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The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays
by Davis Bitton

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Davis Bitton is one of Mormonism's most influential teachers and writers. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Bitton was at the center of arguably the most progressive period of Mormon historical scholarship in the twentieth century. Most of the nine essays in this collection come from this remarkable era. All the essays have been updated to encompass some of the subsequent scholarship and include ample bibliographies.

These essays reflect a particular point of view that is akin to "the new social history" and "the new urban history," which refocus historical inquiry from society's central institutions and elite individuals to ordinary folks and their daily activities and associations. Thus Bitton writes about Brigham Young Jr., not his illustrious father; about the preservation and dissemination of Mormon history in popular pageants and community celebrations, not in institutional or academic scholarship; and about the poetic legacy of member Charles Lowell Walker, not that of Elder Orson F. Whitney.

These "new" histories have also drawn heavily from the social sciences and humanistic disciplines that are concerned as much with articulating individual cultural perspectives as with establishing objective facts. Thus Bitton does not analyze the historical origins and sociological functions of polygamy. Rather, he analyzes some nineteenth-century polemic on plural marriage in an effort to explain why so many good people believed so deeply in a practice that ran counter to mainstream American values. Likewise, Bitton addresses Utah Mormonism's first indigenous generation, not to determine whether they were good or bad or the degree of their civility, but rather to determine how and why they were perceived so radically differently by various groups. Bitton also reviews the B. H. Roberts case, not to prove or disprove Roberts' worthiness to join the U.S. House of Representatives, but rather to reveal the subtle and complex assumptions central to the arguments in this controversy.

Another dominant theme in Bitton's studies is human adaptation to changing environments and circumstances. In these essays, Bitton suggests that Mormons adapt when the discontinuity between experience and expectation threatens physical survival or group or individual identity, or places deeply held beliefs in direct and seemingly unalterable contradiction. From this perspective, we see early Utah Mormons meeting the challenge of raising children in a demanding frontier environment, abandoning and later repudiating polygamy for the sake of peaceful coexistence with Victorian America, adjusting social dance practices to avoid alienating the rising generation, and inevitably selecting marginalization over confrontation in a secular, national political arena.

In the end, Bitton sees Mormons as sharing a great deal with the rest of humanity—being good-hearted and hardworking and trying to fulfill basic human needs for existence, companionship, and meaning in life. He sees them facing personal, social, and natural limitations at every turn and needing a good dose of humor and compassion.

Bitton's Mormons are also thoroughgoing Americans—but Americans of a particular and peculiar stripe. This distinctiveness makes these people interesting to study and fascinating to know. Reading these essays, one senses that Bitton is not only a historian of the first rank, but also a lifelong explorer of the human condition. His expeditions have yielded much insight—which is especially remarkable since the insights are revealed by a relatively small religious group in the American West whose influence and intrigue on the national scene have been disproportionate to the size of the group.

Some critics might respond to all of this by exclaiming, “So, tell me something I don't already know!” The temptation to take for granted the subtle insights of these essays is to underappreciate their influence among the community of scholars of Mormonism in the years since they first appeared. Those familiar with the transformation of Mormon historiography in the 1970s and 1980s cannot forget the difference Bitton made, in both scholarly and personal terms. That difference is amply woven throughout these essays.

To the question of relevance, however, another remark would likely sound more reasonable to Bitton himself. If the insights of these studies seem close to the lessons of daily life, he might simply respond, “Eureka!” Revealing the essence of life as lived by ordinary Latter-day Saints of the past is a central thrust of Bitton’s intellectual explorations. That the conclusions may seem self-evident is a credit to the success of his effort.

To those who may see in these essays much that seems ordinary, I challenge them to list the prior historical scholarship on Mormon adolescence, literary traditions, leisure activities, political rhetoric, community celebrations, and public ritual. Research like Bitton’s breaks new ground in Mormon studies by demonstrating the value of applying to the Mormon past new approaches that have proven crucial to the understanding and appreciation of other times, places, and peoples. Contemporary students of Mormonism could do worse than pursue and refine such fruitful avenues of inquiry. One may quibble with Bitton on the relevance of some pieces of evidence, the accuracy of certain conclusions, or with the publisher on the selection of a particular essay. It is incontrovertible, however, that Bitton has left an enviable intellectual legacy to students of Mormonism. This volume is a fitting tribute to that contribution.