

Of the Anti-Mormon Tradition

EARLY OPPONENTS

Our experts on Joseph Smith would have no difficulty at all condemning Jesus. They could have been of real assistance to the high priest when he was embarrassed because his witnesses contradicted each other. . . . The Sanhedrin could have used the useful theory that such disagreement was proof positive that Jesus had been deceiving all those people. And to what did the diligent perjurers bear witness? It was the old story: “We heard him say . . .” “Once he told me . . .” In vain the Lord pointed out that he did not make secret disclosures to individuals. They convicted him in the end for claiming he was the Messiah—which was legally no crime at all.

“Myth Makers,” *CWHN* 11:276

The devoted followers of religious leaders are not noted for restraint and objectivity in the things they tell about their adored leaders, and the least reliable class of all are former believers who have turned against a leader. The only authority for what John says is John, and the only acceptable authority for Joseph Smith’s story is Joseph Smith, not the Whitmers or Willard Chase or Pomeroy Tucker.

“Censoring the Joseph Smith Story,” *CWHN* 11:61

Combine the ambition and jealousy of small souls with the sanctions of religion and you have the most powerful motivation for persecution and chicanery, however the guilty parties may protest their freedom from bias and their Christian motives.

“Myth Makers,” *CWHN* 11:128

[As portrayed in early anti-Mormon literature] women are the fragile and helpless victims of male brutality, commanding sympathy and attention. Women cannot be questioned too closely in delicate matters. The natural modesty of the sex exonerates them from the task of telling shocking stories or giving any proof for them while at the same time the humanity and idealism of the same sex requires them to be sure to mention the stories and tell *about* them. To be emotional rather than explicit is woman’s prerogative, which no one with a spark of chivalry would question. Small wonder, then, that the *feminine touch* is the hallmark of anti-Mormon creativity.

“Sounding Brass,” *CWHN* 11:550-51

Far more Christians were martyred under the eyes of prefects, governors, and emperors than by spontaneous mob action, but it was almost invariably done “for fear of the multitude. . . .”

The purest form of the mob is the lynch-mob. But when are such not acting as vigilantes defending law and order? What the Mormons call “the Missouri mob” were in their own eyes defending home and country as they marched under the leadership of duly constituted civil, military, and ecclesiastical officers.

“Acclamatio,” 11

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How can they presume to criticize a religion in which they do not believe? Is that not akin to the folly of criticizing a painting which one has not seen or music which one has not heard? The insider and the outsider do not experience the same thing at all.

Students of Greek religion, however they may yearn for a whiff of incense or asphodel, can smell today nothing but the musk and floorwax of the stacks, the last labyrinthine retreat of the ancient mysteries. . . . There is something in Greek religion which even at this vast remove of time and in spite of the officious and bookish handling of evidence can still reach us and move us. To become aware of this thing, the modern analytic mind must be subjected to a gentle softening process, first by placing it over the low flame of harmless generalization.

“Sophic and Mantic,” *CWHN* 10:311:12

THE ANTI-MORMON STYLE

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Some years ago I made a long study of just what objections had been raised against Mormonism in the past. From the beginning it was always the same. Nobody was really worried about polygamy, which was in fact a welcome stick to beat the Mormons with; the ferocious denunciations from press and pulpit, the incitement of mobs, and the stampeding of legislatures always rested on one thing alone—the incredible fact that in an age of modern enlightenment, universal education, and scientific supremacy there should be found coexisting with Christian civilization a community of primitives so ignorant, so deluded, and depraved as to believe in revelations from heaven and the operation of charismatic gifts.

“Sophic and Mantic,” *CWHN* 10:360-61

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The exotic [anti-Mormon] literature . . . has always been esteemed by Latter-day Saints as something beneath notice, and by their enemies as a treasure beyond price, the value of which, to quote Pomeroy Tucker’s panegyrist, “will increase as time takes the world farther from the origin of the delusion.”

And indeed, the passing of time has invested with an aura of antiquity and hence of authenticity documents which have no other merit than their age. It is these documents which remain to this day the rock on which the critics of

Joseph Smith and the Mormons have built their house. The experts accept them with straight faces because they have no choice. These are not merely the standard sources for early Mormon history, they are virtually the *only* sources, unless one is willing to make the supreme *sacrificium intellectus* [intellectual sacrifice] and listen to the Mormon side of the story.

As the only witnesses against Joseph Smith these poor gossips must be allowed permanent tenure. We can expect that for years to come they will be solemnly quoted in scholarly writings which will in turn be solemnly praised by overworked reviewers who are only too glad to believe that every footnote is authentic and that an appendix is enough to establish the total veracity of any book.

But if some waggish reviewer were to take off a few hours some day to make a spot-check of the references in the latest books and articles on Mormon beginnings, he would soon find out what the fortunate reader of this book is about to discover—that the whole structure of anti-Mormon scholarship rests on trumped-up evidence.

Foreword to *Myth Makers*

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The commonest objection to this writer's mystery thriller, *The Myth Makers*, is that the book is waste of paper—less in a literary sense than as a laboring of the over-obvious, the beating of a dead horse. Would that were so!

When friends and enemies protest that the charges against Joseph Smith are brought by witnesses so obviously prejudiced and unprincipled that only a[n] . . . idiot would make an issue of their accusations, it is the writer's painful duty to point out that those accusations are to this day the soul and substance of a large and flourishing school of anti-Mormon literature, most of it going under the banner of serious scholarship.

If the investigator really wants to know how far supposedly intelligent and serious-minded people can go in their myth making, we would recommend a calm appraisal of Mr. Wallace's story of Ann Eliza's wondrous romance with Brigham Young [*The Twenty-seventh Wife*]. As a piece of sheer effrontery it is unsurpassed in the annals of literature, or at least in the literature that this writer has got through in forty years of grimly systematic reading.

Let it be clearly understood, then, that but for one peculiar circumstance the discussion that follows is a total waste of time and paper. The peculiar circumstance is that the drivel we are to survey is taken seriously by large numbers of our fellow citizens and were it to go unchallenged would pass in time as a correct and accurate history, a true portrait of Brigham Young and a true measure of his religion.

"Sounding Brass," *CWHN* 11:581-82

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For your readers, Mormonism is what *you* [the anti-Mormon writer] say it is. It is to establish that thesis that you have been at such pains with your personal buildup. Once entrenched as an official guide, you can take your readers where you please. It is not the *thing* you are showing them from then on, but your *interpretation* of the thing.

It has been the practice of religious polemic in every age to attack not what the opposition practice and preach but our impression of what they practice and preach. "Blasphemy!" was the heading of the first published report on the

Book of Mormon, and Alexander Campbell sincerely believed it *was* blasphemy. The early anti-Christian writers were just as sincere. Blasphemy had been from the beginning the stock charge against Jesus and the apostles, just as it is the favorite word of anti-Mormon writers. Didn't Jesus recommend publicly that those who "offended" should be glad to have a millstone hung about their necks and be cast into the sea? Blood atonement! Didn't he instruct his followers to hate—yes, hate—their own mothers and fathers and children? Horrible, horrible! To hate even their own lives? A cult of suicide, no less! And then to have innocent babes and venerable ancients damned eternally for no other sin than not having had the ridiculous dunking that so shocked Ann Eliza; and to proclaim that an offender should cut off his own hand or pluck out his own eye—a cult of self-mutilation! And didn't the founder spend his time in private "conversations" with women, including women of ill-repute? And weren't his followers the dregs of society, who admitted that respectable people avoided them? Didn't they preach the shocking doctrine of a physical resurrection?—even doctors of the Church like Origen and Jerome squirm uncomfortably. Their notorious "love feasts"—too indecent to write about—show they meant it literally when they called each other "brother" and "sister" and then proceeded to intermarry in a cult of incest.

"Sounding Brass," *CWHN* 11:510-12

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When one is making grave criminal charges, either directly or by broad implication as all anti-Mormon writers do, questions of evidence can be very bothersome unless one has the wisdom and foresight to avoid all such questions. Surprisingly enough this can be done rather easily [as we shall illustrate] . . . in a situation which we shall call "The House That Jack Built":

1. It is common knowledge that Jack built a house. It is that house which we are now discussing.
2. There are rumors that a good deal of malt—very probably stolen—was stored in the house. What lends plausibility to the report is the building of the house itself—by Jack. Why a house, if not to store the stolen malt?
3. It is said that the malt was eaten by rats, and in view of the high nutriment content of malt (see Appendix A for references to scholarly and scientific studies proving beyond a doubt that malt is nutritious), there is no good reason for doubting this report.
4. The rats may very possibly have been killed by a cat, as some believe, and there is certainly nothing intrinsically improbable in the event. On the contrary, studies made at the Rodent Institute of the University of So and So, etc. . . . The report that only *one* rat ate the malt is of course erroneous, since the consumption of such a large quantity of malt would require many years and probably a large number of rats.
5. That the cat was chased by a dog is only to be expected. Only a fanatic would question it.
6. The same applies to the dog's being tossed by a cow, though it is admittedly a less common event.
7. "*At any rate*" (a very useful expression) we can be reasonably certain that the cow was milked by a milkmaid—what other kind of maid could it have been?—and also (since there is no good reason to doubt it) that the milkmaid, whose name may have been Bertha, was wooed by a man all tattered and torn. There are unmistakable references in the newspapers of the time (or at most a generation later) to poorly dressed men known as "tramps" roaming parts of the country. There can therefore be little doubt that Bertha was engaged in a passionate public wooing.

8. The exact date of Bertha's marriage to her tatterdemalion lover is not known, though it *may* have been some time late in January 1858. Certainly the court records of the time are silent on any earlier or later marriage.

9. Though there is no direct evidence that Bertha was mistreated by the man who wooed her so passionately, there is every evidence of cruel neglect both in the proven fact that Bertha apparently had no house to live in (at least there is no record of her having a house in the county archives) and in the character of the man who married and abused her.

It will hardly be necessary to point out to the student the solid advantage of such little touches as "the *exact* date" . . . in No. 8. Since no date at all is known, it is perfectly true to say that the exact date is not known, implying that an approximate date *is* known: "it *may* have been in January 1858"—true again, perfectly true—it may also have been in September 1902 or May 1320. Again, if there is no evidence whatever that Bertha was mistreated (or even that she existed), it is both shrewd and correct to say that there is no *direct* evidence, implying, while not saying, that there is plenty of indirect evidence.

Let the student check the above ten points for evidence. There is none! We have given the world a suffering Bertha and her brutal spouse without having to prove a thing.

"Sounding Brass," *CWHN* 11:495-98