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Abstract Review of *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (1996), by D. Michael Quinn.

D. Michael Quinn. *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. x + 477 pp., with index. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Klaus J. Hansen

Quinnspeak

According to the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes, if cows had a god it would be a cow. Later thinkers would expand this into the notion of the egocentric predicament: the enormous—if not insuperable—difficulty we encounter in conceiving the world in terms other than of our own experience and understanding. A recent, telling example is that of the late Sinclair Ross, distinguished Canadian novelist and writer, who, coming “out of the closet” late in life, confided to a young friend that he could never quite believe that this young man “or any other male, was quite so straight . . . [he] couldn’t be tempted by the pleasures available in a male body, or that such a body wasn’t part of every man’s fantasies. He was pretty sure it was.”¹ An even more extreme and perverse expression of this “egocentric” perspective is that of Adrienne Rich who, from her lesbian orientation, can conceive of heterosexuality only as enforced behavior for purposes of procreation²—which has elicited a positive response from some Mormon radical lesbians (pp. 120–21).³

While Michael Quinn goes to some lengths to distance himself from such extremism and egocentrism in *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example*—his

¹ Keath Fraser, “As for Me and My Secrets,” *Saturday Night* (March 1997): 77.

² Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (summer 1990): 631–30.

³ See especially Maxine Hanks, “Toward a Mormon Lesbian History: Female Bonding as Resistance to Patriarchal Colonization,” audiotape, Conference on Sexuality and Homosexuality, University of Utah, 8 August 1995.

ambitious, wide-ranging examination of same-sex dynamics among nineteenth-century Mormons—he does recognize the impossibility of complete objectivity. He acknowledges that “there is a gulf between those who have experienced erotic desire for a person of their same sex [like himself] and those who have *never* experienced erotic desire for a person of their same sex” (p. 7). Being in that latter category, I am of course limited by my own egocentric perspective and in my attempt to understand Michael Quinn’s effort to communicate “across that gulf of same-sex desire” as he introduces his readers to a same-sex past that for them is as alien as the customs of a foreign country. Although he disavows any intention of retrieving a “Golden Age” of social tolerance, he suggests that in his own work he is emulating the efforts of English social historian Peter Laslett to restore *The World We Have Lost*.⁴ It seems to me no accident that Quinn, who is openly “gay,” believes he has discovered in the same-sex dynamics of nineteenth-century Mormonism a world far more hospitable to and tolerant of same-sex relationships than that of modern Mormonism, which he regards as “homophobic.”

In the preface to Jackson Lears’s stimulating and brilliant study, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture*, Lears observes that “all scholarship is—or ought to be—a kind of intellectual autobiography.”⁵ This observation strikes me as particularly accurate in reference to Michael Quinn, whose prolific scholarship in Mormon history I respect enormously, and whose books on J. Reuben Clark Jr., Mormonism and the occult, and the Mormon hierarchy I have reviewed in leading professional journals. What Lears has in mind, I think, is not a subjective, personal approach to history, but rather an intense engagement with issues of concern to the respective scholar, leading to particularly acute insights illuminated by historical imagination. To a great extent the work under review bears all these typical hallmarks of Quinn’s scholarship. At the same time, I seem to detect here a degree of subjectivity not evident in his earlier work (with the possible exception of his speculations

⁴ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (New York: Scribners, 1966).

⁵ Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), x.

regarding the priesthood for Mormon women).⁶ I cannot but believe that *Same-Sex Dynamics* is, on one level, part of an effort to reconcile Quinn's professed homosexuality—which he publicly announced as a consequence of the book's publication—with his long-standing, profound commitment to Mormonism (in spite of his excommunication, for reasons other than homosexuality). To Quinn the enormous furor in orthodox Mormon circles over the present book is, in fact, merely an indication of just how far the church has moved away from its original foundation—not in its fundamental teachings, but in its “homophobic” modern incarnation. I am very much reminded of the work of the late John Boswell, who, in a number of influential works on the position of homosexuals in the early and the medieval church, adopted an analogous point of view.⁷

According to Quinn, nineteenth-century American culture (Mormonism included) lacked conceptions of sexuality and sexual identity, and therefore did not single out individuals performing homosexual acts as belonging to a special category. At the same time, Quinn asserts that segregation between the sexes was common and pervasive, permitting and even encouraging a whole spectrum of same-sex relationships. These range from associations in work, recreation, school, or church; from nonerotic friendships all the way to passionate love relationships and sexual liaisons—translated into Quinn's version of sociologese (or sexuellese) as the homosocial, the homopastoral, the homotactile, the homoemotional, the homoromantic, and the homomarital (all these from the table of contents). Having thus been prepared for the very worst of jargon-ridden prose, the reader is relieved to find that the writing style on the whole is workmanlike and straightforward.

The same, however, cannot be said for the way in which Quinn constructs his arguments. To be sure, this is pioneering work in virgin territory, and the author deserves some leeway. It is, after all, amazing that a book on this subject could be written by some-

⁶ See “Response” to *A Gift Given: A Gift Taken* by D. Michael Quinn, in *Sunstone* (September–October 1981): 26–27.

⁷ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); and *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard, 1994).

one professing a firm testimony of the truth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Quinn is very brave indeed. In his characteristic way, he has amassed a truly staggering and daunting amount of material. Clearly, one purpose is to overwhelm the reader into agreement. Quinn proceeds from the premise that same-sex attraction is an inherited genetic trait, like left-handedness. In the past left-handed individuals were harassed, and attempts were made to change them into right-handed people; however, society has learned to tolerate left-handedness, so why not gays and lesbians? It is virtually irrefutable logic, except that we are dealing with morals ruled by religio-social laws, not logic. But Quinn also understands that what is ultimately important is not the cause of same-sex attraction, but its social construction. It is at this juncture that the analogy breaks down, as it must if Quinn is to justify writing this book. Of course, that gets him into another difficulty. Because nineteenth-century Americans lacked conceptions of sexual identity, their behavior is not readily identifiable in sexual terms that we as modern readers can understand. We construct our world differently from the way they constructed theirs. Thus our deconstruction of their world may lead us to misconstrue it. Though Quinn professes to be sensitive to this danger, he has not always avoided it, as I shall attempt to demonstrate.

On the surface, his use of the term *same-sex dynamics* for nineteenth-century American culture rather than *homosexuality*, *bisexuality*, *gay*, or *lesbian* seems entirely appropriate. Yet even though he breaks the term down into numerous subcategories, it retains a certain fuzziness, allowing for intimations of homosexual and lesbian behavior that the textual record, in my opinion, does not show. I realize, of course, that by asking for historical proof I may be accused of historical denial of same-sex eroticism (e.g., Blanche Wiesen Cook: "this demand for absolute proof of same-sex genital contact equals the 'historical denial of lesbianism'" [p. 159]).

Quinn's evidence for homoerotic behavior among nineteenth-century Mormons is like the tip of the proverbial iceberg: most of what happened below the waist happened below the waterline. Quinn documents only 76 cases (52 men, 24 women), but he speculates that there must have been at least 400 times more instances of male and 175 times more of female homoerotic

activities (out of a total Mormon population of approximately 400,000 by 1900). Given that Quinn calculates the occurrence of homoerotic behavior by taking about 10 percent of any given population, this projection is entirely reasonable (though current statistics from the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta put the figure closer to 5 percent). On the basis of such figures, it is possible that some of Quinn's subjects were indeed homosexual or lesbian. He has also anticipated Mormon critics, who may counter that the Saints should be held to a higher standard, with evidence of a surprisingly high degree of heterosexual transgressions. In fact, Quinn shows that by both church and state heterosexual infractions were punished more severely than "crimes against nature," such as sodomy.

In his indefatigable scouring of religious and secular records, court and medical records, diaries, journals, and letters, Quinn has indeed amassed an impressive record of same-sex dynamics. Yet much of his evidence seems to be a kind of overkill, a sociological pigeonholing of the obvious into rather artificial categories that acquire an aura of scholarly respectability through the magic of "Quinnspeak." "Homosocial" encounters, for example, occurred among men in priesthood quorums, in the School of the Prophets, in the theocratic Council of Fifty, and so on, while women experienced them in the Relief Society, cultural organizations, and female-only testimony meetings. An example of a "homotactile" practice is the ordinance of the washing of the feet in the School of the Prophets (practiced to this day by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve). The anointing of the sick is both "homopastoral" and "homotactile." Same-sex dancing in Nauvoo, on the trek west, and in Utah is an example of both "homosocial" and "homotactile" behavior. In letters and diaries both women and men express "homoemotional" and "homoromantic" feelings, so common throughout the nineteenth century. If they kiss, as they frequently did, they may also be moving into the more dangerous territory of the "homoerotic." Summing up the meaning of this kind of behavior, Quinn quotes social historian E. Anthony Rotundo to the effect that, in a society that lacked the concept—and the language—of sexual identity, "young men (and women, too) could express their affection for each other physically without risking social censure or feelings of

guilt" (p. 94). However, an important point Quinn acknowledges but does not stress is that this sort of behavior did not go to the extremes of genital play. It appears then that the same-sex dynamic was not as open-ended and fluid as Quinn seems to imply, though he stops short of pushing his evidence beyond parameters of plausibility that are patently unconvincing. In his discussion of the idea of same-sex marriages ("homomartial" unions) among Mormons, for example, he is considerably more careful and restrained than John Boswell,⁸ whose assertion that the early Christian church performed marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples rests on a willful misreading of highly ambiguous evidence (though Quinn accepts Boswell's interpretation) and provides no support for those who are looking for a precedent that would allow same-sex marriage ordinances between Mormons.

While Quinn is not as vulnerable to criticism as Boswell, the cumulative effect of his selective evidence and interpretations raises questions in my mind about the validity of his arguments and conclusions. This selectivity is particularly apparent in Quinn's treatment of Joseph Smith. What, for example, are we to make of accounts such as the following: that Joseph taught that "two who were vary [*sic*] friends indeed should lie down upon the same bed at night locked in each other[']s embrace talking of their love & should awake in the morning together" (p. 410), and at Carthage Jail Joseph shared a bed with thirty-two-year-old Dan Jones, who "lay himself by [Joseph's] side in a close embrace" (p. 410)? Quinn claims that it is not his intention to turn Joseph into a homosexual; readers can arrive at their own conclusions, as did one reviewer in *OUT*, a homosexual publication, who sees this history as placing modern "homophobic" Mormonism in an extremely ironic position.⁹ Of course, some scholars have even argued for a homosexual interpretation of the young Abraham Lincoln's sharing a bed with his law partner. What is missing here and elsewhere is a nuanced reading of the text within a larger context. The same can be said of Joseph's sermon regarding the destruction of Sodom: it was destroyed "for

⁸ Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*.

⁹ Michelangelo Signorile, "The Secret History of Mormons," *Out* (August 1996): 26.

rejecting the prophets." Quinn interprets this sermon as "a revision of the traditional sexual interpretation of Sodom's destruction" (p. 409). The one, surely, does not exclude the other. It is unfortunate that when Parley P. Pratt gave a sexual interpretation for the fall of Sodom in 1853 he did not have Michael Quinn to tell him that he was "reversing the Mormon founder's nonsexual interpretation" (p. 412). Another telling example of how Quinn misconstrues evidence is his account of the Prophet Joseph's reputedly intense homoemotional and homoromantic relationship with William Taylor, a younger brother of John Taylor. In 1842, after Joseph had made a three-week visit to the Taylor home, William reported that "it is impossible for me to express my feelings in regard to this period of my life. I have never known the same joy and satisfaction in the companionship of any other person, man or woman, that I felt with him, the man who had conversed with the Almighty." Editorializes Quinn: "That was an extraordinary statement in view of Taylor's marriage at age twenty-two and his four subsequent plural marriages" (p. 112). What is even more extraordinary is Quinn's obtuse if not deliberate misreading of this account. To be sure, modern psychologists have attempted to surround religious charisma with a sexual aura, a point Quinn might have used to his advantage. Yet he presents the passage "straight," as it were. He similarly misconstrues Brigham Young's famous remark that there was probably no man alive who cared for the company of women less than he, and does the same with the equally famous remark by George Q. Cannon that "men may never have beheld each other's faces and yet they will love one another, and it is a love that is greater than the love of women" (p. 113). Surely such passages cry out for consideration of the context, for careful exegesis, even for the acknowledgment that multiple interpretations are possible beyond the tunnel of same-sex dynamics.

While Quinn acknowledges that "the most conscientious researchers have honest differences about the significance and meaning of the historical evidence that does exist" (p. 8), the construction of his argument requires a very specific and particular reading of the textual evidence.

Change, as Quinn understands only too well, is best accomplished under a conservative banner (Bismarck and Disraeli are

good examples in politics). If Joseph's sexuality were ambiguous, perhaps there would be hope of license for modern gay and lesbian Mormons. Although reports concerning Joseph Smith take up relatively little space in the volume, he is clearly central to the whole argument, because of his key role in the whole Mormon enterprise. Thus the "outing" of Tabernacle Choir director Evan Stephens—in spite of the enormous public furor it generated (the University of Illinois Press was forced to withdraw a dust jacket depicting Stephens and one of his putative homosexual "boy chums")¹⁰—is really rather insignificant compared to the far less overt but ultimately much more controversial "outing" of Joseph Smith. For if I read Quinn correctly, it is within the sexual dynamics that the Prophet Joseph Smith supposedly promoted and sanctioned that behavior such as is alleged on the part of Stephens must be understood.

Quinn is not naive, and I hardly expect that he anticipates a change in church policy regarding homosexuals and lesbians anytime soon. Perhaps he may take some encouragement from the unanticipated change in policy regarding priesthood denial to blacks not long after Lester Bush's famous article in *Dialogue*,¹¹ though this may well be an instance of the *propter hoc* fallacy.¹² It seems to me, however, that any such change would be prompted less by an uncertain historical argument based heavily on speculation and inference than on doctrinal considerations that Quinn—for reasons I find puzzling—largely ignores. President James E. Faust, speaking for the First Presidency, recently made an

¹⁰ On this, see the discussion in this volume of the *Review* by George S. Mitton and Rhett S. James on pages 141–263.

¹¹ Lester Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," *Dialogue* 8/1 (1973): 11–68.

¹² According to David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 166, "The fallacy of *post hoc, propter hoc* is the mistaken idea that if event B happened after event A, it happened because of event A. An example is provided by a female passenger on board the Italian liner *Andrea Doria*. On the fatal night of *Doria's* collision with the Swedish ship *Gripsholm*, off Nantucket in 1956, the lady retired to her cabin and flicked a light switch. Suddenly there was a great crash, and grinding metal, and passengers and crew ran screaming through the passageways. The lady burst from her cabin and explained to the first person in sight that she must have set the ship's emergency brake!"

unambiguous pronouncement regarding the church's stand on homosexuality and lesbianism; he denounced the "false belief of inborn homosexual orientation. No scientific evidence demonstrates absolutely that this is so. Besides, if it were so, it would frustrate the whole plan of mortal happiness."¹³ Quinn, of course, has argued that the scientific world does indeed have evidence to the contrary. He further editorializes that he fails to see how the belief that a small percentage of people have inborn homosexual traits can be a threat to the happiness of a heterosexual majority any more than a minority of left-handed individuals can be a threat to a right-handed majority. Though the logic of that argument may be compelling, it is not central to the thesis of the book. Indeed, for Quinn's sake it is just as well that his construction of ubiquitous same-sex dynamics of nineteenth-century Mormons is not entirely persuasive. If it were, I would expect an even greater backlash and bleaker future for Mormon gays and lesbians.

¹³ "First Presidency Message: Serving the Lord and Resisting the Devil," *Ensign* (September 1995): 5.