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Toward a Reconstruction of Mormon and Indian Relations, 1847–1877

Ronald W. Walker

There are reminiscent stories about the last days of the Ute chief Black Hawk. Tormented by his several years’ warpath and pillage, the physically broken warrior toured central and southern Utah asking forgiveness. At times, his rite bordered on self-flagellation. Tonsured at his request as an act of penance, he spoke of his obvious decline and of Brigham Young’s dark prophecy that those who opposed the Saints would inevitably wither. Would the settlers, he asked, absolve him?²

At first I set the tableau aside. While aware of Black Hawk’s conciliatory last travels, I thought stories of maledictions and penance were too pat and after the fact. But as my research continued, primary sources confirmed their outline. My experience, with a figure and episode of more than ordinary importance, suggests the incomplete and tentative nature of studies of Native Americans in the Brigham Young era. To be sure, much has been done. Consult the catalog of any large Utah or Mormon repository, and you will find an abundance of articles on Native Americans.² But the work is episodic and often uneven. At best scholars have illuminated perspectives rather than panoramas. Just to cite a few examples, we still wait for major studies of the Walker and Tintic wars—not to mention Utah Indian wars in general. We have neither monograph nor book on the Utah militia. With two or three exceptions, Indian biography, tribal surveys, and ecohistories have not been undertaken, at least in depth. Brigham Young’s Indian dealing, his role as ex officio superintendent of Indian affairs, his directives relating to the Gunnison and Mountain Meadows massacres, and his ongoing relationship with Saint and Indian all require further study. Also needed are surveys dealing with government agents and policy, pertinent law, trading and commerce, the overlooked events of the last decade of Brigham Young’s leadership, and Mormon-Indian relations, especially at the daily level of ordinary settlers and tribesmen. Above all, we need summary and synthesis.

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The length of this laundry list is surprising on at least two counts. Since mid-twentieth century, Mormon history has been a fruitful enterprise. Scores of increasingly sophisticated articles and books arrive each year, yet with short shrift rendered to Indian studies. In contrast, one need only scan the *Western Historical Quarterly*'s articles and reviews to document that at the same time western and national historians have given dramatic and leading attention to the topic.

Is this disparity simply another indication of Mormon peculiarity and relative isolation? Western and national historians who have written on the Native Americans during the last several decades were influenced by a post-Vietnam, New Frontier legacy. Much of their writing is antiarmy, antiwar, and pro-environment, with an equal revulsion for colonization and racism. Of course there have been broader currents. But even the more balanced treatments betray a climate of opinion, like twentieth-century historiography generally, that exults in cultural diversity and has little patience with ideology and absolute values.

Perhaps this is the reason why Mormon historians have largely allowed Native American studies to pass them by. Whatever its reputation in some quarters, the tenor of Mormon studies, at least from a national perspective, has been bland and conservative. We have been more prone to introspection than to challenge and protest. This inward tendency in turn has limited our attention to cultures different from our own.

But the most inhibiting factor to the study of Mormon-Indian relations probably lies in the usual historical interpretation of the Mormon experience with the Native American. Since pioneer times, Mormons have seen their acts toward the Indian as kindly and well meaning, and the majority of Mormon historians when crafting an occasional chapter or article have spoken with this viewpoint. They liked what they saw, or at least unconsciously accepted the cultural assumptions of which they were a part. This tendency has led to what might be described as the traditional view of Mormon-Indian relations. Begun by Hubert Howe Bancroft, Orson F. Whitney, and B. H. Roberts, it has continued in our own time with such scholars as Juanita Brooks. In an early article that had a wider implication than her apparent focus, Brooks examined the pioneer practice of taking Indian children into white homes. While she was not at all sure of the long-lasting success of the program, her conclusions were otherwise warmly supportive of both Brigham Young and his outlying settlers. Brooks’s article had another importance. In examining this early
attempt at acculturation, she provided an early though seldom followed example of Mormon-Indian people’s history.⁵

Charles E. Dibble’s treatment of the Mormon mission to the Shoshoni was an equally important early survey. Dibble presaged later writing by placing the Mormon advance into the “land of the Shoshoni” within the cultural context of both white and red man. On one hand, like Brooks he acknowledged the Mormons’ “special view of their own mission and the mission of the Indian.” But he also traced Mormon success and failure within the Shoshoni’s own cultural patterns.⁶ Subsequent writers have also pursued the theme of Mormon missions. David L. Bigler treated the ill-fated Fort Limhi, Idaho, settlement among the Bannocks.⁷ L. A. Fleming studied the Muddy River settlements in present-day southeastern Nevada, while Charles S. Peterson documented the Mormons’ proselyting efforts with the Hopi.⁸ Though none of these pieces has the explicit sympathy of Brooks’s article, none bears acrimony. They are content to tell their story within the framework of established interpretation: The Mormon-Indian frontier, while never without tension and even conflict, was nevertheless characterized by the Mormons’ good intentions.⁹

The dean of Mormon historians, Leonard J. Arrington, also offered a supportive view. Writing several chapters on Indians while working on larger topics, Arrington, and in one case his coauthor Davis Bitton, updated the long-standing consensus. Arrington provided a broader survey of Brigham Young’s policy, from the initial pioneer adjuration to “fort up” to later techniques aimed at assimilating Utah’s Native Americans into Anglo society. In describing Mormon policy Arrington used words like “cooperation,” “conciliation,” “patience,” and “forbearance.” Yet he also acknowledged the tension between the Mormons’ kindly Indian dealing and the requirements inherent in their large-scale colonization on Native American lands:

Brigham’s Indian policy did not encompass respect or recognition for the values and outlook of their culture; he cannot fairly be portrayed as enlightened in a sense that would satisfy the militant Native Americans of today. Nonetheless, viewed in the nineteenth-century context, when ruthless exploitation and genocide were all too common, Brigham displayed moderation and a willingness to share.¹⁰

In sharp contrast to the views of the traditional historians, beginning in the late 1970s a competing version of events has emerged. Like the revisionists outside Utah and no doubt inspired by them, these younger historians approach the topic from what they feel was the Indian or at least a non-Mormon point of view.
Instead of cooperation on the Mormon-Indian frontier, they sense conflict. They see less philanthropy in Mormon dealing than cant. They look mostly in vain for anything praiseworthy or even unusual about the Mormon-Indian experience. Utah and the Intermountain West were largely the same old American refrain: two cultures sharply in conflict with the weaker left without rights, lands, or dignity.

The products of this newer approach are neither numerous nor comprehensive. No one has attempted even the limited overview undertaken by Arrington. One of the more active revisionists is Floyd A. O’Neil, director of the American West Center at the University of Utah. O’Neil began his study with a still unpublished Ph.D. dissertation on the Ute nation, followed some years later by an article on Mormon frontiersman George Washington Bean, which deals less with Bean than with Mormon-Indian relations in general. O’Neil also coauthored with Stanford J. Layton an interpretation of Brigham Young as Indian superintendent.11

The latter study is representative of the new approach. O’Neil and Layton see the Mormons’ land hunger as voracious, their motives suspect, and their effect on the Indians “devastating.” Brigham Young in turn is viewed, especially in his dealings with Washington-appointed territorial officials, as arbitrary and ultimately ineffectual. The authors, however, concede some Mormon peculiarity: “Mormonism’s stormy midwestern experience, its New England heritage, its scriptural base, and its schizophrenic view of government in the nineteenth century combined to create its own script that was acted out on the Utah stage.”12 It is, however, clearly an unpleasant drama, without much attractiveness insofar as the Mormon actors go.

Several articles by other scholars have continued the strain. Howard A. Christy argues that “hostility and bloodshed, as much as benevolence and conciliation, characterized Mormon-Indian relations in Utah before 1852.” In point of fact, the former categories dominate Christy’s survey. Centering his attention on Brigham Young and the Mormons’ “Fort Utah” settlement near present-day Provo, Christy concludes that the Mormons held themselves to be culturally superior (indeed like the Indians themselves), took their lands, and at least during the period of survey failed to ameliorate Indian conditions by a policy of benevolence. According to Christy, the result was not unique. Like Native Americans elsewhere, Indians in Utah were not civilized, but destroyed.13

Others find equal harshness. Albert Winkler focuses on Mormon violence during the Black Hawk War that culminated in the killing of imprisoned Paiute men, women, and children at
Circleville, Utah, “the largest massacre,” Winkler believes, “of Indians in Utah’s history.”14 R. Warren Metcalf’s view of the Black Hawk War is similar, holding that “the settlers first expropriated . . . [Indian] lands and then, when they resisted or became a nuisance, the government removed them. The Black Hawk War may thus be seen as the hostile phase of this familiar pattern.”15 Perhaps Eugene Campbell’s Establishing Zion provides the fullest statement of the new school. Devoting two of his nineteen chapters to the subject, Campbell summarizes previous findings. First, he argues for Mormon inconsistency. While the settlers’ scriptural injunctions and good intentions might impel them to found Indian missions, their treatment of the Native American was besotted by harsh encounters. Emphasizing tension, conflict, and the similarity of Mormon ways to the broader American experience, Campbell holds that Mormon colonization was disastrous for the Native American.16

The challenge of the revisionists met with surprising passivity. Only Lawrence G. Coates, a professor of history at Ricks College, rose to the traditionalists’ defense. Frankly acknowledging the Saints’ ways were not always those of Brigham Young, Coates maintains that President Young’s relations “with the Indians were more than pious expressions of good will or statements of empty dreams, hopes, and visions.” If this argument was intended as a riposte to O’Neil and Layton, Coates appears equally willing to take on Christy, insisting that Brigham Young’s acts, “more than simple deeds of kindness or acts of violence,” were a “blend of his social-religious-humanitarian philosophy and practical measures that he thought necessary for establishing the Mormon kingdom of God on earth.”17

The debate over Mormon Indian policy embraces some of the issues—and problems—of the larger, national discussion. Certainly some of the revisionists evince a higher appreciation, or tolerance, of Indian culture and viewpoint. Environmental issues are also at times manifest, with at least several of the revisionists treating the Indian as something of a model or at least a successful ecologist. But if new perspectives are provided, there is also a lamentable downside. Too often revisionist passion hinders thorough and balanced analysis. Indeed, some of the younger authors only reverse the roles of previous heroes and villains, creating fresh stereotypes in their wake.

Of course not all historical writing of the topic fits neatly into the two categories. A second article by Howard Christy mixes elements of both. Christy describes the passive defensive tactics successfully employed by Mormon leaders during the Walker War,
arguing that such a strategy was unprecedented in Mormon-Indian dealing and perhaps “unique in the general western [United States] experience.” But he is not prepared to abandon the thesis of conflict. Were not the leadership’s defensive tactics during the war an admission of its earlier failure with the “mailed fist”? Moreover, Christy chooses to accentuate the rank-and-file’s resistance to the tactic. Didn’t this document the “average” Mormon’s hostility to the red man?²¹

Other writers have stood outside the polar tensions of Native American and Mormon studies. Gustive O. Larson narrates the circumstances of the important 1865 Spanish Fork treaty. In exchange for the promise of long-term annuities, the negotiated but unratified treaty tried to extinguish Ute land titles.¹⁹ Thomas G. Alexander’s study of relations with the Interior Department places Mormon and Utah Indian matters into a wider, national scope, while Beverly Beeton’s review of the Utah Indian farms, 1850–62, provides useful detail without the usual advocacy.²⁰ Finally, Beverly P. Smaby broadens the interpretive categories in her study of Mormons and Indians in the Great Basin. Less interested in sorting out blame than in understanding events, Smaby uses an ecological framework uniting geography, social organization, demography, and cultural values to describe the Mormon and Native American tension. Her “resource utilization” model finds two cultures radically at odds, with the Saints guilty not so much of blood and carnage as of excessive optimism and naiveté: “The Mormons, so inventive in solving problems of their own continued existence, were unable to appreciate the Indian ecological system; hence they were not in a position to supply any plan for change which grew from the concerns of Indian culture.”²¹

Where do Mormon-Indian studies go from here? How can the varying historiographical perspectives be used to reconstruct a new and perhaps holistic design? A national perspective reminds us of the usual Hegelian process inherent in such controversies. In the national Native American literature, the advocacy of the 1960s and 1970s replaced the established thesis, and in turn the new antithesis has given way to synthesis. Recent works by Robert Berkhofer, Henry Warner Bowden, William Hagan, Clyde A. Milner, and Francis Paul Prucha have blurred polarities by suggesting the commonsense proposition that no race monopolizes good and evil. This new mood, perhaps a reflection of the cultural relativism of our own time, avoids the imposition of personal values, eschews ideological tirade for attempted balance, respects opposing cultures, and speaks softly, dispassionately, and when judging
human motive even ambiguously.\textsuperscript{22} Certainly these are not unworthy goals or themes.

The job must commence by expanding and homogenizing sources. Perhaps because of the daunting task before them, few scholars have mastered basic Mormon, Utah, and Bureau of Indian Affairs materials. For instance, the readily available Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints contains an unusually rich lode of Indian resources, unfortunately concealed by a thoroughly unusable index on the topic.\textsuperscript{23} The LDS Church Archives contain over one hundred diaries touching pioneer-Indian activity. Even more crucial, the Native American materials in the Brigham Young correspondence, largely favorable to the traditional view, have been the sole domain of Leonard Arrington and Lawrence Coates; no one else came knocking even when these materials were readily available.\textsuperscript{24} Equally underused are the important Utah militia papers housed mainly at the Utah State Archives. Historians have made better use of the extensive but sometimes anti-Mormon Bureau of Indian Affairs letters and memoranda, but hardly in a comprehensive way. The best Native American work has dipped into a variety of these Mormon and non-Mormon sources. More often, selective research has produced selective conclusions.

Moreover, we must do a better job at understanding the Native American. Roy Harvey Pearce’s observation is to the point: “White Americans in talking about the Indians have usually been talking to themselves about themselves.”\textsuperscript{25} Historians are not without knowledge of the Utah tribes.\textsuperscript{26} But their reliance on traditional written sources has inhibited penetration and understanding. Even surviving Indian statements are inevitably strained through white perception, and as a result European cultural concepts have often been applied to the Indian in a rough and heavy-handed manner.

Examples of our ignorance are not difficult to find. Basic questions such as Indian population and mortality can be posed but not readily answered. Most surveys place Utah’s indigenous population at the arrival of the Mormons somewhere between twelve thousand and thirty-five thousand, a not insubstantial margin of error. It is significant, however, that recent national historians and demographers speak with one voice in positing much higher population estimates for the North American aborigines—in some cases estimates have risen by a factor of more than nine.\textsuperscript{27} The implications of the higher calculations, even if only partially applicable to the Great Basin, are suggestive. White man’s diseases—typhoid, diphtheria, colds, gonorrhea, influenza,
chicken pox, whooping cough, tuberculosis, yellow fever, scarlet fever, strep infections, and especially measles, smallpox, and syphilis—wreaked terrible havoc.\textsuperscript{28} One mountain man thought the decline in Indian population began two decades prior to the coming of large-scale white migration and settlement. Thereafter it continued apace or accelerated.\textsuperscript{29}

Indian disease and decline suggest important questions. Was the struggle for game and land as great as some have thought? A diminished Indian population may have sustained itself at former and even higher levels despite a narrowing resource base, at least in the short run. At least some Indians, such as Kanosh, reported an improved living standard a decade after the Mormons began to move onto their lands.\textsuperscript{30} Does the virulence of European disease account for what seems the rapid decline in Indian folk healing—and perhaps other traditional beliefs as well?\textsuperscript{31} The shaman-healer must have been seen as utterly impotent before the new scourges. Finally, we need to assess the role of disease as a factor in Indian behavior, both in inciting and moderating it. Disoriented and confused Indians at times blamed Mormon deviltry for sickness within their tribes.\textsuperscript{32} On the other hand, members of Black Hawk’s band testified to the role of infirmity and death in bringing their warfare to an end.\textsuperscript{33}

More needs to be known of other matters besides disease patterns. Historians too often have spoken cavalierly about Indian political organization, suggesting a unity or homogeneity that never existed. Some have generalized unwisely, citing the statements or behavior of one Indian or group and applying it indiscriminately to others. Utah Indian structure was diffuse, fluid, and local. Scores of petty bands, often with only nominal or temporary chiefs, pursued their own interests, sometimes mercurially and contradictorily and often contrary to the behavior of their neighboring tribesmen. Of course within the larger tribes there were what white men saw as “grand chiefs.” But even imposing leaders such as Washakee, Sowiette, Tabby, Wakara, and Arapeen complained of their inability to impose consistent discipline. Symptomatic of the problem, Wakara, by virtue of his supposed suzerainty, gained a long-lasting eponym during “Walker War,” though he at times refused responsibility for the conflict and was out of the territory during its final stages.\textsuperscript{34}

The subtribes and tribes reacted differently to the gamut of the white man’s ways. Some responded favorably, at least initially, to the idea of Indian farms, having practiced a rudimentary agriculture prior to the Mormon settlement. Others saw farming as “squaw’s work,” beneath contempt. Arapeen, Kanosh, and Tutsigobot took
to Mormon preachments and became in their own way preachers themselves. Relatively isolated from the Saints in the Uinta Basin, Sowiette and Tabby were more resistant to the Mormon message. The latter chiefs, however, were not opposed to the new reservation at Uinta (for them there was no uprooting), but many others resisted leaving their forefathers' lands and graves. These diffuse and centrifugal tendencies were especially apparent in the Utes' wars with the white men. From the initial "Battle Creek" engagement near present-day Pleasant Grove, Utah, in 1849 to the culminating Black Hawk War a decade and a half later, there was no unified Indian response, with warriors invariably fewer in number than the peacemakers, fence sitters, and informers. The Mormons never lacked for allies.

The cleavages widened at the intertribal level. Shoshonis, Utes, and Paiutes bore a strong animosity for one another. One week after their arrival, the advance party of the Mormons watched a wild fight between a Shoshoni and a Ute, which eventually ended in the latter's death. "The Shoshonis appeared to be displeased because the brethren had traded with the Utes," a pioneer record summarized the substance of the difficulty.35 "The Mormons would find tribal rivalry endemic. Like Indians elsewhere, the Shoshonis and Utes each regarded themselves as "the people" and probably feared their immemorial red enemies more than the white intruder.

Behind the inter- and intratribal rivalries, of course, lay people—individual men and women with personality and feeling, not simply a faceless, blurred historical concept or conglomeration. Certainly we know enough of the early chiefs to begin assigning character. There was the sterling and magisterial Sowiette, bearing the wisdom of old age, consistently seeking peace; Wakara, quick-witted and clever, volatile, light on his feet; Kanosh, the "white man's friend"; Big Elk, brave, cool, determined as he defended his well-chosen ramparts during the Fort Utah conflict; or Squash, angry, manipulating, given to trickery. Together, even using white man's records, their collective portrait is not unsatisfactory. Certainly they were not passive. Taken as a group, the Indian leaders seem able, thoughtful, and, within the measure of their society, honorable. Generally their first impulse—and often their second and third as well—was toward peace. Concerned about their leadership responsibility, most wanted what was best for their followers and seemingly recognized quite early that their nomadic ways must eventually be put aside. The trick, given the deep longings of their culture, was in the doing.
What does this suggest about the writing of Indian history? We must seek new interpretive concepts. We must write carefully with an eye to the particular, but above all must be conscious and respectful of another culture. "If we are going to tell the whole story of Indian-white relations," Wilbur Jacobs has written, "we must make an all-out attempt to picture the clash of cultures so that there will be an understanding of both cultures, not just one. Thus, to give more attention to the Indian side is not necessarily to plead for the Indian point of view."\textsuperscript{36}

Fortunately there are helpful existing disciplines. Too long have the historian, the ethnologist, and the psychological anthropologist pursued their own ways. Ethnography can help make sense of the abundant clues of Indian culture in the written sources. For instance, the records often speak of the "brother" relationship of the major Ute leaders.\textsuperscript{37} Are not at least some of these references to the cross-cousin marriages widely found in American aborigine culture elsewhere? Similarly, the ethnologist can bring understanding of tribal organization and functioning, ecological and social relationships, and the Native American's changing economic system.\textsuperscript{38}

Finally, the rich Indian belief and religious system begs for research, with its guardian spirits, spells, dreams, shamans, and burial rites. While Joseph G. Jorgensen has explored Ute deprivation, religion, and shifting culture, much remains to be done.\textsuperscript{39} For many Great Basin Indians, the 1870s were filled with religious awakening, millennial expectation, reasserted cultural pride, Mormon conversion, and deep visionary quest—all at the time the inaugurated reservation movement seemed to place Indian culture at great risk. From the retrospect of the twentieth century, these developments may have an application beyond Mormon and Indian studies. The religious awakening of the 1870s parallels in many ways the widely documented Third World "cargo-cult religions" of our own time and may provide a case study of a people's religious adaptation to the shock of deep-felt culture change.

If we need to understand the Native American better, the same is true for the Mormon. Despite reams of previous study, in some ways Brigham Young and his followers remain as shrouded in mystery as their Native American counterparts. The problem involves both facts and interpretation. As indicated previously, the field has only been partially cultivated. But as important as further research may be, the challenging and perhaps irreducible problem lies with methods and explication.

The strong sense of advocacy afflicting both Mormon and Indian studies will likely continue. But there are interpretive
approaches that may narrow the differences and bring more understanding. First, Mormon Indian policy must be placed within its wider culture. To an outsider looking in, some of the current arguments must appear strangely skewed. Brigham Young’s 1850 letter urging Indian removal and the extinction of Indian land titles, often cited as an indictment, becomes more understandable within the context of national practice.\textsuperscript{40} Usually titles were cleared prior to or as soon after settlement as possible, but the Mormon advance into Mexican territory, the ambiguity of Indian land rights conveyed in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the slowness of the federal government to clarify them left both Mormon and non-Mormon territorial leaders deeply troubled.\textsuperscript{41}

Other examples of equally narrow interpretation can be cited. For their part, Mormons have not been quick to show that many of their pioneer practices, whether the charity of the Relief Society women in making Indian clothing or Mormon attempts to promote Indian agriculture, education, and conversion, fit into the altruistic practices of the time.\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, the Mormons shared long-term goals with their broader society. Like eastern reformers, they wanted Indian assimilation, which scholars now sense was probably beyond anyone’s grasp. In a passage that might have been written by a historian detailing the Mormon-Indian experience, Clyde Milner has observed: “The assimilationist program often assumed a simplistic correlation between the acceptance of white ways and the establishment of economic prosperity. With the habits of civilization were to come the habits of husbandry and vice versa. Cultural assimilation and agricultural development were to go hand in hand.”\textsuperscript{43} The flaw of course lay in the strength and resiliency of Indian culture, which white Americans, in their ethnocentrism, were not quick to perceive.\textsuperscript{44}

Mormon experience was like experience elsewhere in another respect. Those most prone to humanity and generosity toward the Indians were often removed from daily, intimate contact with them, whether Gilded Age liberals, enlightened military commanders, or reform-minded churchmen.\textsuperscript{45} In the case of the Saints, the incidence of misbehavior and culpability seemed to grow with each concentric circle radiating from Brigham Young and the Mormon leadership. The gap between the ideal and the real left the Mormon prophet despairing: “If the inhabitants of this Territory, my brethren, had never condescended to reduce themselves to the practices of the Indian—as a few of them have—to their low, degraded condition, and in some cases even lower, there never would have been any trouble between us and our red neighbors.”\textsuperscript{46} Or consider Young’s letter to Arapene during the Tintic War:
I feel just as well with you as I ever did. I sometimes think that if we could get a valley a way off alone and could get all the Mormons that want to fight Indians and wont hear, and all the Indians that want to fight and wont listen to good talk such as you give them and let them fight till they were satisfied that it would be the means of making a good peace.47

One need not probe too deeply to sense the tension between Brigham and some of his followers. While many attempted to adhere to his policy of conciliation, no doubt others bridled at his counsel. A few responded publicly. One correspondent spoke of the heavy demands the Indians made on the settlers and called for a “firm” policy of discipline. In a thinly veiled allusion to the Mormon leader, he wrote, “Should hostilities ensue, whilst we wish our leaders to be prudent, wise men, we would rather cho[o]se those who have learned other military tactics than the extreme of officers to the rear in time of danger and well away to the front on the retreat.”48

Was there something unique or unusual in the Mormons’ Indian experience after all? One suspects from the impressionistic evidence before us that there is a story waiting to be told. We do know from the work of Arrington, Coates, and Christy that especially after 1850 Brigham Young preached a conciliatory policy, which at least in the Walker War resulted in a defensive, almost pacifistic stance.49 He was as cautious during the Black Hawk difficulty, reminding Orson Hyde, who directed Mormon affairs at the seat of the conflict in Sanpete County:

Our past experience with the Indian tribes with which we have come in contact has led us to adopt as a maxim that it is cheaper to feed Indians than to fight them. The correctness of this maxim is especially forced upon us when we consider the great risk the brethren run of losing their lives in endeavoring to whip or kill the marauders. The loss of the life of even one faithful man is something too valuable to be put in the scale against any number of these Indians. . . .

The plan we now propose to adopt is to stop fighting altogether, and as soon as possible establish communication with the disaffected Indians and endeavor to make peace with them by means of presents.50

President Young’s new policy did not bring a quick end to the conflict. With depredations continuing, he moved a half year later to quiet growing white animosity. Calling a meeting of the Saints at Springville, he touched first on the comments of a previous speaker: “Brother [Ezra T.] Benson expressed himself as though some of the brethren felt like wiping out the Lamanites [Indians] in these regions, root and branch. The evil passions that arise in our
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hearts would prompt us to do this, but we must bring them into subjection to the law of Christ.” He then asked the Saints to forgive past depredations and allow malefactors to resume a place in their communities:

When they come to live in your vicinity again, let them come in peace. . . Do we wish to do right? . . . Then let the Lamanites come back to their homes, where they were born and brought up. This is the land that they and their fathers have walked over and called their own; and they have just as good a right to call it theirs to-day as any people have to call any land their own. . . .

. . . We should now use the Indians kindly, and deal with them so gently that we will win their hearts and affections to us more strongly than before; and the much good that has been done them, and the many kindnesses that have been shown them, will come up before them, and they will see that we are their friends.51

Other evidence can be suggested beside Brigham Young’s sermonizing. In the aftermath of the Spanish Fork treaty, O. H. Irish acknowledged Brigham’s sway. “He has pursued so kind and conciliatory a policy with the Indians,” he reported to his Washington superiors, “that it has given him great influence over them.”52 Even an antagonistic observer, Agent Garland Hurt, acknowledged the scale of Mormon Indian subsidies. He complained, in fact, that they had become too great a burden on the Mormon rank and file.53 Following the Indian incursions into Sanpete County in 1872, Camp Douglas commander Lieutenant Colonel Henry Morrow was impressed with the Saints’ self-control. The Indians had become “arrogant, domineering, and dictatorial,” entering homes, demanding specially prepared food, requisitioning livestock. “I think I may say with truthfulness,” Morrow reported, “that there is not another American community in the nation which would have endured half the outrages these people endured, before rising up as one man to drive out the savage invaders at the point of the bayonet.”54 While the question is yet to be fully treated, we may tentatively posit that the scope and duration of the Mormons’ conciliatory policy may have been unusual, perhaps exceptional.

This hypothesis does not set aside the primary assumption of the revisionist school. Tension and strife were endemic in Mormon-Indian affairs, with Indian land rights usually at the center of things. The Mormons pursued an uneven land policy, sometimes taking refuge in the scriptural injunction that the land belonged to no man—neither Indian, Mormon, Mexican, nor American. It was the Lord’s and for everyone to share.55 On other occasions, they struck deals, securing occupancy in lieu of services or goods. Sometimes they simply settled, taking much of the ground but
reserving parcels for Indian use. In several instances, driven to desperation by Indian depredations, they offered to buy large tracts from Wakara and others. More generally they asserted the clearing of Indian titles was a federal government responsibility. Through the several permutations of their policy, they generally upheld an Indian moral right. Young claimed his followers had never settled on Indian ground without permission, and until titles could be established the Mormons bore an obligation to provide the original occupants compensating food and assistance.56

If Mormon motives and policies were mixed, so were those of the Native Americans. As elsewhere in the nation, Utah’s Indians perceived cultural and economic advantages to white settlement. Trading their skins and labor, they secured from the Mormons horses, guns, ammunition, and learning into white man’s ways. While often beneficial to both parties, the arrangement sometimes brought tension. Brigham Young admitted that while the Native Americans had “universally solicited” Mormon settlement, their hospitality could sour: “If they in some few instances should happen to be refused a piece of bread, or a beef ox when it could not be spared, they might anger up a moment, or wish to force presents, complain that this was their land and wish us to leave.”57

For President Young’s part, he believed the ensuing tension was less than in other frontier settlements.58 That proposition is yet to be demonstrated. But it seems reasonable to conclude that the Mormon-Indian frontier had elements of both conflict and cooperation, and that when interpreting the Mormon-Indian experience, historians would do well to set aside polarities for models of human complexity and diversity. The breadth of data cannot be encompassed otherwise.

An illustration will conclude the point. During the pioneer era, soldiers, forty-niners, Gentile settlers, and territorial officials each charged the Mormons with Indian “tampering,” that is, controlling the Indians for their own purposes independent of national policy.59 That charge, which had truth to it, is hardly consistent with the revisionists’ stress on unalloyed conflict. Would embattled and hostile Indians have been pliable to Mormon influence? Why did Bureau of Indian Affairs agents fear a Mormon and Indian alliance and consistently report many of the Indians’ pro-Mormon sympathies?

This leads to a final element in the proposed new synthesis. The new Indian history needs to place the Native American into the texture of pioneer life, and it is here that the revisionists’ emphasis on conflict has particularly been ill serving. Too often the Utah Indian has appeared in our histories simply as a barrier to white
man’s civilization. We have emphasized wars and warriors instead of painting the broader landscape of everyday life. Sometimes the record seems expunged, as though a censor’s scissors had been at work. Historians for example have typically described the Salt Lake Valley upon the pioneers’ arrival as an uninhabited no-man’s land, a Ute-Shoshoni march. Yet Brigham Young remembered three hundred Indians periodically camped at their Warm Springs traditional camp, with additional clans to the south and east. Accounts of the inaugural Pioneer Day celebration of 1849 say little about the Native American, though one of its purposes was Indian pacification, and Wakara and two hundred of his tribesmen ate the Saints’ bounty. Despite the paucity of detail in contemporary accounts, after the initial stage of settlement Indians became part of the warp and woof of most Mormon communities, coming and going, interacting with the settlers. This was also true during the first decade after the establishment of the Uinta reservation, when contrary to some narratives the bulk of the Indians remained with the whites on their ancestral lands.

Much of this daily, common detail can be reconstructed from diaries. The neglected Works Progress Administration historical records, for example, provide fascinating glimpses. “The Ute Indians were always around,” remembered one respondent on early Round Valley life. Hannah McFarlane Bingham recalled the arrival of a thirty-six member Indian camp on a sand ridge east of Ogden. Only eight years old, she played with the Indian children until her brother accidentally stepped on an Indian child’s foot. The child’s frightened cries brought “two old buck Indians” wielding a butcher knife. “Her brother ran home, ducked under the bed, very much frightened. Her father had to give them flour and sugar to pacify them. Mrs. Bingham never played with the Indian children again.”

This kind of detail suggests the intimacy between the two peoples—but also the cultural gap that divided them. Their religious dealings demonstrated as much. Particularly in the early 1850s, the Mormons actively evangelized the Indians, baptizing many and ordaining prominent chiefs to the Mormon priesthood. But probably not until the 1870s did the Indians demonstrate much Mormon identity. Then, hundreds voluntarily submitted to baptism or rebaptism. To the Mormons it seemed the scriptural fulfillment that “a nation will be born in a day.”

During this period the Mormons accelerated their program of “civilizing,” establishing Indian farms in the Malad and Thistle valleys and another in the west desert. But a decade later Church President John Taylor acknowledged the failure of the Mormons to
deal effectively with their red brethren: "It has been too much the habit in many places to have the Indians to take care of themselves in religious matters," he observed. "They have been baptized and confirmed and then left to do as they please."65

By the end of Brigham Young's presidency, from the Mormon perspective there were successes as well as failures. President Young's policy had neutralized the primary chiefs and primary clans; most Utah Indian hostility during his thirty-year administration had been localized and spasmodic. The wholesale carnage of many other communities had been avoided. Probably the majority of Utah's Native Americans were at least nominal Mormons. Yet, unfortunately, there was also distress. Government Indian Agents reported the decline of the never-too-strong chiefly power. Disease had wreaked havoc, while the social diseases of alcoholism, gambling, and prostitution were widespread.66

During the winter of 1870, the Deseret News provided a telling vignette, noting that no fewer than five Indians had been seen walking State Road intoxicated: "Three of the five were inclined to mischief; one drew a pistol and the other two drew their butcher knives, and a fight among the three seemed imminent. The pistol was fired, but instead of fighting they sat down and commenced gambling for whisky."67

The incident told of the times—and of what increasingly would occur. In reconstructing Utah's pioneer-Indian relations, we may speak of the need for greater understanding for both the Indian and the Mormon. We may hope that future studies will smooth the sharp contours of past writing and bring newer interpretive categories that will endow the protagonists with greater complexity and humanity. But the story will remain more unpleasant than we might wish. Despite the good intentions of many red men and whites, two opposing and unyoked cultures had clashed, and with disease playing a major role the result became predictable and tragic.
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NOTES

1Mary Goble Pay, "Reminiscences," in Treasures of Pioneer History, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1952-57). 4:208; Deseret News, 21 August 1867; 9 July and 22 December 1869; and Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 25 May 1869, Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives); see also n. 23 below.

2David J. Whittaker, "Mormons and Native Americans: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 18 (Winter 1983): 33-64, offers a fine bibliographic introduction to the topic. While one of the purposes of this article is to discuss recent historical writing on Utah’s Native Americans, readers should also be aware of Peter Gottfredson, Indian Depredations in Utah (Salt Lake City: Skelton Publishing Co., 1919). Gottfredson’s work is anecdotal, fragmentary, and carries the cultural biases of his time, yet it remains the beginning point for nineteenth-century Mormon-Indian research, particularly for military matters.


9In this category might also be placed the preliminary and more conversational Coulsen and Geneva Wright, "Indian-White Relations in the Uintah Basin," Utah Humanities Review 2 (October 1948): 319-45.


9 Eugene E. Campbell, Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847-1869 (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1988), 94, 100. While the focus is not on Mormon-Indian relations, Brigham D. Madsen, The Shoshoni Frontier and the Bear River Massacre (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), and Madsen, Chief Pocatello: The ‘White Plume’ (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986), in passing describe Mormon conduct as confrontational.


15 See n. 4 for full information on the following: Berkhofer, White Man’s Indians; Bowden, American Indians and Christian Missions; Hagan, United States Comanche Relations; Milner, With Good Intentions; Prucha, American Indian Policy in Crisis and Great Father.

16 The Journal History is a huge, multivolume, chronological scrapbook of Mormon miscellany, drawing on diaries, newspapers, personal and official letters, and other LDS church records. Microfilm copies of the collection are lodged in principal Mormon and Utah repositories, including the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.

17 Once open to research, the Brigham Young Collection lately has been inaccessible to scholars without the special permission of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.


20 Wilbur R. Jacobs, “The Indian and the Frontier in American History—A Need for Revision,” Western Historical Quarterly 4 (January 1973): 45. Quite another question is the effect of Western disease on native fauna. Several Indians spoke of the decline of the range after the coming of the mountain men, a generation or two prior to Mormon immigration.

21 Ibid., 46 n. 27. Scholars debate whether some venereal diseases, including syphilis, may have been present in the Americas prior to the coming of the Europeans.


23 Deseret News, 24 August 1854, 27 May 1855, and 1 June 1856.
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32Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1858, LDS Church Archives, 712.


34Brigham Young came to believe him. “Allow me to say a word in behalf of Walker,” he was reported saying in one of his sermons. “I tell this congregation and the world, that ‘Indian Walker,’ as he is called, has not been at the foundation of the difficulties we have had. He has had nothing to do with them” (Deseret News, 11 May 1854).

35Journal History, 31 July 1847, 1. Also see the Howard Egan and Wilford Woodruff journals, LDS Church Archives, for the same date.

36Jacobs, “The Indian and the Frontier.” 43 n. 27.

37Using these references, Conway B. Sonne has posited a Ute family dynasty of fifteen members. See “Royal Blood of the Utes,” Utah Historical Quarterly 22 (July 1954): 271–76.


39See Jorgensen, Sun Dance Religion.

40First Presidency to John M. Bernhisel, 20 November 1850, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives. See also Brigham Young Manuscript History, same date, 108.

41“Petition of Governor [Alfred Cumming] and Judges . . . to A. B. Greenwood,” Journal History, 1 November 1860; and John Dawson, Governor’s Message, Journal History, 10 December 1861, 11. The language of the former (p. 1) is instructive: “It is believed that this Territory presents the only instance of the organization of a Territorial Government by Congress,—the country thrown open to settlement without measures being first adopted to extinguish the Indian title. The result has been repeated and almost constant depredations by the Indians upon the settlers, the destruction of whole fields of grain, stealing and driving away stock, and, in many instances, the most wanton and cruel murder of peaceful and unoffending citizens.” As late as immediately prior to the negotiation of the 1865 Spanish Fork Treaty, the government was unwilling to recognize fully the Indian title. Agent O. H. Irish was instructed to differentiate between “Indian title” and “Indian occupancy” (see William P. Dole to O. H. Irish, 28 March 1865, in Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1865 [Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1865], 148–49).


44Francis Paul Prucha, Great Father, treats this theme at length.


46Brigham Young, Remarks, 6 April 1854, in Deseret News, 11 May 1854.

471 March 1856, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.

48Thomas M Emmott to the Salt Lake Herald, 10 July 1872.


50Brigham Young to Orson Hyde, 1 October 1865, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.

51Brigham Young, “Remarks” (at Springville, 28 July 1866), Deseret News, 16 August 1866. Given at the height of the war, this is one of Young’s most conciliatory, pacificist statements.


53Garland Hurt to J. M. Elliot, 4 October 1856, Indian Affairs Letters, 1824–81. Mormons were not hesitant in noting their heavy Indian tax. While such sentiment could be cited at length,
see "Excursion to Fillmore" (a report of the tour of John M. Bernhisel and Daniel H. Wells), 29 August 1855, Deseret News; and Edward Hunter, Bishops' Meeting, 29 November 1877, Journal History, same date.


45Ps. 24:1, 1 Cor. 10:26. For an example of such Mormon use, see Brigham Young to Washikey, 1 May 1855, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.

46Brigham Young to John M. Bernhisel, 27 May 1856, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives. "We have never in a single instance driven off the Indians from their land," Young claimed, "of this you are well aware."

47Brigham Young to John M. Bernhisel, 27 May 1856, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.

48Brigham Young, sermon at Logan, Utah, 9 September 1866, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.

49For the briefest sampling of evidence, see Anthony Ethier to Deseret News, 2 July 1863, and the following in Indian Affairs Letters, 1824–81: E. J. Steptoe to George W. Manypeny, 5 April 1855; Garland Hurt to Manypeny, 2 May 1855; Henry Martin to William P. Dole, 2 September 1861; John W. Dawson to C. B. Smith, 26 October 1861; O. H. Irish to William P. Dole, 8 September 1864.

50Brigham Young, remarks, Deseret News, 15 April 1871.


52Interview of Moses L. Burdick," Works Progress Administration Utah Historical Records Survey, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter cited as WPA Records).

53Interview with Hannah McFarlane Bingham," WPA Records.

54Edward Hunter, Record of Bishops Meetings, Reports of Wards, Ordinations, Instructions, and General Proceedings of the Bishops and Lesser Priesthood, 2 February 1875 to 27 November 1879, LDS Church Archives. For a contemporary report of some of the conversions, see Deseret News, 30 October 1874.

55John Taylor and George Q. Cannon to Jesse W. Crosby, Jr., 11 December 1885, John Taylor Papers, LDS Church Archives.

56See, for instance, in Indian Affairs Letters, 1824–81: Benjamin Davies to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 20 January 1861; G. W. Dodge to Francis Walker, 18 March 1872; J. J. Critchlow to H. R. Cleem, 15 March 1873; J. W. Powell and G. W. Ingalls to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 25 July 1873.

57Deseret News, 26 February 1870.