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Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History by
Gary Topping

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Gary Topping. *Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History*.

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003

Reviewed by Brian Q. Cannon

In this engaging and creative study, Gary Topping, associate professor of history at Salt Lake Community College, examines the historical work and legacy of five scholars who wrote about Utah and Mormon history: Fawn Brodie, Bernard DeVoto, Juanita Brooks, Dale Morgan, and Wallace Stegner. The five never constituted a cohesive group. Brodie, Brooks, and Morgan grew up in Mormon households whereas DeVoto and Stegner did not. Only Brooks retained her religious faith past her youth. Morgan alone interacted closely with each of the others. They resembled one another in their lack of university degrees in history, their tireless research, and their engaging literary style.

While Topping surveys these Utahns' scholarship broadly, his incisive analysis of their interpretations of Mormon history will be of particular interest to readers of this journal. DeVoto grew up in Ogden as the son of an apostate Catholic and a lapsed Mormon. Theology held no more appeal for DeVoto than it did for his parents. DeVoto bid good riddance to Utah in 1915 when he departed for Harvard. As an expatriate he lampooned Utah and Mormonism in a series of articles published in *American Mercury* in the 1920s, characterizing Ogden as a "scurvy little Mormon-Gentile dump" (48) and Mormonism as "equal parts of smugness, ignorance, and superstition" (53). DeVoto later expressed admiration for Mormon pioneering and solidarity in his classic *Year of Decision 1846*, and in 1943 he apologized publicly for his "ignorant, brash, prejudiced, malicious, and what is worst of all, irresponsible" criticism of Utah and the Mormons (87). But he retained his contempt for Mormon doctrine, which he labeled "simply preposterous" (87), and for Joseph Smith, whom he regarded as paranoid and incapable of effective leadership. Topping does not accept Joseph Smith's theology any more than DeVoto did, but he censures DeVoto for his one-sided interpretation. He finds DeVoto's unflattering portrait of the founding prophet, along with his portrait of many other historical figures,

to be a “caricature” (89) and an “interpretive distortion” (101) that underestimates Smith’s capacity for organization and leadership.

Dale Morgan was a native of Salt Lake City who “quietly apostatized” as a teenager (125). His finest work was his biography of mountain man/explorer Jedediah Smith, but he also wrote on Mormon themes. His first major historical publication was a study of the theocratic ghost government of Deseret that operated unofficially alongside the territorial government of Utah in the mid-nineteenth century. Although Morgan planned to write a multivolume history of Mormonism, he managed to complete only seven chapters that traced the first twenty-five years of Joseph Smith’s life. Those chapters, with their “completely naturalistic” (144) interpretation of the Book of Mormon, were posthumously edited and published in 1986. Morgan believed that his interpretation of Joseph Smith flowed from the facts, but Topping points out that Morgan’s selection and interpretation of the facts were largely shaped by his bias against supernatural explanations.

Topping moves next to a consideration of the work of Juanita Brooks, the Nevada native whose study of the Mountain Meadows Massacre earned her the praise of historians and the scorn of neighbors and some Church leaders. Praising Brooks for the example of integrity that she set in writing Mormon history, Topping nevertheless finds her explanation of the causes of the massacre to be insufficient. In contending that southern Utahns fell victim to hysteria and provocation, Brooks overlooked the possibility that “fundamental personal or cultural flaws” (219) such as violent tendencies or teachings motivated them, he says. Topping argues persuasively that Brooks’s loyalty to Mormonism shaped her interpretation of the massacre just as much as Morgan’s distrust of the supernatural shaped his account of Joseph Smith.

Wallace Stegner, who grew up in Salt Lake City and was educated at the University of Utah, wrote often and insightfully about Utah and Mormons in works including *Mormon Country*, *Joe Hill*, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *Recapitulation*, and *The Gathering of Zion*. Topping praises Stegner for his evenhanded and “fair” if somewhat nostalgic characterization of Utah in *Mormon Country*, which was admired by Mormons and non-Mormons alike. Topping justly criticizes Stegner’s history of the Mormon migration to Utah, *The Gathering of Zion*, for attributing too much of Mormon organization to Brigham Young’s influence, enriching his narrative with imagined detail and distorting the personalities of some characters.

The final writer whom Topping discusses is Fawn Brodie, whose prominent Mormon relatives included David O. McKay and BYU President

George Brimhall. Topping praises Brodie for “magnificent[ly]” linking Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon to Smith’s cultural environment, but he criticizes her for failing in the original edition of *No Man Knows My History* to provide a convincing motive for the founding prophet’s alleged deception.

Aside from the fact that they were contemporaries with ties to Utah who wrote on Mormon topics, what links these writers? Topping convincingly argues that “the creative tension with their native culture . . . ignited and propelled [these writers’] careers” (4). All of them were reacting against the “heavy-handed pro-Mormon interpretations prominent in most Utah histories of their day” (8). Topping attributes the shortcomings of these five writers partly to insufficient training in history and partly to “the Mormon worldview” (323).

Unquestionably, greater training in historical methods would have encouraged Brooks and Morgan to ask larger questions and set their work within a broader historiographical context. It might have also made Stegner, DeVoto, and Brodie more sensitive to nuances and complexity in their evidence. The impact of the Mormon worldview upon these writers collectively is more questionable, though. First of all, what is the Mormon worldview? According to Topping it is a perspective in which “irony is essentially alien” (40) and “the truth is always on the surface” (323). By denying original sin, it also tends toward an “optimistic conception of human nature” (208). These are generalizations that oversimplify the complexity and variety in Mormon scripture and discourse as well as the differences among Latter-day Saints in outlook.

The influence of Mormon cosmology upon these writers is most plausible in the case of Brooks, who retained her faith in Mormonism as an adult. Topping convincingly argues that Mormonism shaped Brooks’s interpretations. Its impact upon Brodie and Morgan, both of whom abandoned their faith as teenagers, is asserted but not demonstrated. Both tried to explain the Mormon past in their research and writing, but Mormonism’s enduring impact upon their mature perceptions of motive, human nature, truth, and irony is questionable. Both reacted against their flawed and partial understanding of a faith and an institution that they had summarily rejected in their adolescence. Stegner and DeVoto became fairly well acquainted with Mormon culture during their adolescence; their interpretations of Mormon history reflected their perceptions as outside observers of institutional Mormonism but their rejection of the supernatural prevented them from taking Mormonism seriously.

Although Topping overstates Mormonism’s impact upon most of these writers, his book nevertheless brims with trenchant observations

regarding each author's methodology, biases, assumptions, and conclusions. Topping probes into differences between fiction and history, considers the relative significance of environmental and psychological factors as causal agents, and discusses the difficulty of emphasizing strands in the evidence without distortion. He shows these writers' tendency to project their own concerns onto those they studied and the ways that bias influenced their selection and interpretation of evidence. All of this makes for an illuminating reading experience.

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