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Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons
Jan Shippo

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Book Reviews

JAN SHIPPS. *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. xiii; 400 pp. Notes, index. \$34.95.

Reviewed by Leslee Thorne-Murphy

Jan Shipps's newest contribution to Mormon history, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons*, is a collection of essays that gives us a retrospective not only of her work as a historian, but also of her personal experience as a friendly observer of the Saints. The most innovative aspect of the book is the parallel she draws between her own growth and that of the Church during the past forty years. Her journey from "gentile" to "sojourner," she reasons, has occurred at a time when the Church itself has been expanding from an intermountain-based enclave to a global entity.

Shipps's personal observations combined with her scholarly essays give her collection a multi-layered approach. At one level, *Sojourner* is a straightforward collection of essays written at different times throughout her career. The essays she chose were composed over the course of two and a half decades and represent a wide range of genres and intended audiences.

The second level of her book consists of autobiographical reflections on her time and work with Mormons and Mormonism. She has not, however, written a memoir of her work in Mormon history along the lines of Leonard Arrington's *Adventures of a Church Historian*.¹ Rather, she has organized her work thematically in five sections, each of which has an introduction outlining the topic and giving autobiographical details about when, why, and how she wrote each essay. In addition, a few of the essays are autobiographical or contain autobiographical elements. Perhaps most important to this autobiographical level are her general introduction and her epilogue. The general introduction outlines her experience and rationale for compiling the collection, and the epilogue gives a delightful account of her introduction to Mormonism, including the adventurous drive she and her husband took when moving to Utah in the first car either had ever owned or driven.

This concluding travel story reflects the theme of the entire collection. From her earliest exposure to and curiosity about the Mormon world to her current emeritus status, Shipps explains, she has traveled along with the Saints as the Church has made its own journey. The third level of her book, then, is metaphorical and analytical. She relates the changes that have come about in the Church to her scholarly work and to her own personal

experience. This is the thematic aspect of the book that compels Shipps to name herself a “sojourner,” a fellow traveler with the Saints who has experienced dramatic as well as nearly imperceptible changes along with members of the Church. This comparison of her own work with the Church’s journey during the last forty years is at once the most innovative and yet the most elusive aspect of the book. This element often functions in the background, coming forward upon occasion when Shipps explicitly outlines her project in the introduction, when she includes essays that specifically address changes in the Church over the past few decades, or when she wraps up her thoughts in the epilogue. The greatest strength of this metaphorical aspect is in offering us a glimpse into how Shipps reads her work in retrospect and where her work is heading from here.

With this multilayered approach Shipps certainly has gone beyond the requirements of compiling a collection of essays. She presents us with a work that represents her current thinking as a historian alongside her past scholarly work and her autobiographical material. Even if she had not gone to these extra lengths, however, the collection would be valuable solely for the essays it contains. Several of these essays are previously unpublished; those published previously, as she explains, appeared in venues that scholars of Mormon history would not normally consult.

The essays were written for audiences as varied as history buffs, attendees of Western History Association conferences, and the readership of the *Wilson Quarterly*. The essays also vary in genre; Shipps has included book reviews, narrative histories, statistical analyses, autobiographical essays, and even encyclopedia entries. This variety naturally indicates that some are short and rather informal while others show all the scholarly rigor Shipps is well able to muster. In this respect, her section introductions serve a valuable purpose in providing her explanation of each essay’s original audience and purpose, as well as her rationale for combining essays that may appear disparate in theme, tone, and genre.

Thus the five sections of *Sojourner* represent the wide range of Shipps’s academic work. Although she could have presented the essays chronologically by composition date to enhance the autobiographical and metaphorical elements, her decision to present the essays thematically gives the collection much more order and cohesion.

Part I, “Studies in Perception,” presents essays discussing how Mormons and non-Mormons perceive each other. An article previously circulated as an unpublished manuscript forms the first essay of this section. Entitled “From Satyr to Saint: American Perceptions of the Mormons, 1860–1960,” it studies attitudes toward Mormons as represented in print culture. Part II, “History, Historiography, and Writing about Religious History,” explores how history is both written and received. This section

includes, among other essays, a brief bibliography of Mormon history, a narrative analysis of BYU's decision not to invite Laurel Thatcher Ulrich to speak at its women's conference in 1992, and typically insightful comments on the academic community's response to John Brooke's *Refiner's Fire*. Part III, "Putting Religion at the Heart of Mormon History and History at the Heart of Mormonism," examines the role of history within the Church as well as discussing changes in Mormonism. Part IV, "Deciphering, Explicating, Clarifying: Exercising an Inside-Outsider's Informal Calling," presents two examples of how Shipps explains Mormon history and doctrine to non-Mormons. Part V, "How My Mind Was Changed and My Understanding Amplified," is self-avowedly the most personal section of the collection. In it she reprints her conclusions on whether Mormonism is Christian and also offers a reflection on how she mourned over the excommunication of one of her many Mormon friends and colleagues, Lavina Fielding Anderson.

These five sections demonstrate why, after all the honorary titles suggested for Shipps's position in the field of Mormon history (den mother, celebrated Mormon watcher, and so on), she has settled on a title for herself. By showing us her personal growth over forty years among members of the Church, Shipps makes it clear that she is not merely the "inside-outsider" of several years ago. She is now a fellow "sojourner" with the Saints.

In its rich variety and depth of insight, this collection will enhance the library of all those interested in Mormon history. Those familiar with Shipps will find a substantial sampling of the work that has shaped the writing of Mormon history over the past two and a half decades, and those new to her work will discover her remarkable ability to write accurately and clearly about her subject.

Although *Sojourner* is a retrospective, Shipps has not finished writing about the Saints: she has announced that the project currently occupying her time is a history of the Church since World War II, in which she will expand her exploration of the dramatic changes the Church has experienced during the past half-century. It promises to be full of the same insight and careful investigation that has always been a hallmark of her work.

I, for one, couldn't be happier that she will continue to sojourn with us.

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JAN SHIPPS. *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. xiii; 400 pp. Notes, index. \$34.95.

Reviewed by Randall Balmer

For more than four decades Jan Shipps, now *professor emerita* at Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis, has been the most reliable source for non-Mormons about Mormonism. Whenever journalists or academics go searching for an explanation of Latter-day Saint theology or try to deconstruct the latest pronouncement coming out of Salt Lake City or understand some cultural or political development in Utah, we call Jan for the inside scoop because she knows the ins and outs, the nooks and crannies, of Mormondom. Chances are very good that she knows the principals as well, and she can leaven her explanation with some pithy aside that provides invaluable insight into one of the most fascinating—and confounding—movements in all of American religious history.

On the face of it, Jan Shipps is an unlikely insider to the machinations of Mormonism. She is devoutly and resolutely Methodist, not Mormon, and she has the unprepossessing demeanor of somebody's favorite aunt or grandmother, rather than the attitude of a single-minded and relentless sleuth that one might expect from someone who has gained so much inside information about the workings of the Latter-day Saints. But looks can be deceiving, of course, and those who underestimate Shipps do so at their own peril. Her *modus operandi* is more Columbo than James Bond, but she is an excellent historian, as *Sojourner in the Promised Land* demonstrates.

This delightful book contains some of her best work over the past forty years, but it also offers occasional, usually offhand, insight into the author's remarkable life (including where she acquired her storied driving skills). Jo Ann Barnett was born and reared in Alabama and took the nickname Jan as a sixteen-year-old when she entered the Alabama College for Women (now Montebello University) in 1946 because so many other students were named Jo Ann (we learn this from a footnote). Her first exposure to Mormonism came when she and her husband, Tony Shipps, moved from Detroit to Logan, Utah, where he became a librarian at Utah State University. Jan's curiosity was so piqued by this alien people—she thought of Logan as a “twilight zone”—that she determined to study the Latter-day Saints further, earning her Ph.D. from the University of Colorado in 1965. That same year the Mormon History Association was formed by a distinguished group of Mormon scholars and “at least one prominent non-Mormon historian,” Shipps (3).

Thus was launched a remarkable career, the tracings of which appear in this collection. Shipps tries to account for why Mormons have been so conspicuously absent from histories of the American West, and she recalls, almost wistfully, the days of Camelot when the Church opened its archives to scholars, both Mormons and non-Mormons, under the stewardship of Leonard Arrington. One of her best essays, “From Satyr to Saint,” based on prodigious research, shows how the public perception of Mormonism evolved from that of a dangerous cult into a kind of paragon of American goodness and righteousness. By the 1960s, she concludes, “it seemed to many of the nation’s citizens that Mormons were exemplary figures. As the mountain curtain turned into a scrim, observers were able to see that the Saints were truly saints; and the satyrs were in the world outside” (73).

Shipps records beautifully how The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refashioned itself from an enclave into a worldwide entity, noting that, in the nomenclature of the church, she herself started out as a *Gentile* historian and, “without changing my religious status in the slightest, I became a *non-Mormon* historian who studies Latter-day Saints” (40). This new openness on the part of the church—including, not incidentally, the decision to ordain men of color—transformed what it means to be a Mormon “from peoplehood to church membership” (41), and this transformation should ensure that Mormons will find their place in the historiography of the American West.

Shipps predicts, however, that such inclusion will come at a cost. As the media gain a fuller understanding of the Latter-day Saints, as it sets aside the two-dimensional caricatures of the past, the church will come under more scrutiny. The 1993 excommunications of the September Six or Brigham Young University’s treatment of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the author suggests, provide a case in point. If the church leadership expected that these actions would be treated simply as an internal matter, they were mistaken. The press took notice, as did the academy.

Sojourner in the Promised Land is full of insights on the Latter-day Saints, on religious studies, and on the writing of religious history. These observations are useful to historians generally, but they have particular application to writing Mormon history. Shipps recognizes that insiders—in any tradition—have an advantage, “for they speak the language and can recognize nuances easily missed by scholars unfamiliar with a denominational idiom,” but any worthwhile account “requires insiders to become ‘outside-insiders,’ who know their denominations intimately but are willing to develop the ability to see them from the disinterested perspective of the outside” (187). An insider, she believes, needs “somehow to bracket and suspend judgment about a faith community’s truth claims” in order to write responsibly: “A willing suspension of belief (or disbelief) makes it less

likely that what a historian writes will be confused with efforts at faith promotion or exposé” (188).

It is precisely this approach that has characterized Jan Shipps’s own work throughout the decades, and this is what makes it so valuable. Shipps has been willing to bracket Mormon truth claims and to suspend her own belief—or disbelief—without being either congratulatory or censorious. The result has been a fascinating “inside-outsider” look at Mormonism. Through books, articles, interviews, and conversation, she has translated the theology, culture, and mores of the Latter-day Saints to those of us outside the movement, but she has also held up a mirror to Mormons so they have a better understanding of themselves.

As Shipps is quick to point out, her pilgrimage among the Mormons has transformed her, even though she remains a Methodist (much to the confusion and the consternation of some church leaders). But she in turn has also, almost single-handedly, transformed the entire field of Mormon studies, adding new legitimacy to the field, encouraging younger scholars, and admonishing Mormons themselves to greater care in their scholarly pursuits.

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