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Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May

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Reviewed by J. R. T. Hughes, professor of economics at Northwestern University.

Classic Mormon economic practices might be seen as exotic species by the non-Mormon historian. The deed of consecration in which the Trustee-in-Trust regranted land ownership rights for a lifetime stewardship was a radical departure from the American fee simple, and also in apparent violation of the principles of *Quia Emptores Terrarum*, the ancient English land law which ruled in colonial America (except in Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania), and became the rule in federal America. The Mormons appeared to be recreating a feudal land-ownership chain, with tenure given for services, and the heirs barred from direct inheritance. Alternately, one might imagine in his deed the transformation of Zion's entire domain into glebeland, or perhaps an entire region of the USA turned into a "use," except that the trustee did not agree to support the heirs of the original owner. But then Zion itself seemed to be contrary to the spirit of the First Amendment, that the states should not establish a religion. It could of course be argued that in the case of the Mormons, a religion appeared to be establishing a state.

There were other peculiarities and social artifacts. To move from one Mormon ward to another required a "recommend," sent by the bishop. This practice is similar to the seventeenth century English laws of settlement. When the early Mormon villages farmed with common fields and herd boys, the outsider might have thought he was seeing a European medieval village reincarnate. The community of Sanpete finally divided its common meadow into strips three rods wide and *two miles* long. Such a division, they argued, "more justly" divided up the better and the poorer lands,

and the gentile historian might see in this a reaffirmation of what most scholars consider to have been the classic justification of strip farming in early medieval practice. In the communal enterprises of the United Order were all the utopian "socialist" ideals of Jacksonian America and beyond, back to Jan Hus, back to the fifteenth century Taborite uprising in Bohemia where they had "all things in common," and beyond that to the Bible itself.

These are of course but a few of the "peculiar" economic and social practices associated with the Mormon phenomenon that might excite the interest of the outside observer. However, he might well see the Mormons as a puzzling oddment within the overall mosaic of nineteenth century American nation-building, but definitely out of the mainstream. Mormons and Mormonism were bizarre, worth a feature story in an Eastern or English newspaper, a fit subject for a world traveller like Sir Richard Burton, or perhaps a native humorist like Mark Twain. But to the Mormons themselves their faith was the universe itself. The peculiar economic and social practices were expressions of a vital religion in which there was no division between the faith and everyday life. It was a nineteenth century American religious experience that recalled the seventeenth century settlers on the Massachusetts shore. A hundred years after 1620 the Puritan experience was mainly a memory. Nearly a century and a half after 1830 the Mormon experience remains a vital and growing one. For that reason alone those early beliefs and practices fascinate the historical imagination. So one can but welcome the publication of *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons*.

This book is vintage stuff. As Professor Arrington explains in his preface, the late Feramorz Fox had written a substantial manuscript on these topics in the 1930s which was never published. Arrington's own work, in several published articles and in his famous book, *Great Basin Kingdom*, had traversed much of this terrain. The Fox manuscript now forms part of this new study, and Arrington and Dean L. May are responsible for the rest, all presented in a single integrated account. The book bears Arrington's characteristic stamp, careful scholarship, extensive reliance on primary information sources, illuminating quotations, solid writing style, balanced judgment.

Even to an outside scholar with more than a passing interest in Mormon history the achievement of this book is stunning. It is a

model of microhistory, and it is a story truly retrieved from the edge of oblivion by the methods of modern historical scholarship. What we are given is a rich tapestry of economic and social experiment from the Kirtland days through the nineteenth century extended down to the modern LDS social system. It is a tradition of thinking, sacrifice, and achievement of which the Mormon people can be justly proud.

It must be remembered that nineteenth century America was a place of novelty and experiment. The forms and structures of economic life which now are taken for granted by Americans did not then exist; for example general-purpose corporate charters, labor unions, a uniform national currency, settled usages in banking and commerce, regulated industries and antitrust law—these and many more institutions were inchoate and developing in the age of classical Mormonism (from 1830 to 1887, i.e., from the founding to the amended Edmunds-Tucker Act). The Mormon experiments, however exotic they may seem today, were part of the American search for viable social institutions. In the Mormon communities the search embraced a problem of singular difficulty, for the Saints tried to find a way to exploit nature, labor, and capital, in ways not repugnant to the axioms of a largely utopian religious gospel. Modern Israel, even the socialist states of Europe and Asia, illustrate that such a task is nearly impossible, even if the utopias are secular dreams. To remove exploitation of man by man, to produce justice, equity, and charity in the distribution of income and wealth without destroying the incentive to produce, these have proved to be problems of almost infinite difficulty.

One cannot say now that the Mormon communitarian efforts were in some sense doomed to failure in the original circumstances in which they were conceived—substantial independence and isolation from the developing mainstream American market economy. Those circumstances vanished. Brigham Young's Mormonism was no match for the growing economic power and influence of Modern America. Yet in their efforts, now given their fullest public demonstration in *Building the City of God*, we can see why the old-fashioned Mormons created a sense of community upon which their religion survived and modern Mormons could build. Sense of cohesion and community are lost by neglect, not by failure energetically pursued. Hence, as our authors note, the memory and the moral force of these Mormon experiments remained strongest where the failures were most painfully evident.

Even for Mormon readers this book will be a revelation. One knew about ZCMI, probably about Orderville, perhaps of the cooperative origins of Brigham City. But how many Mormon scholars ever heard of the efforts to form United Orders in places like Paris, Idaho; Hyrum, Utah; or in Cave Valley, New Mexico? How many know that the Mormon cooperative movement was inspired via returned missionaries, directly from the English experiment at Rochdale? With a wealth of detail, guided by their sure knowledge of classical Mormon principles, and the impact of differing personalities in Church leadership (even down to the level of individual wards) these authors have restored the fabric of Mormon historical reality for Mormon readers, and for non-Mormon readers provided a fascinating introduction to a rich and largely unknown epoch in American social history.

The last chapters are concerned with the modern Mormon welfare system. Here the authors deal briskly with modern misconceptions; for example, that no Mormons were on public relief during the 1930s, or that the system has now removed Mormons from the grasp of state and federal programs. By one measure of historiographical achievement this book is a rare success: Leopold von Ranke's statement that the historian's central purpose is to discover "how it really was." One rarely experiences so vivid an evocation of the historical past as *Building the City of God*. There were not all that many Mormons in Brigham Young's Zion. Yet, like the Massachusetts Puritans, the Mormon frontiersmen and women seemed to be ingenious in the creation of social innovation. It is a story that should not be forgotten. In this book a valuable lesson is found that adversity has its positive uses, failures of one generation can inspire another.