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Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life: The Autobiography and Teachings of Jim Dandy

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Robert S. McPherson, Jim Dandy, and Sarah E. Burak.

*Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life:
The Autobiography and Teachings of Jim Dandy.*

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012.

Reviewed by Jessie L. Embry

Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life shows how Jim Dandy—a Mormon Navajo who participated in the Indian Student Placement Program, attended Brigham Young University, and taught school in San Juan County, Utah—combines his Navajo and Mormon lifestyles. He asked his Anglo neighbor Robert S. McPherson, a professor at Utah State University Eastern–San Juan Center, to help him record his history. McPherson has written many books on Navajo culture and history, including *Navajo Land, Navajo Culture: The Utah Experience in the Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001) and *A Navajo Legacy: The Life and Teachings of John Holiday* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005). His research is well respected by the academic community and Native American tribes. Sarah E. Burak was an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer in Utah and helped McPherson with the Dandy interviews.

Before I read the book, I was acquainted with Jim Dandy's story because I had interviewed him in October 1990 for the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies' LDS Native American Oral History Project. The interview took place shortly after George P. Lee of the Seventy was excommunicated from the LDS Church. After discussing his experiences as a Latter-day Saint and as the son of a medicine man, Dandy, who had served as a mission companion with Lee, expressed his feeling that Lee had moved away from Church teachings even though he was a General Authority. At the end of the interview, Dandy graciously thanked me for the opportunity to share his experiences, leaving me with the impression that he was a well-spoken, forthright, kind, and courteous man who focused on his convictions as a Latter-day Saint.

Dandy had wanted to share his story in more detail for years. McPherson explains in the book that he met Dandy in 1976 when they were neighbors in Blanding, Utah. At that time, Dandy asked McPherson

if he would write his story. McPherson, who took an oral history class from me, always had many projects going and did not find the time to talk to Dandy until Burak worked for VISTA in the area. With her help, McPherson was able to interview Dandy. Then Dandy, McPherson, and Burak conducted other interviews with Dandy's relatives to add background and depth to his stories.

McPherson carefully spells out in the introduction how he combines Dandy's stories with other Navajo voices. He also uses the monthly publication *Leading the Way*, where Navajo elders share their views. This information is in the endnotes, so I read the book with my finger in the back so I could learn more about Dandy's experiences, and the quotes from the elders helped me understand and appreciate Navajo traditions.

The book is divided into three parts. First, McPherson uses his extensive research to carefully describe Mormon and Navajo history and then discuss similarities and differences in their beliefs. He points out that he is not trying to establish that the two traditions are inter-related, but he shows common beliefs that help foster understanding that Dandy can be both a practicing Mormon and a medicine man. McPherson explains, "A medicine man, familiar with ceremonial knowledge, stories, and language, would be more at ease" with discussing the two beliefs "than many Navajo people unfamiliar with traditional teachings. In Jim Dandy's circumstance, where he is conversant with both worlds, he has no problem going between the two" (49). When I start reading about the Navajo worlds and creation stories, they are usually so foreign to me that my mind fogs out. McPherson's introduction explains how these stories are not that much different than my own beliefs, which gives me a frame of reference to focus on and understand what Navajos believe.

The second part of the book is Dandy's life story, but it reads very differently than the interview I did with him. As McPherson explains, "This book will not sound like a straight oral interview" (xiii). McPherson interweaves Dandy's story with background information on Navajo life and quotes from other interviews. To distinguish the difference, Dandy's and the other interviewees' stories are printed in italics. For the most part, the shift from contextual information to oral history interviews flows smoothly. There are some places where the transfer is a little awkward and repetitive. As an oral historian, I would have preferred just having Dandy's story. Such a format, however, would have made it difficult for someone who does not understand how Dandy fits into the broader Navajo and Mormon story.

The final section of the book includes Dandy's own teachings. He discusses the place of the Holy People, creation stories, animals, and traditional ceremonies in the Navajo worldview. He explains the "light and dark sides" of life and how Navajos avoid and cure evil. McPherson explains why Dandy wanted to tell the story of both Mormon and Navajo influences in his life. "Conversant in both worlds, he has shared his teachings from the past to help people in the future. Wisely, his grandfather and father steered him on a course that allowed him to be successful in both. . . . Now it is Jim's turn to point the way for future generations of young Navajos interested in traditional teachings. That is why he had this book written" (248).

I enjoyed reading McPherson and Dandy's cooperative work and learned much that will help in my own research with Navajo Farina King about Mormon Navajos, which research is based on Redd Center and LDS Church History Department interviews. Dandy's story is a valuable microcosm of what we are writing in our study. Not all the interviewees agree with Dandy's combination of Navajo traditions and Mormon practices, but as I read Dandy's teachings, I better understand those who do believe such worldviews can be combined.

Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life is a creative combination of personal narrative and scholarly work. For the most part, McPherson has developed a nice balance so that people interested in Navajo beliefs in general, Mormons wanting to learn more about Navajos, and Navajos wanting to see how their beliefs might connect with Mormonism will find much of benefit. I do wish for more of Dandy's own words in the second section, and more context for his beliefs in section three. However, for the most part, McPherson and Dandy have successfully forged the difficult path of balancing between two narrative approaches. They have created a landmark study for finding a common ground between Mormon and Navajo teachings.

Jessie L. Embry is the associate director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University. She has written and edited numerous books about the American West and Mormon history, including *Black Saints in a White Church* and *"In His Own Language": Mormon Spanish Speaking Congregations in the United States*.