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## *Elect Ladies Janet Peterson and LaRene Gaunt*

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## Book Reviews

JANET PETERSON and LARENE GAUNT. *Elect Ladies*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1990. ix; 229 pp. Appendixes, notes, index. \$10.95.

Reviewed by Mary Stovall Richards, an associate professor of history, Brigham Young University.

Latter-day Saint women's history is finally coming into its own as a mature, sophisticated field. No longer satisfying are the staples of much of the "first wave" of this history—vignettes about the first Latter-day Saint woman to attend medical school or to be invited to the White House, often written to prove that Latter-day Saint women were "there, too." As John Hope Franklin remarked to me years ago about Afro-American history, "Black history will finally have come of age when it no longer feels it necessary to chronicle the first black person to have gone ice fishing."

An equivalent maturation is occurring in the field of Latter-day Saint women's history. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Jessie Embry, Jill Mulvay Derr, Lavina Fielding Anderson, Valeen Tippetts Avery, and Linda King Newell, among others, refuse to settle for simplistic stories stressing only women's presence. Women are no longer the objects of history but the subjects—powerful actors on the historical stage, not passive creatures at the mercy of circumstance. The women who emerge from the pages of these authors' histories are often maddeningly complex, defying any attempt to sum up their lives as faith-promoting parables which support worthy lessons for the gospel or contemporary feminism.

Thus *Elect Ladies*, by Janet Peterson and LaRene Gaunt, is disappointing because expectations for what it *could* have been are so high. It is, in many ways, an anachronism. Fifteen or even ten years ago it might have been hailed as pathbreaking simply for making available biographies of the Relief Society presidents, but now that the novelty of writing about the history of women has long worn off, we are demanding that such work not only exist but be done well. The political correctness of a subject cannot atone for poor scholarship.

This book, unfortunately, falls far short as serious history. Consisting of a competently written, short biography (fifteen to twenty pages) on each general president of the Relief Society from Emma Smith to Barbara Winder, *Elect Ladies* assumes the lineaments of scholarship but not the substance. Neither Peterson nor Gaunt is a trained historian, even at the undergraduate level, and their inexperience is apparent. While we should applaud their undertaking such a mammoth task and emerging with some pleasant sketches of the lives of the Relief Society presidents, serious historians will not only find little new here, but will also be annoyed by Peterson and Gaunt's historical errors and generous borrowing from others' work without full acknowledgment. Historians will also be distressed by many of the authors' interpretations of the more sensitive aspects of Church history.

The errors range from the mundane—assuming West Virginia existed in 1822, believing Church promotional literature that the *Woman's Exponent* was the second national women's magazine, and misspelling Sonia Johnson's name (62, 87, 172)—to the more serious. The authors misunderstand the intent of the Fourteenth Amendment and the resultant division in the woman's suffrage movement over support for that amendment, which defined citizenship and indirectly awarded black men the franchise but made no provision for women, either black or white. The formation in 1869 of the National Woman Suffrage Association by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton thus represented not a "rapidly gather[ing] momentum" for suffrage (86) but a fracturing of the movement as Anthony and Stanton, insisting that women be included, split from the more conservative Lucy Stone and Henry Ward Beecher, who subscribed to the "half a loaf" philosophy and supported the amendment even though women were omitted.

A more general concern arises from the authors' misunderstanding that proper scholarly acknowledgment is necessary for all ideas that are not their own, not just the direct quotations for which their footnotes are primarily reserved. Whole pages of exposition pass with nary a note to recognize those upon whose insights the authors are relying. The failure to cite completely leaves the general reader with an insufficient appreciation of the debt Peterson and Gaunt owe the work of other historians, particularly that of Maureen Beecher and Carol Madsen, whose analyses of Eliza R. Snow and Emmeline B. Wells, respectively, form much of this book's chapters on these women, which, ironically, are the strongest in the work.

Errors of fact and interpretation emerge in the first chapter on Emma Smith. Evidently written without reference to the Newell and Avery biography or to any of the numerous articles on Emma,

the chapter suffers from the authors' unwillingness to confront history boldly when that history might offend contemporary sensibilities. For example, after quoting several items from the 1842 Relief Society minutes to document the beginnings of that organization, Peterson and Gaunt inexplicably revert to an inaccurate secondary source for Joseph's bestowal of authority on the Relief Society. Thus the key is not turned "to you," as the minutes state, but turned "in your behalf" (4). Needless to say, the relationship between the temple endowment in Nauvoo and the bestowal of priesthood is not even mentioned. The authors are effective at recreating Emma's endurance through trials so long as those trials are conventionally acceptable. Their squeamishness about polygamy, however, causes them to gloss over the poignant irony of Nauvoo, since Joseph's involvement became the source of much of Emma's agony both in her personal life and with the Relief Society as she increasingly used the Relief Society as a vehicle to fight plural marriage. According to Peterson and Gaunt's work, polygamy had no role in either the demise of the Relief Society in Nauvoo or its twenty-year hiatus.

Similar problems plague the discussion of the life of Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs Smith Young, who was sealed to Joseph and then to Brigham while civilly married to Henry Jacobs. To their credit, the authors address this delicate issue, but their unwillingness to be forthright (even in a footnote) about early polyandry only leaves the uninformed reader deeply puzzled about the reasons for the practice. Further, their circumlocution produced the effect of maligning Henry Jacobs, who appears to have deserted his family after leaving on a mission during the trek west. Peterson and Gaunt fail to reveal that Brigham sent Henry away shortly after Brigham's marriage to Zina and that Henry, although rejected, continued to profess his love in letters to his wife.

An even more wrenching disjointedness emerges from the account of Amy Brown Lyman's life. Written in a tone of almost relentless cheerfulness, the chapter describes Amy as a paragon of industry, faith, and stoicism, and her marriage to Richard Lyman as one of unalloyed happiness. Then with no warning or context, the reader is told that in 1843 Richard, an Apostle, was excommunicated (141). Obviously, all was *not* well in the Lyman household. Such Pollyannaism does a disservice not only to the Lymans, but also to all the book's readers who faithfully (if naïvely) believe its pronouncements on the achievement of mortal perfection and then berate themselves for not reaching that same pinnacle.

Perhaps nowhere is this disjuncture between "pretty history" and the full story of contemporary events more apparent than in the

recounting of Barbara Smith's administration. Burdened with controversies, including the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), the International Women's Year (IWY) in 1977, and the excommunication of Sonia Johnson, her presidency was a time of ferment and crisis for many women in the Church. Yet, Peterson and Gaunt describe the building of the Nauvoo Monument to Women as one of Barbara Smith's greatest achievements. The irony is unintended and tragic; at a time when women desperately needed substantive help to cope with and transcend their pain, they were offered instead lifeless replications of perfect womanhood as the embodiment of the ideal to which they should strive. Nor do the authors mention the Church's mobilization of ward and stake Relief Societies to campaign against the ERA or even hint at the controversy surrounding the IWY in Utah.

One is tempted to conjecture that Peterson and Gaunt did not realize that by choosing to write about the presidents of the Relief Society they would inevitably be confronted with many sticky issues—not only polygamy, but also the role of family connections in callings to prominent Church office, the reduction of the power and autonomy of the Relief Society in the twentieth century, and the Church's largely negative reaction to the revival of feminism in the 1960s and 70s. To authors or a publisher anxious to avoid controversy, such a history is a mine field; to the readers of their efforts, however, the result is less than explosive.