4-1-1976

Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton 1840-1842
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Book Reviews


Reviewed by William Mulder, professor of English, University of Utah.

Like the Puritans of New England, the early Mormons were compulsive diarists. Both indulged in a kind of spiritual bookkeeping. Awakened to a new life in the gospel, but hardly changed from sinner to Latter-day Saint overnight, Mormon converts were preoccupied, sometimes morbidly, with their salvation and anxious about God’s purposes. Anyone interested in what William James called “the varieties of religious experience” finds such personal narrative fascinating, despite often the trivia and repetition, or possibly because of them, because they betray a pattern of concern and values significant to the behavioral scientist, however disappointing to the historian, who would like more chronicle and less introspection, more “life and times” in the flesh, less whining of the spirit. Mormon diaries fall somewhere between St. Augustine and Boswell: they abound in concrete, often unconsciously colorful detail about the daily round at the same time they search the corners of the soul.

William Clayton’s journal of his labors in the Mormon congregation at Manchester in 1840 and of his emigration to Nauvoo with the second company of Mormons to leave England, is typical and a happy choice to start Peregrine Smith’s Classic Mormon Diary Series. There is a ready-made interest in Clayton as the man who kept the journal of the first pioneer company and wrote “Come, Come, Ye Saints.” Now in Manchester Mormons (an apt and catchy title), we go back beyond these landmarks for an eyewitness account of Mormonism’s earliest activity in England and the scene at Nauvoo. It is a pristine period, Joseph Smith’s era, the age of Primitive Mormonism before the schisms, as yet unconditioned as Mormon memory would be by the exodus and the saga of settle-
ment in the West. It is a time when the Mormons, to paraphrase what Edmund Burke once said of the Americans, were still in the gristle, not yet hardened in the bone. The diary is dotted with the names of the makers and shapers of the early movement, the proselyters, the future pioneers, the rising prophets of Mormondom—Willard Richards, Wilford Woodruff, Heber C. Kimball, Parley P. Pratt, and Brigham Young, Clayton’s contemporaries in England, and, in America, Joseph Smith himself. In the hands of the editors, trained historians Allen and Alexander, the diary grows in interest and significance as they put England, Manchester particularly, and early Mormon doctrine, practice, and expectation in context.

The editorial apparatus, and it is considerable, admirably serves this end: a general introduction, the text of the diary itself with extraordinarily thorough footnotes following each entry and explaining every allusion, an annotated alphabetical list of identifiable persons appearing in the diary as an appendix, and a very detailed name and subject index. Editorially the work is evidence of the new professionalism that is becoming the hallmark of Mormon historiography. Of the few editorial slips that occur in the book, only one, the scrambled bibliographical details of Orson Hyde’s tract, *A Timely Warning*, seems of any substance.

The editors are no stylists and they lack narrative talent: their summary, in the introduction, of Clayton’s career and the action of the diary is economical and informed but lacks drama and momentum, though the diary itself has novelistic moments. Their strength lies in notation and analysis, as in their painstaking reconstruction of the social and economic scene in industrial Manchester and their section “The Urban Saints: A Social Profile.” Such data are a boon to the serious reader, though perhaps a weariness, when presented without verve and color, to the general one. The difficulty lies precisely there: it is a question of audience, a question to be resolved not by the editors of this volume so much as by those determining guidelines for the series: are they publishing for the general reader or for other historians? And for a Mormon or a non-Mormon audience? *Manchester Mormons* tries to please both, but the divided point of view puts the explanations of Mormon doctrine and practice out of focus: what the non-Mormon reader will surely find diverting (saluting with a holy kiss, the internal ministering of anointing oil, the wine- and coffee-drinking, the use of the collection box, the practice of open confession for transgression, the foot-washing, the speaking in tongues, the readiness to excommunicate
or disfellowship among the early Mormons) becomes the occasion for solemn over-explanation for the benefit of the Mormon reader, to lessen the shock, presumably, of differences in Mormon outlook and behavior between then and now. It's a matter of tone; but if edited Mormon manuscripts are to win their way outside Church circles a certain sophistication of language will have to accompany the sophisticated historiography which the editing of *Manchester Mormons* does indeed display.

To their great credit, the editors do not flinch in delicate matters; they are frank, for example, as they pursue the implications of young Clayton's "special feelings," though he was a married man, toward Sarah Crooks, an attractive member of his congregation: "The Lord keep me pure, and preserve me from wrong doing," he confides. Such entries, showing Clayton struggling to understand the new faith and his own calling, with many a conflict of duty and desire, show the human side of Mormon history. If we are sometimes irritated by the self-deprecation, the display of human pettiness and contentiousness, the antics of the holy, we are as often moved by the desire to reform, the longing to become worthy, the trials of embattled spirits and afflicted bodies, the heroics of the humble. No commentary need enhance entries such as "The child will die," "I was very footsore," "Some are not saints who profess to be," and, when Clayton's company sails for Zion, "We are on our way home."

Thanks to the meticulous and comprehensive aids the editors provide, the useful cross references to the manuscript history of the Church and journals kept by Clayton's contemporaries, we get unexpected bonuses in Mormon history: when Clayton records, "Read the vision to some of the sisters," the editors speculate that this is a reference, very likely, to the First Vision, an account "not widely circulated in the early years of the Church, and . . . not included in any missionary literature, or any publication, for that matter, prior to 1840." Of a very different order is the entry about young sisters flirting with the sailors, indeed drinking wine with them, on the voyage to America, and returning "very indifferent answers" when reprimanded, saying "they could take care of themselves." An unexpected emancipation!

Besides the pleasures of the diary itself, *Manchester Mormons* affords an aesthetic pleasure: it is a nice piece of bookmaking: the half-binding with a period photo of Clayton on the cover, the end papers showing Clayton's missionary labors and the emigration route,
the oval engravings which head each section and invoke an antique atmosphere, the type and quality paper—all have been coordinated by Keith Montague into a singularly harmonious design. The presswork, unfortunately, is uneven, with some page impressions alternately light and heavy and too many "high risers," lines of type that are markedly darker than the rest, an irritation to the reader. The publisher, so bent on excellence, must feel like the farmer whose cow put her foot in the milk. One peccadillo about mechanics: the footnotes are numbered consecutively so that by the time we reach the end of the volume we are up to footnote number 252. Since the footnotes immediately follow each diary entry the convention of assigning each page, or each entry, its own series, would have been simpler.

Unhappily, Peregine Smith has announced that because of economic pressures, the Classic Mormon Diary Series will not be continued beyond Manchester Mormons. We can only hope that the other two diaries announced for the series—the journals of Charles L. Walker and Thomas Bullock—will be printed by other publishers.