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Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian Levi S. Peterson

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“I couldn’t lay the book down” is usually said of a Dorothy Sayers mystery or a John LeCarré novel. But Levi Peterson’s recent biography *Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian* held me in just such a grip. It may be that having known Juanita, having read most of her books, having traveled around Dixie with her, and having lived in her “U” Street house, guaranteed my enthusiasm for her story. But I have struggled through competent biographies of other people I have known and respected and been left with no more memory than the flavor of blancmange. Peterson’s book, in contrast, tasted good from first to last, and left me hungering for more. It is, in Thoreau’s model, “a simple and sincere account” of one person’s life, differing from Thoreau’s ideal only in that it was not Juanita herself who wrote it.

One might accurately label this “one-darn-thing-after-another” biography, a narration that follows detail after chronological detail. Yet it works. The composite effect of 423 pages of Juanita Brooks’s life, told in the gentle, controlled prose of a master
stylist, is awesome. Day by well-filled day, Peterson recreates for us the life of this many-faceted woman, the details building one upon another, the common and the uncommon mingling in a tapestry of rich but well-aged colors.

Peterson's sources, those he found and those he created, are a biographer's dream: a full file of incoming and outgoing letters; diaries of his subject and her husband; and interviews with immediate family members, friends and professional associates still living. Juanita's own attempt at an autobiography, published in 1982 as Quicksand and Cactus, had made available some of her most colorful stories, though for the most part Peterson resisted the temptation to repeat the twice-told tales. Brooks's own letters, with all the immediacy and intimacy of the form, are the mother lode from which Peterson drew his best insights, and his quotations from her and, in reply, from her correspondents, are moments of pure gold. The letters to and from Dale Morgan, for example, are illuminating not only of their relationship, but of the issues in the air at each stage of Juanita's career: the shifting vogue among publishers, the highs and lows of Church and popular acceptance, each new discovery on a given project, and her own insecurity as a lamb among the wolves of the academy. These Peterson has well illustrated from that correspondence.

Seldom have subject and author been so well paired as here. Levi Peterson's love affair with Juanita Brooks is a tender one, enhanced by their shared experience. Both were born Latter-day Saints on "the ragged edge" of civilized Mormondom. Both were educated beyond the expectations of their community. Both felt the disapproval of the group for their maverick ways, straying as they did into realms of mind beyond the borders of orthodoxy. But both were undergirded in their wanderings by a persistent core of faith that supported them. Their Mormon past nurtured them, sustained them, and exemplified for them the value of life on the frontier, geographical or spiritual. It was right that Levi should become Juanita's biographer; he has, by his own avowal, long been her brother.

As she has unknowingly been sister to many others. Unconsciously Juanita Brooks was a model to the generation of bright and questing women who followed her. She "did it all"—family, church, career—without ever losing the perspective of any of it. When Claudia Bushman asked her to address the budding feminists of the 1970s for Dialogue, she replied in the only way she could—by telling stories from her own life. She didn't know the issues, nor would it have made a difference had she been afflicted with the "raised consciousness" of the next generation. And Levi, in writing
her life, reflects her innocence; he, too, seems unaffected by the women’s movement that swirls around us all. But he acknowledges the individual woman for her achievement, and that, as the kids would say, is where it’s at.

There is no doubting the importance of Juanita Brooks to Utah and Mormon history. George Ellsworth once crowned her “the queen of Utah historians.” Her 1950 Mountain Meadows Massacre, answering with rigorous accuracy and human compassion the questions long buried beneath the surface of Mormon shame, set new standards for Mormon scholars. As Dale Morgan predicted it would, the book served “to shape, even as it now expresses, the social force that will bring about” a new course in Mormon historiography. Though she found among the angry young Mormon writers of the 1940s camaraderie in her demand for objectivity, unlike them Brooks maintained a fierce loyalty to the Church and the people who birthed and nurtured her. In that she became a model for a new generation of Mormon intellectuals, firm in the faith and determined to discover a real and accessible past.

Juanita was an original, a lone cowpoke riding the edge of the herd, whistling her own tune. That the herd listened, and moved accordingly, is witnessed by the burst of Mormon studies since Mountain Meadows Massacre and its contemporaries that have adhered to, and surpassed, their standard of historical integrity. Without the association that links today’s Mormon scholars in the sharing of methods, insights, and documents, Brooks scoured the Southwest for source materials locked in family trunks and challenged the guardians at the gate of the Church’s collections for those papers she knew were there. Peterson’s image of the small-framed woman sitting obdurately outside the office of some Church leader remains after the details of the confrontation are blurred.

Peterson’s re-creation of the professional life of a determined and ambitious woman is complete and convincing. If I could wish one widening of the dimension in which he depicted Juanita, it would be a clearer revelation of the feminine aspects of her nature. Peterson is careful to point out that the pinnacle of her value structure was her wife-and-motherhood, but her own record, and his subsequent sources, did not reveal in sufficient or consistent detail those moments when the feminine asserts its supremacy—the female rituals of life and living. How did she respond to the birthing of her babies and the fears and the joys of their every new learning? To the quiet conversations with her daughter, her mother, her sisters in spirit? To her successes and failures in the day-to-day workings of her household, or the neighborhood, or the Relief
Society? To those moments of intimate communion with the Spirit? For those lacunae I cannot fault Levi—I myself asked Juanita about such things and received little of substance in reply. In the things that mattered most, Juanita was a very private person. It's possible that even her children could not have described those hidden parts of her life.

The book, and Juanita Brooks's life, raise for our time and place the imponderable question once posed by Virginia Woolf: what if Shakespeare's sister had had his genius? Peterson touches on the issue when he subtitles the book "Mormon Woman Historian." What if Juanita Brooks had been a man? Certainly we would then have lost some of the most delicious moments of her story, for would a man feel he had to disguise his scholarship by tossing a cloth over the typewriter and plugging in the iron when visitors arrived? Would a man have had to write at midnight, and been so engrossed as to have forgotten the baby asleep outside? Or would he have habitually taken the midnight bus home from a research junket in order to arrive in time to serve breakfast to his well-rested family? Or been content to work in a corner of the kitchen? Will Brooks recognized his wife's exceptional abilities, her sense of mission. Others, he reminded her, could wash dishes and scrub floors; only she could write her books. But her neighbors lacked this perspective, and she bought their definition of her role as well as her own, and accomplished both. If Shakespeare had been a woman, would we have had all that treasure? If Juanita Brooks had been a man, what more might we have had from her? Or was there in the tension between her two worlds an energy that gave momentum to both? On the other hand, what if Will Brooks had not been the provider he was? Or what if he had had her gifts, her calling to research and write? The imponderables . . .

But let us give thanks for what is here portrayed of this life well lived. I, and many of my sex and of the other sex, find example, direction, and validation in the struggles and triumphs of Juanita Brooks. And thank Levi Peterson for mirroring them so tenderly and gracefully.