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By Colleen McDannell

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Reviewed by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

Because of its freshness and clarity, I predict that Colleen McDannell's *Sister Saints,* a history of modern Latter-day Saint women, will become a standard in religious studies courses and perhaps in book clubs among Latter-day Saints as well. It is unquestionably a "crossover" book. General readers will appreciate its lively stories and well-balanced arguments, and students at any level will profit from its detailed endnotes and chapter-by-chapter bibliographic essays. The book is fair-minded but never wimpy. It will provoke discussion in and out of the academy.

In one of the last pages, McDannell observes, "There never has been a singular 'Mormon woman.' Despite this reality, Americans continue to elevate a minority of Latter-day Saints into a fantastical majority" (201). She is commenting here on the current popularity of so-called "mommy blogs." But her observation is just as relevant to the longer history she narrates. Public portrayals of Latter-day Saint women, whether hostile or admiring, have often leaned toward the fantastical. McDannell's book complicates those images and stereotypes.

Sister Saints begins with an account of an 1884 meeting between Latter-day Saint editor Emmeline B. Wells and a British reformer named Emily Faithful. As journalists and advocates for women's rights, the two women had a great deal in common. Yet after leaving Utah, Faithful promulgated already well-worn anti-Mormon slurs that would soon be used to validate disenfranchisement of Utah women and confiscation of Church property. Wells wondered how someone who "lectured about the hypocrisy, extravagance, and shams of the modern world could pander so much to society's taste for the sensational" (3). McDannell wants to know what it was about the religious system of the Church that allowed women like Wells "to withstand the ridicule of a whole

nation" (4). She wants to understand what roles they played in forming that system and how women's participation in building Zion changed "as Utah became more fully integrated into the nation's social, economic, and political order" (35).

The chapters that follow describe a kind of dance between engagement with a changing gender order in the larger society and fidelity to prophetic leadership. In the early twentieth century, General Relief Society President Amy Brown Lyman embraced progressive reform with enthusiasm, encouraging sisters to learn social-work skills and participate in efforts to improve public health, efforts that were undercut in Utah as elsewhere in the nation by fears of socialism and the realities of economic depression (37, 52).

After World War II, a new Relief Society president, Belle Spafford, embraced the nation's and the Church's emphasis on women's domestic responsibilities. The 1947 centennial celebration reinforced a commitment to Church and family history. McDannell observes that "uplifting stories of ancestors countered the increasingly bureaucratic orientation of Mormonism. As mothers stitched Victorian clothing for their children to make Pioneer Day celebrations more realistic, they physically joined the modern world to the past" (73). McDannell believes that for stay-at-home mothers, Church callings "became both an extension of the home and a respite from its demands" (73).

The first half of the book is in some respects a creative synthesis of scholarship already familiar to specialists in Latter-day Saint women's history. The second half showcases more of McDannell's own primary research. To balance official pronouncements from the 1950s and 1960s, she mined the papers of Ramona Wilcox Cannon, a woman who from 1947 to 1974 wrote a "Dear Abby" type column in the *Deseret News* under the name "Mary Marker." And to complicate existing accounts of the Church's battle against the ERA, McDannell uses letters that ordinary women wrote to Latter-day Saint dissident Sonia Johnson, documents archived in Johnson's papers at the University of Utah. Not surprisingly, some letter writers saw Johnson as an instrument of Satan, yet McDannell found no echo in their letters of the ideas promulgated in *Fascinating Womanhood,* the wildly popular book self-published in 1966 by Latter-day Saint author Helen Andelin. "Hyperfemininity may have made sense to evangelical Protestant women who found power in submission," writes McDannell, "but it had less staying power in Mormon culture" (117–18).

McDannell believes that by the 1970s, "social changes in the country as well as geographical and educational differences among Latter-day Saints had produced a variety of ways to be active and faithful. And the push for unity under male leadership failed to curb this growing diversity" (107). As feminist and protofeminist ideas infiltrated the general culture, even showing up in Church-sponsored publications, the potential for pushback increased. Sermons excoriating feminists and intellectuals, tightening ecclesiastical control over programs at Brigham Young University, and efforts by local leaders to discipline members who questioned authority created panic and disaffection.

"By the early nineties," McDannell argues, "committed Latter-day Saint women had begun to seriously wonder what the church could offer them. Historians and feminist thinkers told a tale of loss: during the nineteenth century women performed powerful roles in the church, but over the twentieth century those roles were diminished. Mormon women were not taking advantage of expanding professional possibilities at the same rate as their non-Mormon counterparts" (131). In some accounts of Latter-day Saint women, the story ends there. But *Sister Saints* moves forward with a serious examination of two countervailing movements—the revitalization of Church missions and the widespread embrace of digital communication.

The expansion of missionary work, propelled in part by the opening of the priesthood to all worthy males, moved the demographic balance of the Church away from the Intermountain West. Much of missionary success, McDannell argues, came from a shift in the mode of proselyting that emphasized religious experience over religious dogma (139). This shift is reflected in the 2004 manual *Preach My Gospel,* which, whether intentionally or not, played to female strengths, preparing the way perhaps for later expanded participation by women. In the early 2000s, the Church once again became a church of converts. McDannell's work reinforces this conclusion. "Unlike the heritage Mormon, who remembers the past, the church of converts is a church of the present," she writes (152).

With the spread of the internet, the dance between diversity and authority has intensified. McDannell sees a sharp contrast between the methods used by the official Church and those employed by its members to respond to this expansion of communication and membership. The institutional Church has responded to the daunting task of holding its expanding global membership together by cultivating "a small set

of core principles" expressed over and over again (174). In contrast, lay members have used the same technology "to expand the number of voices heard" (175). These techniques are not necessarily incompatible. At its core, the Church has long validated both prophetic authority and individual inspiration. (McDannell may surprise some readers by arguing that the much-discussed 1995 document "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" has been effective precisely because it asserts general principles, while leaving the details to "the couple and the Lord," to use language taken from the Church handbook statement on contraception [167]. That doesn't mean she ignores the many unresolved contradictions in this document.)

Though it seems clear that the Church will allow a great deal of personal interpretation, especially in areas where cultural practice rather than doctrine are at issue, in recent years, it has not hesitated to silence overt challenges to its authority. The inspiration of local lay leadership can become the mode of enforcement, as in the case of Kate Kelly, who was excommunicated for refusing to back down when she and her followers attracted press attention by attempting to enter a general priesthood meeting to which only men were invited (185–89).

The epilogue to *Sister Saints* is filled with thoughtful observations about possible futures for Latter-day Saint women. It makes clear, however, that the direction of change will depend not only on pronouncements from Salt Lake City but on the actions, individual and collective, of real Latter-day Saint women. Young women, for example, who learn new leadership skills by serving missions may or may not "lean in" at the ward and general Church level. "The problem of the future," she argues, "might be less a feminist one of expanding official roles for women and more a pragmatic one of women choosing not to put their energy into church life" (197). Real women, in all their diversity, are crucial to the survival of the Church. They are the ones who will determine "whether the next generation remains committed to their faith—and precisely what shape that faith will take" (202).

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich recently retired from Harvard University. She received the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize for her book *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). Her latest book is *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).