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Zane Grey in Zion: An Examination of His Supposed Anti-Mormonism

Gary Topping

Zane Grey has been singularly unfortunate in his treatment by the literary critics. From the time his books began to hit the best seller lists, critics have persistently attacked his purple prose, his overly romanticized views of the West, his one-dimensional characters, and his formulaic plots.¹ Consequently, Grey's novels survive in academic and literary circles as epitomes of subliterary fantasy unworthy of serious attention. Unhappy with that stereotype of a supposed creator of stereotypes, literary historians have recently reopened the case of Zane Grey vs. the critics. Their findings have not been uncritical, but they generally show that a serious reading of Grey's novels simply will not support the older hostile views.²

Not all scholars have accepted this new evaluation of Grey. Among those who have not are Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, who dissect the "Manichean world" of Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* in an attempt to demonstrate a basic hostility on Grey's part to the Mormons.³ What they carelessly identify as "Manichean" in the novel is an alleged moral dualism between the Mormon community, which is thoroughly evil, and the individualistic gunman Lassiter, who is thoroughly good. Grey thus presents the reader, in their view, with only two extreme alternatives: the totalitarian community, composed of "thousands of dupes and dudes and their handful of unscrupulous leaders," or the individ-

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¹Documentation for that unhappy relationship is abundant. Perusal of *Book Review Digest* since the appearance of *Riders of the Purple Sage* in 1912 can provide a multitude of hostile reviews, especially among the elite literary journals. A summary of unfair criticisms is given in T. K. Whipple, *Study Out the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943), pp. 19-29. Grey's own frustrations are best seen in an unpublished essay, "My Answer to the Critics," at Zane Grey, Inc., Pasadena, California, and in a few brief conversations with Hamlin Garland in *Hamlin Garland's Diaries*, ed. Donald Pizer (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1968), pp. 139-41.

²Grey still needs a literary critic who will read his novels objectively, as Whipple did. Among those who have been champions of a new deal for Grey, the following merit attention: Carlton Jackson, *Zane Grey* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1973); Richard Etulain, "A Dedication to the Memory of Zane Grey 1872-1939," *Arizona and the West* 12 (Autumn 1970):217-20; Danney Goble, "'The Days That Were No More': A Look at Zane Grey's West," *Journal of Arizona History* 14 (Spring 1973):63-75; Gary Topping, "Zane Grey's West," *Journal of Popular Culture* 7 (Winter 1973):681-89, and "Zane Grey's West: Essays in Intellectual History and Criticism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 1977); and Joseph L. Wheeler, "Zane Grey's Impact on American Life and Letters: A Study in the Popular Novel" (Ph.D. diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1975).

³Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Community and Isolation: Some Aspects of 'Mormon Westerns,'" *Western American Literature* 8 (Spring and Summer 1973):15-31.

ualism of Lassiter, whose only law is his guns and who refuses even to be married, because a man and wife form a little community.⁴

Arrington and Haupt make three points about Grey's treatment of the Mormons. The first is explicit: *Riders of the Purple Sage* is literarily simplistic. The other two seem to be strongly implied: Grey's view of the Mormons and Mormon-gentile relations is historically inaccurate, and Grey himself was hostile to the Mormons.⁵ Although historical veracity is not in itself a valid criterion for literary criticism except where the work also claims to be accurate history,⁶ it does seem to be worth noting, since Arrington and Haupt raise the point, that Grey's views of the Mormons are not nearly so simplistic, hostile, or historically inaccurate as they maintain. The point of this essay is that a careful rereading of *Riders of the Purple Sage* and an examination of other evidence on Grey's treatment of the Mormons calls for considerable revision of those conclusions.⁷

Of course *Riders of the Purple Sage*, as Arrington and Haupt point out at some length, fairly drips with anti-Mormon rhetoric, and one could search for some time in Western literature before finding more despicable villains than the Mormon leaders Tull and Dyer. But reasoning from that to the conclusion that Grey was basically hostile to Mormons or even that the basic idea of *Riders of the Purple Sage* is the conflict between community-oriented Mormons and the individualistic gunman presents some serious problems.

The first problem is that Grey is on record in several instances as being an ardent admirer of Mormons. Among the first Westerners Grey met were Mormon cowboys who worked for Col. C. J. "Buffalo" Jones. Praises of their capabilities are scattered

⁴Ibid., p. 20.

⁵These ideas are popular stereotypes of Zane Grey. Although it seems obvious that Arrington and Haupt have based their mistaken explication of *Riders of the Purple Sage* on these stereotypes, the validity of my assumption of that does not affect the validity of my argument. My goal is not the refutation of their article, but of the more general stereotypes they seem to accept.

⁶See Don D. Walker, "The Rise and Fall of Barney Tullus," *Western American Literature* 3 (Summer 1968):93-102; "Can the Western Tell What Happens?" *Rendezvous* 7 (Winter 1972):33-47; "Notes toward a Literary Criticism of the Western," *Journal of Popular Culture* 7 (Winter 1973):728-41; and Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; reprint ed., New York: Atheneum, 1965), all of the second essay, especially pp. 73-82.

⁷I still believe Grey's Mormon novels are literarily somewhat unsatisfying, but not for the reasons Arrington and Haupt propose. Mormonism, as other historical topics, presents peculiar literary problems that perhaps make it an unwise choice for an aspiring writer. For examinations of those problems, see Don D. Walker, "The Mountain Man as Literary Hero," *Western American Literature* 1 (Spring 1966):15-25; and especially Neal Lambert, "Saints, Sinners and Scribes: A Look at the Mormons in Fiction," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 36 (Winter 1968):63-76.

through the books he wrote about his expeditions with Jones, and one of the Mormons, Jim Emmett, impressed him so much that he later wrote an article about Emmett entitled "The Man Who Influenced Me Most" (see Graham St. John Stott, "Zane Grey and James Simpson Emmett," this issue). Romer Grey, Grey's eldest son, who accompanied his father on many trips through Mormon country, scoffed at the idea that his father intended any ill will toward Mormons; Grey's supposedly anti-Mormon novels merely illustrate, he said, that Grey "knew a good story when he saw it."⁸

In his correspondence, Grey was enthusiastic in his admiration of the Mormons. Preparing for his 1911 trip to Utah during which he did the research for *Riders of the Purple Sage*, he told Mormon guide David Dexter Rust that "I shall not write anything about the Mormons that would hurt anybody's feelings. I simply want to tell of the wonder and beauty of their desert struggle as I see it. . . . I see them as a wonderful people, and so I shall write of them." Grey was careful to dissociate himself from the anti-Mormon writers of whom he was aware: "If you could read what is being written now in three magazines about the Mormons you would be pleased with my point of view." Ironically, since *Riders of the Purple Sage* was to make him a rich man, Grey argued that his insistence on writing favorably about the Mormons was keeping him poor: "As I will not make any contract with a magazine to roast the Mormons, I'll have to pay my expenses [for the 1911 trip] out of my own pocket. If I wanted to make any such contract I should get \$2500 tomorrow for a trip."⁹

The second problem is that Grey wrote pro-Mormon novels as well as anti-Mormon ones, and each of his novels that deals with

⁸On Grey's experiences with Buffalo Jones, see Frank Gruber, *Zane Grey: A Biography* (1970; reprint ed., New York: Signet Books, 1971), pp. 68-77. The books Grey wrote about that trip include *The Last of the Plainsmen* (New York: Outing Publishing Co., 1908) and *Roping Lions in the Grand Canyon* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922). Also relevant is the article "Nonnezoshe," in *Tales of Lonely Trails* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922), pp. 3-17. The article on Emmett is in *American Magazine*, August 1926, pp. 52-55. My discussion with the late Romer Grey about the issue of Grey's anti-Mormonism occurred in Pasadena, California, 3 February 1975.

⁹Zane Grey to David Dexter Rust, 4 December 1910; 2 and 15 January and 15 February 1911, Box 4, Folder 7, David Dexter Rust Collection, Church Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Also interesting, but less important, is a letter in which he tells of a Utah trip in 1929: "I saw Blue Valley, a deserted Mormon settlement, remarkable in its isolation, and most inspiring." Grey to "Henry and Bill" (his editors), 5 November 1929, Zane Grey Collection, Brigham Young University Library.

Mormon life at all contains "good" Mormons.¹⁰ *The Heritage of the Desert*, Grey's first actual Western novel, is largely the story of the patriarchal Mormon August Naab, who was inspired by the real-life Mormon Jim Emmett. Naab is the hero, and the Mormon community he dominates is an island of civilization and security in a sea of anarchy created by gunfighters and rustlers. One of the villains in that story is Naab's own son Snap, who is a rebel against the civilized ideals of the Mormon community. *The Man of the Forest* uses four Mormon brothers as secondary characters who help the hero defeat a kidnap attempt.

Even in the seemingly most harshly anti-Mormon novels, Grey uses "good" Mormon characters. In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, it is Jane Withersteen. She remains, in her own eyes at least, a true Mormon to the end, even though she acquires a higher conscience that forces her to resist the Mormon hierarchy. In the sequel, *The Rainbow Trail*, the cowboy Joe Lake (based on the real-life cowboy Joe Lee of "Nonnezoshe") represents a younger generation of Mormons who reject polygamy and the harsh authoritarianism of the older generation. Lake is one who helps rescue the non-Mormon girl Fay Larkin from the Mormon village of plural wives.

Finally, the community vs. isolation formula seems to do scant justice to the complexity of the Lassiter character. Lassiter in fact is the first in a series of Grey's gunfighters who, by the moral complexity of their situation, can provide little support for the idea of Manichean moral dualism in Grey's fiction. Lassiter is a basically good man whom society has driven to a rampage of revenge. He thus exhibits both good and evil qualities: his social relations are normal with everyone but the lustful Mormons who kidnapped and ruined his sister. Lassiter's paradoxical moral composition puzzles Jane Withersteen:

Good and evil began to seem incomprehensibly blended in her judgment. It was her belief that evil could not come forth from good; yet here was a murderer who dwarfed in gentleness, patience, and love any man she had ever known.¹¹

Furthermore, it is difficult to see Lassiter as a nemesis of the idea of community in general. He is merely the enemy of commu-

¹⁰Grey's main "Mormon novels" include *The Heritage of the Desert* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910); *Riders of the Purple Sage* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1912; reprint ed., New York: Walter J. Black, n.d.); *The Rainbow Trail* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1915; paperback reprint ed., New York: Pocket Books, 1961). Of less importance is *The Man of the Forest* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1920). Several other Grey novels contain Mormon characters in inconspicuous roles.

¹¹Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, p. 138.

nity constructed according to wrong principles. In fact, Lassiter appears much more strongly in the novel as a harbinger of community than as a destroyer. Lassiter tells Withersteen at one point that he conceives his role to be that of a destroyer of those who hinder the development of civilization in the West, prophesying that "some day the border'll be better, cleaner, for the ways of men like Lassiter."¹² Lassiter may be a bit melodramatic, but he is neither incorruptible nor isolated.

No one, least of all Zane Grey himself, ever claimed that his portrayal of southern Utah in the 1870s was sociologically accurate, any more than one would claim that Melville's white whale is zoologically accurate. The purpose of literature, after all, is to heighten, to generalize, and to intensify in order to achieve truth at another level than mere sociology or zoology.¹³ The truth Grey achieves in his Mormon novels is to be found in his dramatization of the kind of psychology that existed in many small, nearly all-Mormon communities when faced with gentile incursions. To the gentile, it was all too easy to see in every zealous bishop an incipient Tull or Dyer; to the Mormon, it was all too easy to see in every scoffing gentile a threat to a divinely ordained social order. Having written *The Heritage of the Desert* to explore the literary possibilities of the theme of brotherly love cutting across creedal boundaries,¹⁴ Grey turned, in *Riders of the Purple Sage*, to the inverse possibility—the bloody consequences of intolerance on both sides. If Grey's "pristine world," then, "is black and white, a world of absolutes,"¹⁵ a view that I have shown must be partly qualified, it is because southern Utah in the 1870s *was*, in the minds of many Mormons and gentiles alike, a world of absolutes.

The notable fact about *Riders of the Purple Sage* is not that Grey emphasizes the intolerant social attitudes of the region but that he points out that moderate partisans on both sides have reasonable complaints and that he shows little sympathy for extremists on either side. The Mormon moderate, Jane Withersteen, is just as exasperated by the simplistic gentile solution represented by

¹²Ibid., p. 272.

¹³Critics like Arrington and Haupt seem to have forgotten Aristotle's description of the relationship of literature to reality as expressed in his classic distinction between poetry (literature) and history: "The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is . . . that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be" (*Poetics*, 9).

¹⁴That possibility was also rooted in sociological reality. In fact, as I have shown, it was based on Grey's own experience with Mormons.

¹⁵Arrington and Haupt, "Community and Isolation," p. 20.

Lassiter's guns as she is by the simplistic Mormon response represented by Elder Tull's whip. If the gentiles Lassiter and Venters are driven to become gunfighters by Mormon violence and intolerance, Withersteen points out that Mormons were first driven to it by gentile incursions and threats to the Mormon way of life:

The men of my creed are unnaturally cruel. To my everlasting sorrow I confess it. They have been driven, hated, scourged till their hearts have hardened. But we women hope and pray for the time when our men will soften.¹⁶

How then are we to understand Grey's conception of Mormonism? First, I think it is important to note that he had no profound knowledge of Mormon history, theology, or social life, and did not intend to write the ultimate "Mormon novel." Mormons were only one group among many denizens of the West that interested Grey, and the ideas of polygamy and authoritarian government seemed to present good material for a raging Western story.¹⁷ Grey's own copy of the Book of Mormon shows none of his characteristic marginalia found in books that impressed him greatly.¹⁸

Finally, the only attempt at a concise account of Mormon history and theology in his novels, evidently put forth in all seriousness, is extremely simplistic and inaccurate:

The first Mormon said God spoke to him and told him to go to a certain place and dig. He went there and found the Book of Mormon. It said follow me, marry many wives, go into the desert and multiply, send your sons out into the world and bring us young women, many young women. And when the first Mormon became strong with many followers he said again: Give to me part of your labor—of your cattle and sheep—of your silver—that I may build me great cathedrals for you to worship in. And I will commune with God and make it right and good that you have more wives. . . . That is Mormonism.¹⁹

Secondly, Grey's views of Mormonism were largely determined by his own religion, which, Joseph L. Wheeler points out, "was a

¹⁶Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, p. 13. See also p. 3, where Grey traces the Mormon-gentile conflict back to "the invasion of Gentile settlers and the forays of rustlers."

¹⁷Grey wrote to his literary agent near the beginning of the series of Mormon novels that "I am feeling fresh and full, and want to write. But I haven't any great desire to write another lion story. . . . I'd much rather write a big novel, and fill it with the desert, the Mormons, and their relations" (as cited in Kenneth W. Scott, in "The Heritage of the Desert: Zane Grey Discovers the West," *Markham Review* 2[February 1970]:11).

¹⁸It is in the possession of Zane Grey, Inc., Pasadena, California.

¹⁹Grey, *The Rainbow Trail*, pp. 115-16.

strange combination of Christianity, pantheism, Deism, Oriental religions, and evolutionism.” Eventually, Wheeler adds, Grey included other elements as well: “Indian, especially Navajo, nature worship; spiritualism, [Emile] Coue and his self-help, raise-yourself-by-your-own-bootstraps philosophy; psychology; Christian Science; and various other assorted mystical and practical ‘isms’ or ‘ologies.’” Wheeler also quotes a diary entry in which Grey sets forth the general nature of his creed: “The Religion which I would like to follow is embodied in the rule, ‘do unto others as you would have others do unto you.’ Be unselfish, give as you receive, let others live.”²⁰

In such a religion, creeds and ecclesiastical organizations are irrelevant or obstructive. Mormonism, with its elaborate theology and ecclesiastical hierarchy, seemed to Grey to be more of a hindrance than a help toward a vital religious life. In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, the only promising alternative to the vicious intolerance between Mormons and gentiles is found in the friendship between little Fay Larkin’s mother and Jane Withersteen. It is the only real meeting of the minds across the ecclesiastical barrier, and occurs because of the lack in both participants of a zealous sectarianism. When Withersteen agrees to take Fay and raise her in a Mormon home but without instruction in Mormon doctrine, Fay’s mother indicates that a genuine Mormon-gentile reconciliation has taken place: “Because you’re a Mormon I never felt close to you till now. I don’t know much about religion as religion, but your God and my God are the same.”²¹ When Lassiter, Withersteen, and Fay Larkin are isolated in the new Eden of Surprise Valley at the end of the novel, the family thus created—a gentile father, a Mormon mother, and a creedless child—symbolize Grey’s hope of reconciliation.²² In *The Rainbow Trail*, Fay’s life develops the symbolism even more. Nicknamed “The Sago Lily,” she flits about among the crags and crevasses as wild and surefooted as a deer—a truly transcendental child of nature.

²⁰Wheeler, “Zane Grey’s Impact on American Life and Letters,” p. 321. The diary entry is dated 9 September 1906.

²¹Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, p. 79.

²²My improvised terminology here is an attempt to approximate Grey’s thought rather than accepted Mormon usage, according to which both Lassiter and Larkin, as non-Mormons, would be called “gentiles.” I call Lassiter a “gentile” because, although Grey does not say so, his anti-Mormonism could have been partly rooted in a creed of his own, besides what the Mormons did to his sister. I call Fay Larkin a “non-Mormon” to emphasize her creedlessness, of which Grey makes a strong point.

Grey's creedless transcendentalism provides a key for explaining other things as well. His Mormon characters generally fit one of two types: the urban Mormons, who are generally dogmatic, authoritarian, polygamous, and unscrupulous; and the rural, transcendental Mormons, who live close to nature and are thus less interested in Mormon or any other theology and live apart from the Church hierarchy. Tull and Dyer of *Riders of the Purple Sage* fit the first group; August Naab of *The Heritage of the Desert* (in spite of his zealous polygamy) and the Beeman brothers of *The Man of the Forest* fit the second. To a certain degree, then, the community vs. isolation dichotomy does help to explain Grey's Mormon novels, but the division is among the Mormons themselves rather than between Mormon and gentile.

There is a temptation when criticizing popular literature to let melodrama obscure complexity. We tend to allow our experience with dime novels and other extremely formulaic literature to blind us to the possibilities of variation, intellectual subtlety, and literary complexity in all popular novels. Zane Grey's novels are no exception. Lassiter, as the prototype of more recent literary gunfighters, and Tull and Dyer, as obvious extensions of older gentile conceptions of Mormons, tempt us to see in them no more than manifestations of those stereotypes. But Grey, for all the shallowness of his understanding of Mormons and Mormonism, was no mindless dualist who saw community or isolation as the only possible alternatives. Instead, he was an imaginative writer who saw, even if he did not fully develop, a potentially great theme in the Mormon-gentile encounter. In his novels about the Mormons, he tried to explore, as thoroughly as his limited skill allowed, the literary possibilities in that theme. Thus it seems unfair, merely because he used a few Mormon villains, to try to force him into the nineteenth century tradition of anti-Mormon polemical writers.²³ Grey is perhaps better understood as standing, however ambiguously, at the beginning of a new tradition of objective, even sympathetic, writing about the Mormons that has culminated in the works of writers like Thomas F. O'Dea and Wallace Stegner.²⁴

²³That tradition is set forth in an earlier Arrington and Haupt article, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth Century American Literature," *Western Humanities Review* 22 (Summer 1968):243-60.

²⁴See Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); and Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1942), and *The Gathering of Zion* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).