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Not in Vain: The Inspiring Story of Ellis Shipp, Pioneer Woman
Doctor Susan Evans McCloud

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SUSAN EVANS McCLOUD. *Not in Vain: The Inspiring Story of Ellis Shipp, Pioneer Woman Doctor*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984. 209 pp. \$8.95.

Reviewed by Jessie L. Embry, director of the oral history program at the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University and executive secretary of the Mormon History Association.

I was pleased to discover a biography of Ellis Shipp published by Bookcraft. Many nineteenth-century Mormon women, like Dr. Shipp, played an important role in Utah history but have not been studied extensively. It was especially pleasing to see such a biography released by one of the largest publishers of Mormon materials.

Unfortunately, as I started reading, my enthusiasm vanished. This is not a first-rate biography but rather a composite of currently popular types in the Mormon market. First, it is simply, as the title suggests, an “inspiring story of Ellis Shipp.” It views Dr. Shipp in a vacuum, with no attempt to interpret her life in terms of her own experiences or the way she reacted to the world around her. Then, the flowery language, such as “so the youthful years passed for Ellis, colored by her own passion and poetry” (22), reads like some of the recent Mormon novels of love and romance. (I refer to them as Mormon harlequins because they have all the elements of a Harlequin Romance except that the love scenes are not as vivid.) The only difference

between these novels and *Not in Vain* is that Dr. Shipp was a historical figure, not just a product of the author's imagination. But like Keith and Ann Terry's books on Emma Smith and Eliza R. Snow, this is merely a dramatization of a woman's life, not a complete history. McCloud tells Dr. Shipp's story by inventing dialogue so that the story reads like a novel and by guessing how Shipp and the other characters felt when she has no sources to support her sentimental interpretations. Finally, *Not in Vain* reads like an amateur family history where the main goal is to glorify the ancestor. McCloud includes long quotes from Shipp's autobiography and journals as if she were afraid to leave out any word that flew from Dr. Shipp's golden pen. In the concluding chapter, she quotes extensively from Shipp's obituaries and funeral so that she will not miss any of Shipp's good qualities. In fact, the book reads so much like a family history that I kept checking to see if McCloud were related.

The dust cover claims that McCloud has done "meticulous research," but the footnotes do not support that claim. The only sources McCloud used were the personal writings of Shipp, published works about Utah women in medicine, and community histories. To me, "meticulous research" would be reading countless stake and ward Relief Society minutes to find out more about the nursing classes Shipp taught, examining the journals of women who took those courses and the diaries of women Dr. Shipp assisted, reviewing medical records, and interviewing family members and others who remembered Ellis Shipp. For example, if Shipp said she never lost a mother in childbirth, the researcher could have examined birth and death records to see if a mother ever died just after Dr. Shipp delivered her baby. The possible negative evidence gathered from such a search would be just as valuable as the positive evidence of how much the women appreciated her assistance.

The real damage done by such a book as this goes beyond the skimpy research, the ornate language, the undocumented statements that make *Not in Vain* more of a historical novel than a biography. The danger is that many Mormons will consider this a good biography, maybe even the last word on Ellis Shipp. But we still need a carefully researched and critically examined study of her life. Writing such a biography will not be easy, but I hope such a book will still be written. I hope, too, that a publisher like Bookcraft will recognize the difference and be willing to market it.