10-1-1989

Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian Levi S. Peterson

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol29/iss4/13

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Book Reviews


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It should be noted at the outset that Levi S. Peterson’s Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian has both its strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, it is clear that Peterson, a professor of English at Weber State College, has produced an important work that for several reasons commands the attention of both scholars and interested students of Mormon studies. Juanita Brooks herself is noteworthy in that she was one of the most important historians to come out of the Utah Mormon tradition. Extremely prolific, she was the author of twelve books and several dozen articles and essays, and editor of four major diaries. Her seminal and perhaps most important work, The Mountain Meadows Massacre, has gone through eight printings, sold some sixteen thousand copies, and is still in print. Brooks’s role as a historian was further enhanced by the fact that over a period of several years she collected, copied, and preserved dozens of early Mormon pioneer diaries that would have otherwise been lost or destroyed.

In addition to the importance of its subject, Peterson’s biography is valuable because in recounting Juanita Brooks’s life and activities the author has provided a generous slice of twentieth-century Latter-day Saint history, a relatively neglected topic among Mormon studies. A third contribution is the work’s focus on the so-called Dixie region of Mormon settlement (southwestern Utah and adjacent Nevada communities) as the setting for much of the action involving Brooks. This should serve to remind us anew that certain crucial developments affecting Mormonism occurred in regions away from the Wasatch Front.

A fourth outstanding contribution of this biography is that it conveys, with understanding and empathy, a keen sense of Brooks’s personality and of what it must have been like to be a woman in Mormon country during the period from the early to late twentieth century. This is no small feat for a male writer with the courage (or audacity) to undertake a biography of a female subject. In probing Brooks’s overall personality, Peterson presents her as “direct and uncomplicated” (x) but at the same time as an individual who “constantly desired challenge and creative expression” (114) and who was willing to stand up for what she believed despite the controversy or unpopularity of the cause.
Peterson portrays Juanita’s childhood in Bunkerville, Nevada, with particular vividness. For example, he notes that until she was well into her teens she “wore in the summertime only a loose shift and panties sewn from flour sacks” (10). Also well presented are the varied triumphs, as well as tragedies, that marked Juanita’s eventful life, including the early death of her first husband, Ernest Pulsipher, shortly after the birth of their first child. There is also a keen feeling of the complex, sometimes ambivalent, but generally loving and mutually supportive relationship that existed between Juanita and her second husband, Will Brooks, throughout the thirty-seven years they were together.

Peterson is also careful to take note of what Brooks herself considered the proper role of women. She was no advocate of women’s liberation despite her own difficult yet successful effort at balancing her role as a homemaker and mother to eight children with her prolific research and writing activities. On one occasion, she “emphatically declared marriage to be the primary role of women,” urging women to support their husbands “in every way” and to “share your children’s interests and encourage them” (303). However, she was not absolute on this point, for on another occasion she “emphasized [the need for] professional achievement” outside of the home (309).

A fifth outstanding contribution of Peterson’s biography is its vivid, detailed portrayal of Brooks’s complex and changing relationship to the Church—in particular her role as a Mormon dissenter who remained faithful but who advocated change and reform from within. Hers was a faith frequently tested by curiosity, adversity, and sometimes moral outrage at what she considered improper behavior and actions of particular Church members, including certain leaders. As a teenager she was “a Sunday School dissenter,” regarded by some townspeople “as verging on apostasy” (32). After the slow, painful death of her first husband, Juanita’s faith, in the words of Peterson “would remain permanently sobered”: “If she had not abandoned her belief in God, she at least had lost her confidence in his servants” (57). Brooks vigorously disagreed with the Church’s support for the prosecution of “fundamentalist” (polygamous) Mormons, its policy of denying the priesthood to blacks, and its general indifference to historic preservation. In the wake of the destruction of the Coalville Tabernacle, she proclaimed that “my own faith in our present [Church] leaders is almost shattered” (368). In a larger sense, Brooks’s intense dislike of Brigham Young strongly influenced her whole orientation as a historian and writer of Mormon history—a point most persuasively argued by Peterson. In the words of the
author, “The foremost issue between Juanita and the Church at large was the reputation of Brigham Young. . . . She in fact held a lifelong grudge against him for having sent her ancestors in an impoverished exile on the ragged edge of the Mormon empire” (246).

Brooks’s role as a Mormon dissenter also involved her interaction with other like-minded individuals. These associations are carefully chronicled by Peterson, who asserts that “she became the nexus of an extensive Mormon underground” (5). During the course of her life, Brooks interacted with a wide variety of Mormon dissenters, beginning with Brigham Young University psychology professor Wilford Poulson, whom she met while a student during the 1920s. During the 1930s and 1940s, she became acquainted and developed close relationships with such notable dissenters as Nels Anderson, Dale L. Morgan, Charles Kelley, Maurine Whipple, and Fawn M. Brodie. Particularly significant was her relationship with Morgan, a noted writer-historian in his own right. Indeed, throughout the 1940s and 1950s Morgan was particularly helpful to Brooks, assuming a role as chief critic-mentor to the fledgling writer. Still later, during the 1960s, after moving from St. George to Salt Lake, Brooks involved herself with two dissenting Mormon groups: the “Swearing Elders” and the “Mormon Forum.” Notable individuals involved with one or the other of these groups included Sterling McMurrin, William Mulder, Angus Woodbury, Judge Allen Crockett, and Brigham Madsen. According to Peterson, Brooks clearly “sensed her citizenship in an underground community of dissenting Mormons” (266).

Despite her dissent, Brooks remained steadfast in her Latter-day Saint faith. Indeed, one cannot help but be impressed by Peterson’s clear and vivid presentation of her deep and continuing spirituality. This was clearly evident in a revealing exchange that took place between Brooks and Morgan in the wake of the publication of Fawn M. Brodie’s No Man Knows My History. Brooks took strong exception to Brodie’s basic thesis that Joseph Smith “was a conscious fraud and imposter,” proclaiming to Morgan that “for a fraud, he inspired loyalties too deep in too many. Certainly he had SOMETHING. Men catching their spark from him, were willing to sacrifice too much to further his cause.” She then cited her own spiritual experiences as reasons for believing in Joseph Smith’s spiritual experiences, declaring, “I believe that it is possible for human beings to tap the great source of all good—to contact God direct, if you will” (170). On a later occasion, she told another dissenter, “Somehow I have always felt that a basic faith in God . . . gives depth and direction to life,” adding that “I also think
that the basic teachings of Jesus Christ are worth trying to live, and the weekly pledge that I will try to keep His commandments that I may have His spirit to be with me is one that I am glad to make” (291). On still another occasion, she admitted to her eldest son, in the wake of his own disaffection from the Church, “that she herself had her reservations about [certain Mormon] doctrine and ritual” but went on to say that despite such imperfections it was important “to discern the valid from the invalid”: “Don’t throw out the child with the bath. In other words, seeing the dirty water that does get into the tub, don’t forget the living, vital truth that is also there. Save it, cherish it, and drain off all the unclean that you can” (343).

Also a part of Brooks’s basic spirituality was a sense of ecumenicalism. This is reflected in Peterson’s description of her impressions of several Catholic churches she saw while visiting Santa Fe, New Mexico. She noted: “In every one I had a deep sense of reverence—the feeling that these people are as sincere as we, trying to reach the same great source, but using different methods and symbols” (314). And when her son Ernest Pulsipher “became seriously attached to a woman who was not a Mormon” (who indeed was a Catholic), Brooks remarked, “All roads may lead to God if the person involved tries to find one,” adding, “You’re a Great Couple in my Book” (402). In summary, Peterson’s sensitive discussion of Brooks’s basic spirituality, combined with his overall presentation of the various other facets of her life, make this biography significant.

Despite its strengths, the book has some notable shortcomings that detract from its overall quality. Most serious is an apparent shortcoming in the basic structure and organization. This involves the author’s use of an extreme chronological framework in which he is apparently trying to present all the many and varied activities of Brooks in the exact order in which they occurred. Thus the account tends to read as if it were a day-by-day journal or diary that all too frequently intermixes the seemingly insignificant (and indeed at times the trite) with those events that were notable and crucial. This technique works well when the narrative is concerned with certain dramatic events such as the controversy involving a test of wills between Brooks and Latter-day Saint leaders over the status of John D. Lee—specifically whether or not to publicize the Church’s 1961 decision to restore Lee posthumously to full fellowship. But such dramatic events are few and far between, and not enough to make this form of organization effective throughout the course of the entire biography. Instead, Peterson’s detailed, hodgepodge narrative seems to preclude or get in the way of any systematic effort at critical
analysis. As a result, the individual chapters are not clearly focused, and, indeed, the biography as a whole lacks a clear theme or overarching interpretive focus.

There are other stylistic problems. Peterson is too didactic in his basic presentation. That is, he assumes the awkward role of direct critic. Thus the author critiques Brooks’s varied works, venturing his own opinions as to which ones are good, bad, or indifferent. Such an approach would be appropriate in a work of literary criticism, but it seems out of place, and at times heavy-handed, in a work that purports to be the definitive biography of the subject in question. For example, Peterson boldly proclaims that “The History of the Jews in Utah and Idaho was indeed Juanita’s worst book,” going on to note that “in it she offered a welter of trivial facts . . . failed to characterize the Jews methodically . . . was careless with transitions,” and concludes that “her style was pedestrian and repetitious [and] failed utterly of verve and elegance” (386). If such an evaluation had come from someone other than Peterson himself and had been quoted or paraphrased by him, it would have been a most effective means of presenting the author’s own feelings concerning this book. But coming from Peterson himself, its effectiveness is severely diminished, and, instead, the author’s comments come across as inappropriate and at times hypercritical.

A third major stylistic problem is Peterson’s tendency to be overly pedantic. This is evident when he describes in excessive detail the contents and basic story line in the various works authored by Brooks. Particularly disconcerting, and indeed repetitive, are the detailed descriptions of those books that Brooks wrote about various members of her own family: her grandfather Dudley Leavitt, her husband Will Brooks, and especially her own autobiography, Quicksand and Cactus. Peterson draws on this work in reconstructing the events of Brooks’s early life, then midway through the book details many of these same events in describing Brooks’s initial efforts to write her autobiography during the 1940s, and then toward the end of the biography relates some of the same events a third time in illustrating how they make their way into the final draft of Quicksand and Cactus as written by Brooks during the late 1970s. Peterson’s pedantic tendencies are also evident in his speculative statements about what might have happened in specific situations for which historical documentation is minimal or completely lacking. His tendency to always start off such speculative statements with “one imagines” and then conjecture what might have happened is also disturbing at times. For example, in describing a Dutch-oven cookout hosted by

Besides such stylistic problems, Peterson’s biography leaves unanswered a number of questions concerning certain crucial aspects of Brooks’s life. For example, one wonders about the precise nature and implications of Brooks’s apparently less than ideal relationship with her eldest son, Ernest Pulsipher. While the author emphasizes the close, loving relationship that Brooks maintained with her other children (including her stepchildren from Will Brooks’s first marriage), he is rather vague in discussing what was apparently a somewhat more distant relationship between Juanita and Ernest. Indeed, at two different periods while Ernest was growing up he did not even live with his mother. Peterson does not concern himself with the varied implications of this situation—that is, how it affected Brooks in her attitudes and behavior as a mother and writer.

Peterson also arouses, without satisfying, curiosity concerning Juanita Brooks’s precise attitudes toward sex and her own basic sexuality. On the one hand, her position would seem clear, especially in light of her candid statement made shortly after her marriage to Will Brooks: “I think that of all things in the world sex gratification is the least satisfying. It leaves not even a memory that is pleasant; in fact it can’t be enjoyed in anticipation or retrospect at all. For a few seconds there is a type of excitement and that is all. It’s not even especially pleasant” (91). Peterson’s discussion of these negative feelings is somewhat confusing in light of the fact that she and Will went on to have four children within the short space of just five years. Indeed, so many children in such a short period of time caused concern among the older children, with one son remarking, “Now look here, Mom, the town is starting to talk about when you and Dad are going to stop having kids. It is becoming almost a scandal. We hear whispers everywhere we go” (112).

A third question relative to Juanita Brooks’s behavior concerns her basic political attitudes. What factor (or factors) made her a strong, lifelong Democrat? Peterson does not provide any explanation.

Finally, one is left wondering why Juanita Brooks had such a deep sense of personal inferiority. Peterson takes note of this time and again throughout his narrative, noting that she not only felt inadequate about her personal appearance but also, and more importantly, about her abilities as a historian-writer. This is a
perplexing issue, especially in light of her significant and varied successes as an author-historian, a wife-mother, an involved citizen of the community, and a committed member of her church. Her physical appearance, moreover, while admittedly somewhat plain, was certainly not unattractive. Indeed, she projected a certain dignified presence, particularly during her later years. Peterson himself offers little explanation on this point.

Despite its varied problems, however, _Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian_ is one of the most important works yet written dealing with twentieth-century developments affecting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While a notable achievement in and of itself, the book is as much if not more a tribute to its subject, the late Juanita Brooks, who has with good reason been characterized “the dean of Utah historians” (411). As such it is essential reading for all students of twentieth-century Mormon studies.