



9-1-2005

Val D. Rust *Radical Origins: Early Mormon Converts and Their Colonial Ancestors*

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Recommended Citation

Pulsipher, Jenny Hale (2005) "Val D. Rust *Radical Origins: Early Mormon Converts and Their Colonial Ancestors*," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 44 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol44/iss3/11>

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Val D. Rust. *Radical Origins:  
Early Mormon Converts and Their Colonial Ancestors.*

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004

Jenny Hale Pulsipher

In *Radical Origins*, Val D. Rust has taken on the ambitious task of proving not just the common wisdom that New England ancestry looms large in the backgrounds of early Latter-day Saint converts, but that a uniquely radical slice of that region yielded the largest group of ancestors of LDS converts and predisposed their descendants to accept the similarly radical beliefs of the LDS Church. He has opened up an avenue of exploration that is well worth pursuing, and his work is likely to remain significant for years to come. That said, I believe that there is much that remains to be done to make Rust's argument more persuasive. I will list a number of my reservations.<sup>1</sup> My hope is not to downplay the importance of Rust's work, but to suggest ways that either he or other scholars could dig deeper to make the case more convincing.

**The Drifting Definition.** Rust is most interested in the groups he defines as the "radical fringe," those he believes were the spiritual as well as biological ancestors of early Mormon converts. According to Rust, the radical fringe believed that Christ's gospel would be restored through divine intervention, that all people held a "divine spark," that God still revealed truth to mankind, and that he blessed people with spiritual gifts (33). Rust contrasts this radical fringe with the more traditional Puritans and notes that the radicals yielded significantly more ancestors of LDS converts. While Rust does show that some ancestors of LDS converts, such as Roger Williams and some of the Gortonists, fit his radical fringe definition (33), in several places in the book the definition expands to draw in fairly traditional groups—including Puritans—who could be considered radical only if compared to their fellow countrymen back in England. For example, Rust counts Rowley among the Essex County, Massachusetts, towns yielding large numbers of ancestors of LDS converts—twenty-five of the fifty-nine original heads of household. While he rightly acknowledges that Rowley was "a conventional Puritan town and congregation," he also

calls it radical, one of the many “towns . . . made up of radical religious groups that had sailed as a body across the Atlantic” (30–32). Thus, two definitions of radical seem to have emerged here: those more radical than the Puritans, and those more radical than the Anglicans. Rowley certainly fits the latter definition, but not the former. Even Plymouth, which Rust points out had a larger number of ancestors of LDS converts than any other colony, is hard to characterize as radical. It grew more like Puritan Massachusetts over time, and even early on its leaders and congregations ejected radicals, including both Roger Williams and Samuel Gorton.<sup>2</sup> Because of this definition drift, I was not persuaded that the reason ancestors of LDS converts hailed from certain New England locales (such as Essex County) rather than others (such as Boston) was religious radicalism. More precision in either defining “radicalism” or selecting examples would strengthen the argument of this book.

**The Inexact Example.** The task Rust has set for himself would daunt even the most senior of historians. He is characterizing a vast array of people and places and is bound to offend the sensibilities of those with deep, rather than broad, knowledge of some of these persons and locales. Respected historians have treaded this thin ice before—David Hackett Fischer’s *Albion’s Seed* is a prime example—so Rust is in good company if he gets a little wet.<sup>3</sup> One inexact example that caught the eye of this historian was Rust’s saying that Maine “cultivated mainstream Puritan sentiments and practices, including a spirit against the ‘wild fanaticism’ of those who did not bow to its authority” (58–59). Possibly, Rust was predisposed to see Maine as mainstream because it yielded very few ancestors of LDS converts. But Maine was actually an exaggerated version of what Rust describes Essex County to be: a place where deep divisions between extremes of belief and political orientation fostered turmoil (56–57). The turmoil in Maine was unequaled in any other New England colony. Maine was both the site of growing numbers of Massachusetts Puritan immigrants and a haven for exiles from Puritan belief and authority.<sup>4</sup> So why didn’t Maine yield many ancestors of LDS converts? Might this case, and others, have more to do with exposure to the gospel than radical background? In other words, might Rowley residents have colonized towns in New York that LDS missionaries happened to visit, while Maine residents did not?

Another inexact example appears in Rust’s discussion of the Salem witchcraft crisis. Rust argues that LDS convert ancestors’ participation as accused or accusers indicated their religious radicalism—their belief, contrary to “mainstream” Puritanism, in access to unseen powers (130, 139). In actuality, it is hard to find anyone in seventeenth-century Massachusetts

who did *not* believe in witches. Some—very few—questioned the magistrates’ handling of the crisis, but almost everyone agreed that the devil was at work in Massachusetts. Belief in witches was the norm, not a manifestation of radical thought.<sup>5</sup>

**Proximity as Proof.** Rust gives a number of examples of LDS converts’ ancestors who lived in towns or families he defines as radical. He argues that their presence in those towns or in families—their “proximity”—suggests their agreement with the dominant ideology. However, in several cases that argument is difficult to sustain. For instance, Rust notes several ancestors of LDS converts who lived in such radical towns as Exeter, New Hampshire, or the Baptist haven of Swansea, Massachusetts. However, he also notes that these ancestors were indentured servants—people who would have had no choice about what town to live in or, possibly, whether to come to New England at all (48, 93). In another instance, Rust notes that Susanne Hutchinson, daughter of the radical Antinomian Anne Hutchinson, was an ancestor of LDS converts. However, Susanne was a very young child at the time the rest of her family was killed in an Indian attack on Long Island, and following the death of her family she was raised by Puritans (90). Unless the radicalism was somehow genetic—nature rather than nurture—Susanne is unlikely to have passed her mother’s radicalism on to her descendants.

These objections aside, I do think that the data Rust has presented make a good case for challenging both John Brooke’s claim that hermeticism was insignificant in New England, and Jon Butler’s claim that New England had less to do with the development of American religions than commonly supposed (120–22, 154). Rust’s figures on the New England origins of LDS converts, as well as converts to other religious movements such as the Campbellites, are striking (14–15). But by my reading of the book, I am not persuaded either that all of the people, places, and events Rust defines as radical actually fit that definition or that radicalism, rather than general religiosity, influenced later conversion to the LDS Church. Despite my stated reservations, I believe Rust has succeeded in raising some very interesting questions that deserve our attention and provide the basis for what is likely to be a long, interesting, and productive discussion.

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1. It is beyond my expertise to discuss Rust's use of genealogical methods and resources, a subject ably discussed by professional genealogist Kory Meyerlink at an "Author meets the Critics" session of the 2005 Mormon Historical Association meeting in Killington, Vermont.

2. Philip F. Gura, "The Radical Ideology of Samuel Gorton: New Light on the Relation of English to American Puritanism," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 36, 1 (1979): 78–100; Nathaniel Morton, *New England's Memorial*, in *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. John Masefield (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1936), 103.

3. On the controversy surrounding David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), see "Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America—A Symposium," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 48, no. 2 (April 1991), 223–308.

4. On Maine's political and religious turmoil, see Jenny Hale Pulsipher, *Subjects unto the Same King: Indians, English, and the Contest of Authority in Colonial New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), chapters 2 and 9.

5. The Salem witchcraft crisis is the focus of a vast and growing literature. Some of the most important works include Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Vintage, 1989); and Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Knopf, 2002). For a brief but useful overview of the crisis, see Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards*, rev. ed. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1995), chapter 12.