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The Lion of the Lord: Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter

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Book Reviews


Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander, Lemuel Hardison Redd Jr. Professor of Western American History at Brigham Young University.

In any collection of essays, many readers will undoubtedly find some more useful than others. In determining the usefulness of most essays, I generally ask myself what new interpretive insights they offer. Ordinarily, I am less interested in essays that review or add detail to well-known topics or interpretations than in those that offer new insights, especially new interpretive insights. Moreover, I find particularly useful those that provide a corrective to the conventional wisdom.

Using that criteria, I found four essays in this collection most worthwhile: Jill Mulvay Derr’s “Brigham Young and the Awakening of Mormon Women in the 1870s” (312–37); William G. Hartley’s “Brigham Young and Priesthood Work at the General and Local Levels” (338–70); David J. Whittaker’s “Brigham Young and the Missionary Enterprise” (85–106); and Gail Geo. Holmes’s “A Prophet Who Followed, Fulfilled, and Magnified: Brigham Young in Iowa and Nebraska” (128–53).

Although Derr’s essay appeared in an earlier version in *BYU Studies* in 1978, it is significant because it challenges the conventional wisdom on the role of women in nineteenth-century Mormon society. The essay reconciles the apparent contradictions between the nineteenth-century system of relegating women to second-class status, American society’s tendency to view Mormon polygamy as degrading to women, and Brigham Young’s encouragement of women to acquire marketable skills. In the essay, Derr
argues, rightly I believe, that although Brigham Young was no modern feminist, he had considerable respect for women and their intellect and skills. Unlike many nineteenth-century men, he refused to relegate them solely to the roles of running households, caring for husbands, and nurturing children.

Hartley’s essay builds on his previous work, particularly his essay on the 1877 priesthood reorganization. This essay covers the full range of organizational activities at the general church, stake, and ward levels during Brigham Young’s presidency. It offers a needed corrective to the lens of pervasive presentism through which many members tend to view earlier Church organization and practice. He shows, for instance, that the seeds of currently accepted stake and ward organization and functions date from relatively late in President Young’s administration; the general practice of ordaining young men to successive offices in the Aaronic Priesthood did not begin until after Brigham’s death; men were frequently called to move from one settlement to another to serve as bishops or stake presidents; and during the early years of President Young’s administration half of the Apostles lived outside Salt Lake City and many served as stake presidents.

Whittaker explores the ten missions that Brigham served prior to the death of Joseph Smith in June 1844 and then examines missionary work during his service as Church president. Brigham viewed missionary work as a tool to facilitate the gathering of the Saints to the Great Basin. Most significantly, the missionary force during Brigham Young’s presidency was very small, averaging fewer than 80 missionaries in the field per year. Even in the peak year of 1869, only 222 missionaries served. Although missionaries served then for much longer than the present eighteen months to two years, an average of approximately 0.1 percent of the Church membership served on missions at any one time. Currently nearly 0.6 percent of Church members are serving in the mission field.

Whittaker considers the significance of missionary labor as an aspect of the gathering and of the larger pattern of emigration to and colonization of the American West. He does not, however, consider the significance of missionary work for our understanding of the role of women in Utah society. As most readers know, the conventional wisdom has it that because of the large number
of men serving on missions, women had to take a more active role in supporting families than is now necessary. Since, however, an average of only about eighty men served at any time in the mission field, the emphasis, noted by Derr, on educating women for professions takes on a decidedly different meaning. Instead of stemming from the necessity of work to support families in the absence of missionary husbands, Brigham Young’s admonitions for women to train for and participate in the marketplace derived from his perception of their role in building the kingdom.

Holmes’s essay ought to dispel the widespread impression that still persists (but ought to have been laid to rest in 1987 with the publication of Richard Bennett’s Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852) that Mormon pioneers concentrated only at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and Council Bluffs (Kanesville), Iowa. Holmes offers a short but valuable discussion of the geographic range of Mormon settlements on both sides of the Missouri, together with the location of various other Native American and Euro-American communities and business enterprises.

Because many of the readers of BYU Studies may not be as familiar with the literature as many scholars, most will find the other essays in this volume useful and informative as well. To help such readers, the following survey comments on the remaining essays.

Larry C. Porter’s “Whitingham, Vermont: Birthplace of Brigham Young—Prophet, Colonizer, Statesman” (1–19) is most valuable in adding detail to our information on the family of John Young, Brigham Young’s father. The essay outlines the various residences of the family and locates the probable sites of family homes in Whitingham through the use of local records and histories, oral history interviews, and other documents.

Ronald K. Esplin’s “Conversion and Transformation: Brigham Young’s New York Roots and the Search for Bible Religion” (20–53) considers Brigham Young’s early life and upbringing, the family’s religious environment, his local reputation and professions, his conversion to Mormonism, and his early missionary and other Church activities until the death of his first wife, Miriam Works, in 1832. The essay’s most important contribution is to relate Brigham’s early life and conversion to the biblical culture of New England and New York.
Esplin’s “Brigham Young and the Transformation of the ‘First’ Quorum of the Twelve” (54-84) discusses the organization of the Quorum of the Twelve, Thomas Marsh’s presidency and disaffection, Brigham Young’s call as President of the Quorum, and the central role of the mission to Great Britain in the emergence of the Twelve as a leading quorum in the Church. Drawing on his wide-ranging research on Brigham Young, Esplin helps us understand the important role that Brigham played in transforming the Twelve from a local council to one of the leading quorums of the Church.

Milton V. Backman Jr.’s “‘The Keys are Right Here’: Succession in the Presidency” (107-27) retells the story of the early role of the Twelve, their succession to the Church leadership after the death of Joseph Smith, and the eventual reorganization of the First Presidency in 1847. The essay provides an excellent overview of the role of the Twelve in responding to the vicissitudes of Church leadership following the martyrdom of Joseph Smith.

Susan Easton Black’s “The Mormon Battalion: Religious Authority Clashed with Military Leadership” (154-71) offers additional insight into the conflicts between the Mormons and some of the army officers. Drawing on her larger and extremely valuable biographical studies, Black presents additional biographical information on the various characters in the conflict. The essay also emphasizes Brigham Young’s role as religious leader behind the Mormon Battalion.

Dale F. Beecher’s “Colonizer of the West” (172-208) provides an outline of the settlement process used by the Latter-day Saints. One of Beecher’s most valuable contributions is a twenty-eight-page listing of colonies founded by Latter-day Saints between 1846 and 1930. Beecher, however, undoubtedly claims too much influence for the Mormons. Contrary to his assertions, Congress did not ratify the Mormon land system—rather, Mormons had to purchase or homestead land under federal laws just as other settlers; moreover, there is little evidence that the Mormons actually influenced the development of the national forest system. In addition, as Walter Prescott Webb, Robert Dunbar, Donald Pisani and others have shown, irrigation institutions similar to those in Utah also developed in other western territories and states.

Richard L. Jensen’s “Brigham Young and the Gathering to Zion” (209-26) offers an overview of the migration of Latter-day
Saints as they sought to build Zion. It is especially valuable as a discussion of the role of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund.

Richard O. Cowan’s “Brigham Young: Builder of Temples” (227-43) discusses Young’s work in constructing and operating temples. Beginning with the Kirtland Temple, Brigham Young had some association with all the temples constructed in the nineteenth century. Although the Manti and Logan Temples were not completed until after his death, he even worked on the initial planning of the two edifices.

Paul H. Peterson’s “Brigham Young and the Mormon Reformation” (244-61) builds on his doctoral dissertation and on research by Gustive Larson, Howard Searle, Michael Orme, Gene Sessions, and this reviewer to provide a concise overview of the Reformation of 1856-57. The Reformation was undoubtedly one of the most significant events of the 1850s. Peterson points out that, although Jedediah Grant is generally credited with starting the Reformation, Brigham Young actually envisioned the movement.

John J Stewart’s “The Railroad Builder” (262-90) reviews Brigham Young’s role in the planning and construction of railroads. Contrary to the arguments of a number of anti-Mormons, Brigham favored the construction of the transcontinental railroad. He also promoted and facilitated the building of branch lines throughout northern and central Utah.

Leonard J. Arrington’s “Brigham Young and the Great Basin Economy” (291-311) draws on a lifetime of research and writing to provide a concise overview of the Mormon role in building an economic system in the Intermountain West. Young expected to refashion the earth “to make it like the Garden of Eden” (291). Arrington’s essay recounts the methods used in an attempt to achieve that objective.

John W. Welch and John Wm. Maddox’s “Reflections on the Teachings of Brigham Young” (371-441) offers a valuable and comprehensive fifty-three-page index to 734 Brigham Young sermons. The authors adopt a view that contrasts with those of John A. Widtsoe, Eugene E. Campbell, and Hugh W. Nibley on the central themes of Brigham Young’s discourses. They recognize that Widtsoe, Nibley, and Campbell offer idiosyncratic readings of Brigham’s talks. Moreover, “aware of the limitation” of any effort of selection, they have, in an effort “to identify the strongest reflexes in his
typical teaching” (383), attempted to classify the main themes in each speech. Twenty-eight topics, such as God (42), Joseph Smith (32), knowledge (31), plural marriage (21), and Adam and Eve (16), appear in fifteen or more speeches; twenty-seven further topics, such as prayer (13), women (12), resurrection (12), and freedom (9), appear between nine and thirteen times; with another forty-three between five and eight times.

The pitfalls in the path of any such effort become evident, however, when we review some of their selections. The category “His other common themes (5 to 8 entries)” excludes Brigham Young’s Adam-God theory (385). Nevertheless, the “Subject Index of Discourses of Brigham Young” under Adam lists at least eight examples (390) that fit in that category, though the list minimizes this number by subdividing the entries. What this seems to mean is that Brigham spoke more frequently on Adam-God than he did on several subjects including the Bible (5), death (5), and family (5), none of which are subdivided in the list (385). In this connection, the authors seem a bit too hard on Gene Campbell when they argue that his selection consists of “obscure points that receive little or no emphasis today or details that tend to be more sensational than substantial” (378). From my admittedly biased point of view, it seems obvious that if we are to understand people in times past, however difficult it may be, we ought to try to avoid the imposition of a presentist (“emphasis today,” 378) interpretation on their works. Latter-day Saints reject the Adam-God theory today as heresy, but as Campbell understood, Brigham Young considered it significant.

In summary, I would recommend this collection especially for the essays by Derr, Hartley, Whittaker, and Holmes. The other essays are interesting and informative, and many readers will undoubtedly find them useful as well.

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