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The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception

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J. B. Haws. *The Mormon Image in the American Mind:
Fifty Years of Public Perception.*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Sherry Pack Baker

J. B. Haws received his PhD from the University of Utah and is an assistant professor in the Department of Church History at Brigham Young University. His research interests include twentieth-century history of Latter-day Saints and the general public perception of the group. This book (based on his 2010 PhD dissertation) is the winner of the 2014 Mormon History Association Best Book Award.

The book focuses on the fifty-year period surrounding the presidential campaign of George Romney in 1968 to Mitt Romney's campaign in 2012. The author considers the role Mormonism played in these campaigns; the heart of the book, however, focuses on other major events that affected public perceptions of Mormonism throughout this period, and the relationships and interactions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with various segments of American society over time (3–4).

The book is well cited, and its conclusions and commentaries are well supported. The endnotes constitute 107 of the book's total 412 pages. Some may fault its heavy reliance on secondary sources; however, Haws has made an important contribution by pulling together into new configurations a large body of previous research from diverse sources about particular historical events. He also contributes by including original sources in the form of excerpts from personal correspondence and interviews. Among the greatest contributions of this book are the following: its focus on twentieth- and twenty-first-century Mormon history and critical Mormon studies (in a field that so often is grounded in the nineteenth century); its sustained narrative, covering a fifty-year period, that makes clear the cause-and-effect relationships between past events and new events; and its emphasis on the development and implementation of Church public relations strategies and initiatives throughout each

period discussed—the Church’s conscious efforts to position itself in society, to respond to negative publicity, and to shape or influence public perceptions.¹

Studies of Mormon image are a staple in Mormon studies scholarship—but this book sets a new standard in depth and breadth, and in historical context and insight.

Chapter 1 explains that the book focuses on various periods of “intense publicity” and “news-making ‘Mormon moments’ in the four decades between the Romney campaigns” (4). Chapter 2 focuses on the George Romney campaign within the context of Mormonism, the highlights of the David O. McKay era, the press coverage of Mormonism including race and priesthood issues, and the question about whether Mormons are Christians. The book follows over time the “political potency” (35) of the “Mormons are not Christians” charge. Following the George Romney campaign, “disapproval for the Latter-day Saints’ priesthood policy became more vocal and more fiery” (46). His campaign was “an early indication that Americans could hold one opinion of model Mormons who did not have skeletons in their closets, and another of a church that seemingly did” (46).

Chapter 3, entitled “Church Rites versus Civil Rights,” primarily focuses on BYU athletics and Church policies concerning race and the priesthood. It discusses in depth the public protests and censures against BYU athletics, and the Church’s efforts to respond to the criticism. The

1. Sherry Baker and Joel Campbell, “Mitt Romney’s Religion: A Five Factor Model for Analysis of Media Representation of Mormon Identity,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 9, no. 2 (2010): 99–121, have proposed a model for analyzing the factors that influence media representations of Mormons and Mormonism. These factors include (1) the Media Factor (their ownership, editorial perspectives, Mormon-related content); (2) the Mormon Factor (their beliefs, practices, lifestyles, public relations and self-positioning in society); (3) the Other Religions Factor (resistance to or support for Mormonism by other religions; religious rhetoric about Mormonism); (4) the Secular Factor (nonreligious perspectives on Mormon-related issues); and (5) the Political or Governmental Factor (Mormon relationships with government and political power and processes). All these factors are represented in varying configurations and with varying emphasis in each of the periods and issues that Haws discusses. His descriptions of the Mormon Factor over the fifty-year period (in terms of LDS Church institutional public relations, attempts at self-defining and self-positioning within society, and responding to negative public perceptions) is one of the unique contributions of this book.

formation in 1971 of the Genesis Group for black Mormons is discussed briefly (68). Regarding the race issue, the author notes that “this seemed only another instance where public concerns generated new awareness among the Latter-day Saint leadership” (68). The chapter ends with the June 9, 1978, announcement of the policy change about all worthy males receiving the priesthood. Haws notes, however, that by the time of this announcement, the race issue had died down somewhat, and by 1978 “national conversations were less about race and more about gender” (73).

In chapter 4, Haws describes the ways in which the Church responded through “an intensification of the Church’s public relations efforts” to the protests and censures by universities and civic and religious bodies in the early 1970s relating to its priesthood policy (74). “There was a sense that to rehabilitate the Mormon image, so pocked by the anti-BYU demonstrations, public attention needed to be refocused on core Mormon tenets” such as “the centrality of the family” (74). The chapter covers the development of the Church’s Public Communications Department, its assessments of Mormonism’s public image, and the airing of the *Homefront* series of public service announcements. This chapter also discusses LDS opposition to the proposed Equal Rights Amendment and the various public perceptions that resulted.

As this chapter ends, Haws writes that “the real drama would be enacted in the 1980s, so much so that the mid-1980s can be seen as an important turning point—and perhaps *the* important turning point, at least in the last half-century—in the trajectory of American public opinion of Mormonism” (98). He reports that in 1977, 54 percent of Gallup poll respondents rated Mormons on the “favorable” side of a scale; by 1991, the Barna Group found that only 27 percent “saw Mormons favorably” (98). He builds a case, polemical as it may be, that this was largely the result of the efforts of the rising religious (Evangelical) right—“some of Mormonism’s oldest foes” (98).

Chapter 5 documents tensions between these religious groups, including the competition for souls, the *God Makers* movies, the framing of Mormonism as a cult, and apprehension in secular presses about growing Mormon power and influence. Chapter 6 deals with the Mark Hoffman forgeries and bombings in October 1985, as well as internal Church scrutiny concerning the ways in which Mormon history should be written, and the excommunication of “prominent Mormon scholars” in September 1993 (152). “The late 1980s and early 1990s had not been kind . . . to those in church public relations who seemed to find

themselves repeatedly in the uncomfortable position of making careful press statements and answering thorny questions about church-related controversies” (155). The period prompted “a wholesale rethinking of the church’s approach to public relations and a retooling of its image, an image that had become weighed down with charges of authoritarianism, secrecy, and defensiveness” (157).

Chapter 7, “Standing a Little Taller: 1995–2005,” is about Church President Gordon B. Hinckley’s tenure, which “gave new standing to Mormonism’s public image” (191). The chapter provides important insights into the Church’s Public Affairs department, the confluence of experienced and professional PR staff with the media-friendly presidency of Gordon B. Hinckley, and the emphasis on building bridges instead of bunkers through a “door is wide open” philosophy (160).

Chapter 8 is about Mormons in popular culture in the new millennium. Chapter 9 covers the first Mitt Romney bid for the presidency, with a focus on the role his Mormonism played in the strategies of his own campaign and those of his opponents and detractors (both secular and religious). Chapter 10 covers Romney’s second bid for the presidency, *Book of Mormon the Musical*, Proposition 8, and other political and social currents about and within Mormonism that swirled throughout the campaign period. Some of this is somewhat scanty (such as the Prop 8 discussion). The author concedes that “with only a few months of historical hindsight,” reflection on the period “might seem a little premature” (239). Still, these three chapters highlight the key events of the period, provide good observations by the author and others, and are well worth reading.

The subtext of the book as a whole is about Mormons as “other” and the issues that kept them outside of the American mainstream historically. The book ends by suggesting that “Mormons are now ‘in the conversation’ in a way never before seen” (279). This book well documents that journey.

Sherry Pack Baker is a professor in the BYU Department of Communications. Her research focuses on Mormon Media Studies and the ethics of public relations and advertising. She chaired the Mormon Media Studies symposia in 2010 and 2012.