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Saints Observed: Studies of Mormon Village Life 1850-2005; Four Classic Mormon Village Studies

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Howard M. Bahr. *Saints Observed: Studies of Mormon Village Life, 1850–2005*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014.

Howard M. Bahr, ed. *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Todd L. Goodsell

In the early 1920s, a young graduate student at the University of Chicago named Nels Anderson employed a research method that was not then familiar to students of sociology, who took data from libraries and archives for their term papers. Nels took a different approach, because there was little data to be found in those locations on the group he wanted to study: homeless working men, or “hobos.” So Anderson created his own method. Over the space of a year while a student, he lived like a hobo. He visited the cheap diners where hobos with a little money could eat, and copied down the menus. He stayed in a flophouse and documented its sights and sounds and the feeling of insects crawling over him while he tried to sleep. He sat with hobos by a campfire, watched how they handled their eating utensils, and listened to their stories. He learned the nicknames that a hobo could acquire if he lost a limb after falling off a train, and he observed speakers standing on soapboxes in a public square, trying to organize the urban poor. He wrote down all of this and more. The result was a brilliant, detailed analysis of what everyday life was like for a poorly understood minority group, in what became the classic work on homelessness in the United States: Anderson’s book *The Hobo*.¹

Anderson’s work began a golden age of what came to be called the Chicago School of Sociology. A series of engaging monographs, all produced by the University of Chicago’s Department of Sociology, explored the city from a wide variety of angles: economic inequality,² juvenile delinquency,³

1. Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923; rpt., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

2. Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago’s Near North Side* (1929; rpt., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

3. Clifford R. Shaw, *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy’s Own Story* (1930; rpt., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

private dance halls,⁴ African-American neighborhoods,⁵ and others. A common thread through these studies was extended, up-close investigation of real people's lives, placed in the context of their communities and larger society. Robert Park, a professor in the department, captured the classic imperative of the Chicago School when he said to students:

You have been told to go grubbing in the library, thereby accumulating a mass of notes and a liberal coating of grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records based on trivial schedules prepared by tired bureaucrats and filled out by reluctant applicants for aid or fussy do-gooders or indifferent clerks. This is called "getting your hands dirty in real research." Those who counsel you are wise and honorable; the reasons they offer are of great value. But one more thing is needful: first-hand observation. Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesk [*sic*]. In short, gentlemen [*sic*], go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.⁶

Getting "the seat of your pants dirty" came to represent this new (at least new to students) way of doing social science. Ethnography is more than just qualitative research. Scholars in this tradition, which continues today, believe that you cannot understand other people's experiences unless you have set aside or at least managed your own biases, spent extended periods of time in their world, and come to see how that world makes sense from their perspective. Such an approach privileges the everyday experiences of ordinary folks and discovers how complex, human, and remarkable they are after all.

The story of Nels Anderson and the Chicago School sets up what I believe is the take-home message of two books that were written and edited, respectively, by Howard Bahr. *Saints Observed* and *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies* are based on ethnographic research in rural Mormon communities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

4. Paul Goalby Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life* (1932; rpt., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

5. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, rev. and enl. (1945; rpt., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

6. Quoted in Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 97.

During this period, several scholars visited various Mormon settlements, spent extended time there, wrote about what they experienced, and from these writings tried to explain Mormonism to a larger audience. In the first volume, Bahr does a superb job of synthesizing the writings of several intellectuals from the nineteenth century into a kind of “team ethnography,”⁷ and the result is a composite picture of everyday Mormon culture during that time. In the second volume, he presents four complete, hard-to-find, twentieth-century ethnographies of Mormon villages, along with his own follow-up to each. Together, the volumes reveal a long tradition of ethnographic research on Mormon community life. Bahr argues that this tradition is worth continuing.

Saints Observed

In *Saints Observed: Studies of Mormon Village Life, 1850–2005*, Bahr sought to understand how educated individuals who visited Mormon villages in the nineteenth century represented Mormon culture. He selected these writers on the basis of several criteria: they were not Mormon themselves; they spent time living among the Mormons rather than just passing through; they provided some statement of how they gathered their data; and they at least intended to write an objective account of Mormon life. Bahr divided the individuals who met these criteria into two groups. The first group visited the Mormon West between 1849 and 1861; the others (whom he called the “second generation”) visited between 1872 and 1882. Finally, Bahr surveyed twentieth-century Mormon village studies, with an emphasis on Lowry Nelson and his contemporaries, and extended the tradition to today.

Bahr drew upon principles of postcolonialism, most especially the “contact zone” (8), to frame his work. Certainly he could have done more with this theory, but I find it an appropriate framework to use. It draws our attention to the encounter between the European (or the American from the East Coast, as the case may be) and the Other (in this case, the Mormons) as “a joint, constructed encounter” (8). In other words, we as readers do not simply have wealthy, privileged observers telling us the truth about the peoples they meet. Rather, we have an emergent and fluid zone of contact between various individuals and groups within a framework of pronounced inequality. Thus, we have multiple voices, multiple

7. Ken Erickson and Donald Stull, *Doing Team Ethnography: Warnings and Advice* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998).

perspectives, and contested interpretations. One can further observe where the tellers themselves are situated (historically, culturally, socio-economically, and so forth), and thus their reports about the Other are at least in part a reflection of who *they* are, not just a simple account of what they saw.

Bahr's approach using team ethnography is a difficult one, because in ethnography the field researcher is the primary research instrument. However, Bahr does a masterful job of synthesizing the different works. For each component of the research report, Bahr compares the various perspectives provided by the different observers, noting similarities but also explaining differences. The delightful consequence is that the Mormons these visitors encountered appear in three dimensions, as real, complex human beings. Readers will find that different observers had different experiences once inside Mormon culture, and even when they saw the same things, they sometimes were inclined to interpret them differently.

Bahr often had to adjudicate between different assertions. When two visitors met Heber C. Kimball and described his physical appearance in their respective accounts, one, Carvalho, found him to be "noble looking" and "well proportioned," while the other, Remy, described Kimball's body as "grotesque," "punchy," and "comic." As the leader of the "team" of ethnographers, Bahr handles these striking differences of opinion by noting that if researchers want some objective facts about what Kimball looked like, then either they must get additional data or they must live with differing views. Moreover, Bahr points out that there is another way to consider the data: what people say about the Mormons or any others may reveal more about themselves than about the others. Bahr writes, "The contrasting judgments may say more about the observers—American artist versus French aristocrat—than about Heber's phenotype" (43).

At other times, Bahr was able to stand back and allow the various ethnographers on his "team" to have a conversation with each other about what the world is to think about these Mormons. The French aristocrat Remy accused Mormons of "an excessive forwardness and a coarse freedom of manner" (103). Another visitor, who was also particularly cosmopolitan, dismissed such conversational style as simply an aspect of frontier life (105). Others were far more discerning. One visitor—who was distinguished for spending an unusual amount of time with Mormon families—noted aspects of manner that some might find offensive but provided explanations for them: First, among Mormons "a priestly tone" is simply not used, and even the prophet does not speak in a way

that some think a prophet should; second, the tendency to speak plainly and share private matters may result from the experiences of Mormons who, of necessity, had to share so much of their lives together (104–5).

The last chapter, about Mormon village studies in the twentieth century, is more of a bibliographic overview than an in-depth analysis of the cultures of Mormonism found therein. Therefore, I think of it as a brief summary of how Mormon village studies in the early twentieth century lost much of the richness present in these nineteenth-century accounts, and how these studies gradually regained such richness in the later part of the century. I have read many of the studies Bahr mentions (and I conducted two of them). Knowing that there is so much more that has been (and can be) said about Mormon cultures, this chapter leaves me eager for more of the rich detail found in the previous chapters. Nevertheless, I believe Bahr accomplished his objective—to show that this tradition continued until the present and to show where readers can look to find additional studies.

Bahr's highlighting of different perspectives makes this volume a delight to read. He guides us readers through many aspects of Mormon life during this period—social inequality, religiosity, work, family, education, and others—and we see through so many different eyes what it was like to live as a Mormon. At the same time, *Saints Observed* is limited by this thematic approach: the reader sees a synthesized picture of Mormon life that cuts across the perspectives of several different observers. We do not gain a holistic analysis of a single community. For this, we must turn to the second of these two books.

Four Classic Mormon Village Studies

In *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies*, Bahr presents four ethnographic Mormon village studies conducted in the middle of the twentieth century. Each occupies its own chapter and is followed by an afterword reporting what has happened to the village since the research was done. The four villages (and their respective ethnographers) are Gunlock, Utah (Edward Banfield); Virgin, Utah (Henri Mendras); Ramah, New Mexico (Thomas O'Dea); and Pomerene, Arizona (Wilfrid Bailey). By allowing each village study to stand as an independent social scientific study—quite a different rhetorical strategy from what Bahr chose in *Saints Observed*—readers get to see each village holistically and each ethnographer as a unique craftsman. Only one of these ethnographers was LDS (Bailey), and he was a convert to the Church. Each was associated with a university when he conducted the village study. This volume

is a treasure because it makes available several studies that were previously unpublished or difficult to acquire. The volume is also a treasure for its insights on what life was like as a Mormon and what constitutes a good ethnographic study of Mormonism.

Banfield's analysis of Gunlock is excellent. A good ethnography captures and conveys everyday life in the community so well that readers feel like they are there, that they hear the voices of the people, and that they understand the world from their perspective; Banfield's chapter is laden with quotes and stories that bring this effect. His portrayal of the community and its members is rich and nuanced, and every detail is revealing. Take, for example, this story of a Gunlock resident who was surprised that a stranger from Las Vegas could tell who he and his friends were: "The stranger saw a group of young men who had the calloused hands and weathered look of laborers but a clean-cut, polite, well-spoken manner that laborers ordinarily do not have. These could only be rural Mormons" (49). Such insights not only draw upon physical appearance but also capture the subjective experience of discontinuity when life in Gunlock is implicitly contrasted with life elsewhere.

By filling the narrative with quotes and stories, Banfield avoids drawing overly simplistic conclusions, such as depicting Mormon community strictly as either cooperative or conflict-ridden. As we all know, real life is more complicated. We see people who live so much of their lives together that they value keeping at least some aspects private. We see people who can disagree, but who will cooperate when necessary for the sake of the children or in emergencies. We see people who might be understood by outsiders as unambitious, but who in fact come up with creative solutions that meet their needs and make sense of their world. Banfield generally kept his own authorial presence in the shadows, in favor of privileging the voices of the research participants. While some might consider this decision a weakness, I see it as appropriate because he is clear about how he obtained his data. I came away feeling like I know the people of Gunlock as well as (or perhaps better than) I know my own neighbors.

Bahr does not cite postcolonial theory as a framework for this volume as he does with *Saints Observed*, but he could have carried that theory into this work too. One can read *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies* as decentering the object (the Mormon village), meaning that in these studies readers learn at least as much about the observer as they do about the observed. That perception appears most clearly in Mendras's observations of Virgin. For example, Mendras recalled his impression

of Mormon worship services, “when everyone stood up to say with disarming simplicity the naïve banalities that the Lord inspired in them,” and noted that this reminded him of his home village in France, where peasants sang in Latin without understanding what they were singing (84). Mendras conveyed his own bewilderment at the life of the Mormons: he complained about the “monotonous meals” (100); he voiced his frustrations at seeing a bishop so encumbered by work, family, and administrative tasks that he could not be “a true leader” who identifies and resolves problems (105); he observed an MIA meeting where he himself made up the attendance, but the leaders still observed all protocol and ceremony required for the meeting and the secretary filled out the proper forms (107). Some of Mendras’s comments echo those of Banfield—for example, that the LDS Church was the only organization with enough moral authority to address and resolve community problems, though Church leaders typically did not exercise this prerogative. Mendras and Banfield also agreed that residents of the village held attitudes typical of the middle class but material resources typical of the working class. I see this chapter not as a simple portrayal of Virgin, but as the product of interactions between the people of Virgin and a young, educated Frenchman who left a rural village in France only to find himself, not altogether willingly, in a rural village in Utah. This decentering helps readers see the humanity, and the assumptions that come with it, on both sides of the observer/observed divide.

Many social scientists will probably be most eager for O’Dea’s chapter. O’Dea is well remembered for his book *The Mormons*, which is considered a (possibly *the*) pivotal social scientific work on Mormonism in the twentieth century. *The Mormons* was based on fieldwork O’Dea did in Ramah, New Mexico, but it does not contain the field data on which he built his argument. Now, in *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies*, those field data are made widely available. O’Dea’s account is strikingly different from Mendras’s, in that while Mendras is perpetually seen by villagers as the outsider, O’Dea asserts that he was easily accepted into the community. This may be accounted for by his more careful preparation for the move to Ramah; however he achieved that sense of inclusion, O’Dea still produced a work that focused more on the functional integration of the community than on the ethnic flavor of the people.

To be sure, O’Dea captured some subtlety and irony in Mormonism, such as how the “gathering” necessitated a dispersion that created the village of Ramah—and that perhaps because of that dispersion, such a distant outpost developed a strong Mormon identity and tight

social cohesion. Still, I was left wishing O'Dea had provided more ethnographic data. His work on Mormonism is excellent, and I was excited to read the fieldwork behind it. Yet by comparison, Banfield's chapter seemed deeper and richer. I do not have major disagreements with O'Dea's work; I was only a little disappointed to see his structural-functionalist framework coming out so strongly in his ethnographic data from the field. A different approach would have helped me understand better what life was like in this Mormon community.

Bailey's chapter is strong when it considers a Mormon village located next to a town populated almost entirely by individuals of other faiths and asks how these two communities can learn to live together. It traces the nuanced history between these two settlements and their people, and it reveals how Mormonism can adapt and even grow when under outside pressure. On the other hand, the chapter has shortcomings in that Bailey did not fully exploit the strengths of the ethnographic method. While he did give a strong sense of the place, readers do not always hear the voices of the people who live there. Stories and quotes would have helped the reader to understand Bailey's reasoning, particularly when he makes his assertions about how Pomerene came to be imagined the way it was in the 1940s and how it underwent subsequent transitions. The chapter concludes with two selections written by Bailey, extending the narrative to 1990 and then to 2000.

Conclusion

I have heard some social scientists complain that they cannot study Mormons because the LDS Church will not make membership records and other data available for outside analysis. They say the Church will not cooperate in allowing them to gather their own data by surveying its members. The Church does its own social science research, through its Research Information Division (RID), but only a very small percentage of the research conducted through RID is made public. According to these social scientists, Mormons can be studied only if they happen to show up in sufficient numbers (such as in the General Social Survey) for them to run some limited analyses.

I find such claims to be shortsighted. Ethnography is a well-established research method in sociology and in related social sciences. Doing an ethnography of Mormons usually would not require Church approval. Formal approval is indeed needed if one wishes to claim Church sponsorship, access official membership lists or tithing records, or attend private leadership meetings and counseling sessions, but these are often

not necessary for accomplishing the goals of ethnography. The goal of ethnography is to build an understanding of the everyday worlds of the research participants through up-close involvement in those worlds and through listening to their stories. One can accomplish this goal through investigating public spaces, attending public meetings, and building relationships with people in the field. This is by no means easy; the voluminous literature on how to conduct a good ethnography attests to that. My point is that reaching this goal is not impossible, even when researchers are studying Mormons.

Some may argue that the genre of Mormon village studies is dead. Bahr makes a case that it is not. And I believe we can take Bahr's approach and apply it to the study of Mormonism in general. I still hear claims that there are misconceptions of what it is like to be a Mormon (this is one of the stated premises of the 2014 movie *Meet the Mormons*); ethnography can help here because it is a research method that excels at showing what real life is like for real people. With these two books, *Saints Observed* and *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies*, Bahr shows us what good ethnographies of Mormons can look like.

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