote the review for the *New York Historical Society Quarterly*, is professor of European history at the University of Utah. Charles C. Cole, Jr., who wrote for *Ohio History*, is a professor at Lafayette College. John W. Hakola, of the University of Maine, wrote the review for the *Journal of American History*. Merle W. Wells, archivist and historian of the Idaho Historical Society, contributed the review to *Journal of the West* while A. R. Mortensen, professor of history at the University of Utah, and formerly editor of the *Utah Historical Review*, wrote the review for *Arizona and the West*. The review for the *Pacific Historical Review* was written by a colleague of Dr. Mortensen on the history faculty of the University of Utah, S. Lyman Tyler, formerly librarian of the J. Reuben Clark, Jr., Library at Brigham Young University. B. Carmon Hardy, of the faculty of California State College at Fullerton, California, contributed to this impressive roll of book reviews of Klaus Hansen's work through the pages of *Michigan History*.

The most complete and perhaps the most searching review of *Quest for Empire* to date to come to the attention of the present reviewer is that of Richard D. Poll, professor of history and associate director of the Honors Program at Brigham Young University, which appeared in the Autumn 1967 issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.

Bitton felt that although the book was one "which no student of early Mormonism can afford to ignore," nevertheless, there were places in the book where an "undue amount of weight had been placed on a few pieces of evidence."

Cole was of the opinion that Hansen had attempted to provide his readers with a "restrained, temperate, objective account of some of the political implications of Mormonism" but that his "style is pedestrian" and its appeal would be largely to specialists in the field of Mormonism.

Wells said that the book was "a distinct contribution to Western history, to Mormon history, and to the history of religious thought of the nineteenth century." He criticized Hansen, and perhaps justifiably, for making his account of the Council of Fifty "a little too much Utah-centered during the later period." What Wells was rightly pointing out is the fact that Idaho history is almost equally important in church-state relations during the western period of Hansen's study.

Mortensen begins his review of Hansen's *Quest for Empire* with this statement: "In many ways this book is one of the most difficult this reviewer has attempted to assess." His rationale for its being difficult to review is that it deals with a subject "about which so many people [even so-called authorities] claim to know so much, and yet in reality know so little." Mortensen maintains that although the book may raise as many questions as it answers, it will be around for a long time.

Unfortunately a copy of Lyman Tyler's review was not available at the time of the present writing. A not unusual experience at the library—"Immediate past issues of *Pacific Historical Review* are at the bindery."

Hardy said in his review that Hansen's study was a "splendid contribution to Mormon scholarship" and indicated that it was "filled with new and interesting illuminations." He claims that *Quest for Empire* "provides the most complete account of the Council of Fifty yet available."

Hakola, of the University of Maine, maintains that *Quest For Empire* is "meticulously researched" and "clearly written," and that is a "significant addition to Mormon history and American intellectual history."

Dr. Richard D. Poll, as mentioned before, has written what appears to the present writer to be the most complete as well as the most searching review of the book yet published.

After quoting a part of a January 1863 message of Governor Brigham Young, of the quasi-state of Deseret, to the legislature of the quasi-government in Utah, Dr. Poll makes this comment in the beginning of his review of Hansen's book:

For many years Mormon historians, including this reviewer, found in this language [of Brigham Young's] nothing more than the typical hyperbole of Brigham Young and frustration at the failure of Deseret's third bid for admission to the Union. Today, thanks to the research of James R. Clark, Dale Morgan, Leonard Arrington, Juanita Brooks, Hyrum Andrus, and now this important work by Klaus J. Hansen, the quoted statement evokes a concept and a theme which often recurs in the history of the LDS Church in the nineteenth century.

Poll maintains, therefore, that while Hansen's book is not a pioneer effort in the field, its contribution does lie in further "exploring the context from which the kingdom concept emerged and in tracing the developing theme in much fuller detail than has been previously done.

Poll's evaluation of some of the weaknesses of the book are couched in such terms as these:

The resort to plausibility when evidence is insufficient or lacking is risky business.

. . . this reviewer believes that Dr. Hansen goes beyond a safe depth in pursuit of some of his minor hypotheses.

The book repeats itself . . . and its tendency to build a larger hypothetical structure than its evidence will sustain has already been mentioned.

Nevertheless, Dr. Poll says of *Quest for Empire*: "This is a well-researched and well-written book."

The present writer first became aware of the problems in Mormon history discussed in *Quest for Empire* during research for his doctoral dissertation on the topic of church-state relations in education in Utah, 1847-1957.

It later developed that Klaus Hansen, as an undergraduate and then as a graduate history major at Brigham Young University, had been working along somewhat similar lines, but with a different emphasis. Both pieces of research, done independently and for the most part unknown to each other, led us both to some of the same conclusions about the importance of the concept of the political kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon history, at least in the early Utah period. Hansen continued his research independently, as did the present writer, with Hansen's research resulting first in a master's thesis at Brigham Young University on the topic, later, a doctoral study and then finally *Quest for Empire*.

My own research, independently, along the same lines, resulted in a presentation of the topic before the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, publication in the proceedings of the Utah Academy and also in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* and also the introductory chapters in my doctoral dissertation at Utah State University in 1958, with S. George Ellsworth, professor of history, as dissertation chairman.

Writing from this background, I find that I am in agreement with most of what Hansen says in *Quest for Empire*. I agree with his other reviewers that it is a distinct contribution to Mormon literature and Mormon historical interpretation.

I would caution the reader, however, as did Mr. Poll, against the acceptance of all of Hansen's conclusions, especially those for the pre-exodus period. I cannot agree, for instance, that the evidence Hansen offers establishes the connections he makes between the Council of Fifty as a secret organization and the Danites of the Missouri period. Nor can I yet accept all of his conclusions for the connection between the Council of Fifty, the kingdom of God concept, and the exploration for further settlement in Texas and elsewhere by some of the divergent Mormon groups following the death of Joseph Smith.

I would recommend that the book be in the library, however, of every serious and knowledgeable student of Mormon history.