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Historical Context of the Doctrine and Covenants and Other Modern Scriptures, volume 1

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Marjorie Newton. *Tiki and Temple: The Mormon Mission in New Zealand, 1854–1958*.
 Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2012.

Reviewed by A. Keith Thompson

Writing Church history is an art form that has developed significantly in the last twenty years. Historical facts recited without reference to the spirit of revelation that guides the work of God in the last days can be spiritually sterile. However, a fearful focus on how certain materials might affect the faith of readers can damage the color and texture of any historiographical account. Often, the personal failings of the players in LDS religious history serve to underscore the Lord’s hand in his work—as readers infer that it could not have worked out as it did but for divine influence.

Marjorie Newton’s book *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia* was the subject of criticism because some felt that it did not adequately address the faith of the members or the spirit of revelation that guided the work. But if that criticism was ever true of Newton’s history of the Church in Australia, it would be unfair where this new work is concerned. Not only does she preface her work with the hope that this “simple yet inspiring story of the growth of Mormonism in New Zealand” will “convey a sense of the faith, courage and dedication of the North American missionaries, and . . . of their converts” (xiii), but she is direct in identifying examples that might not have been readily inferred by readers from her narrative. The unlikely assignment of Lieutenant Robert L. Simpson to Egypt during the Second World War is a case in point. She notes that despite an expectation that he might be assigned to the Pacific, he was assigned to Egypt at the exact time when the Maori Battalion that included many Latter-day Saints was stationed there. Newton concludes, “Truly, the Lord moves in mysterious ways, and one of His servants found himself able to serve both his country and his church in time of war” (215–16).

Newton similarly suggests that President McKay's change in President Simpson's 1951 assignment to preside over New Zealand's new northern mission (rather than the south mission to which he was originally called) was inspired, since the majority of the Maori members lived in the northern mission and loved President Simpson, which helped them accept "some difficult changes¹ from him which they might not have taken well from anyone else" (265–66). Though it is doubtful that most of the Maori members lived within the geography of the north mission in 1951,² few would question that the call of Robert L. Simpson to preside in New Zealand during such a formative period was inspired.

Marjorie Newton's work is always a pleasure to read. Her abundant research from all manner of primary sources is testament to her resourcefulness and her relentless quest for accuracy and reliable corroboration of all details. If there is a price to pay, it is that her thoroughness inevitably leads her to gently query some time-honored, faith-promoting rumors. She notes, for example, that there is "no contemporary record" for the story that there was a "mass gift of interpretation of tongues" at the *hui tau* at Puketapu near Huntly during Elder David O. McKay's first visit in 1921, though he did promise that "the spirit of the Lord will bear witness . . . of the words that I give to you under the inspiration of the Lord" (164). And Newton is unequivocal in her statement that the Maori Agricultural College "never became a registered secondary school . . . despite assertions to the contrary" (187).

What I find most enlightening, having been born in New Zealand just one year before Newton's account ends, is that some of the difficult issues Church leadership in New Zealand deals with today have been problems from the beginning. What is the appropriate place of indigenous culture in a Church that aspires to create a fellowship of Saints where there are

1. For example, President Simpson discontinued the practice of annual *hui tau* New Zealand-wide conferences during his term as president of the New Zealand North Mission.

2. In 1951, as Newton concedes, the New Zealand South Mission included within its geography the East Coast of the North Island, including Gisborne and South. While the writer does not have any precise demographic breakdown of Church membership in 1951, the heavy concentration of Maori membership in the east parts of the North Island within the New Zealand South Mission suggest that Maori Church membership was fairly evenly distributed between the two missions when the mission was first divided.

“no manner of ites” (62, 241)? Is the haka dance an acceptable cultural practice or is it discourteous or even contentious (259–61)? And what of the desire of indigenous and immigrant peoples who would prefer to worship in their native tongue? Does the gospel require that they all be assimilated into Church units that worship in the commercial language of the nation so that these members are not consigned to second-class economic status?

The story of the Rangitoto Maori Branch in Auckland in the 1940s (224, 237 and 239) seems like a prophecy of the difficulties to come after 1980 as various Polynesian immigrant groups struggled to assimilate into the wider New Zealand culture. Though these groups have at times been accommodated by Church leaders with new language units, no Maori language unit has been reestablished since the Auckland and Rangitoto branches were amalgamated in January 1951 (237). Similarly, the concern of Church leaders in 1928 that the Maori Agricultural College was a drain on precious Church resources (180) was also prescient of more recent concerns leading to the closure of the Church College of New Zealand (CCNZ). But Newton confirms that Elder McKay, as a professional educator, considered that “the establishment of [the Maori Agricultural] College . . . was inspired of the Lord” (168). When he became President of the Church, he expanded the construction of CCNZ announced previously under President George Albert Smith (249) despite “disquiet in Church offices in Salt Lake City over the escalating costs of the project” (248). However, Newton does not connect that disquiet about cost with Elder Harold B. Lee as Gregory A. Prince and W. Robert Wright have done in their biography on David O. McKay.³

Newton is authoritative when she explains the attractiveness of LDS missionary and leadership teaching about the Lehite origins of the Maori and other Polynesian peoples in the Pacific. Though some “early Church of England missionaries such as Samuel Marsden” had taught that the Polynesian people “were descended from the Israelites,” President Joseph F. Smith had also told prominent Maori visitors to Utah in 1913 that they were “some of Hagoth’s people.” This, he said, was very probably because “Hagoth’s ship . . . may have followed the [same] currents

3. *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005).

to the Pacific Islands” that had driven “great saw[n] timbers . . . from the mouth of the Columbia River . . . directly to the shores of Hawaii” when he was in Hawaii as a young missionary in the 1850s (129). Brigham Young had also “taught as early as 1858 that the Polynesians were of Israelitish origin” (130). But it was not just genealogy or “whakapapa” that attracted the Maori people of New Zealand to the restored gospel. They had a prophetic tradition of their own. In 1881, Paora Potangaroa, a Maori prophet and *rangatira* (chief) had prophesied that “the church for the Maori people . . . would come from the east, brought by emissaries who would travel among them in twos, live in their homes, and learn their language” (42). “The significant point is that the Maori people were accustomed to revelation from living prophets,” so the “story of Joseph Smith was not something incredible to them; to believe that God had spoken to Joseph was not . . . a leap of faith . . . but instead was a confirmation of a vital part of Maori indigenous religion” (43).

There are, however, a couple of unnecessary lapses in Newton’s wish to convey “the devotion and dedication” of the early New Zealand missionaries (64–65). While it might be fair to comment that President Gordon C. Young “was not a popular mission president” (241), it seems more than a little unfair to accuse him of “a combination of persuasion and bribery” (236) when he secured for the Church the lease of sea-facing land at Avarua in the Cook Islands in 1950 for ten pounds a year. Not only is this statement made without context of land valuation, but it is compounded with innuendo when Newton states that “he also had qualms of conscience about the low price Bert Meldrum had received for the [CCNZ] land” (236).

In these matters, Newton may have been expressing her honest opinion, but she does not appreciate the artificial suppression of land values in New Zealand and Australia after World War II, which were brought about by compulsory government regulation in both countries. The truth is, there was probably very little either Meldrum or the Church could have done within the law about the price of the CCNZ land. Similarly, while President Young may have felt that he got a very good deal on the Cook Island land purchase, even today, the going price of land in third world countries is often shockingly small in the eyes of first world purchasers—meaning it is highly unlikely that the Church defrauded either vendor as is Newton’s inference. It seems similarly unnecessary to describe President Halversen’s June 1947 report identifying a need for many more Church buildings in New Zealand as “concocted with

Elder Cowley's help, to be used as ammunition for Elder Cowley to fire in leadership councils in Utah" (223).⁴ Not only is this emotive language disrespectful, but it sullies the otherwise impeccable reputations of both Elder Cowley and President Halverson.

These small lapses in editorial concentration aside, this book is a very scholarly and informative read that is a must-have in any LDS library that focuses on international Church history.

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4. Newton's point here is that Elder Cowley very much wanted the Church to reestablish an LDS Church high school in New Zealand that would replace the Maori Agricultural College, which had not been rebuilt after it was destroyed in the 1931 Napier earthquake.