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Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian Levi S. Peterson

Louis C. Midgley

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Juanita Brooks was apparently destined to be a rather ordinary Mormon housewife, but the untimely death of her first husband soon after their marriage led her into teaching. Then a second marriage facilitated the fulfillment of her literary ambitions. She became a sleuth busy collecting lore and then an amateur historian of southwestern Utah who earned the esteem of professional historians.¹ Unlike the tales Levi S. Peterson usually tells,² Juanita Brooks is archivally grounded documentary realism. Hence much detail concerning Brooks's activities and those of her "cultural Mormon” associates can be gleaned from this prize-winning biography, which is clearly the fruit of an intense infatuation verging on an obsession.

Though Peterson's strong point is fiction, Juanita Brooks is at times wearisome reading. Everything about Brooks seems to have been included. There is little winnowing of the mass of materials on her, even when they do not contribute to our understanding of Brooks or her times. Episodes tend to appear chronologically, but often without meaningful transitions. For example, one paragraph is as follows:

On the last Saturday in July [1962], Juanita and Will [Brooks] attended the Mormon Forum [as was previously explained (269-70), this was a group of Mormon dissidents including Brigham Madsen, Ray Canning, LaMar Peterson, and John Fitzgerald] at the summer cabin of Angus and Grace Woodbury in Mill Creek Canyon. Grace, always waggish, suggested that the beer drinkers in the group toss their empty cans onto the tennis court of the next-door neighbor, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith. Good taste prevailed and no one disposed of cans in this manner. On a Sunday in August the Brooks family provided the program at Sacrament Meeting in their new ward.

Then follow some details about the family participation in that meeting before we learn that Brooks attended, on the following Wednesday, a luncheon honoring Russell Mortensen, who was "to become director of the University of Utah Press" (277).

Unless Brooks was one of the beer drinkers, why is that tale included? The source for the yarn about the beer drinkers is Ray Canning—not known for sympathy towards the Church—who told the story to Peterson twenty-four years after the event is
alleged to have taken place. If it is true that without a text there can be no history, it is also true that there are ways around that inconvenience. Conversations many years later can take up the slack, and Peterson has sometimes taken advantage of such a luxury in fashioning his account of Brooks.

This paragraph illustrates another feature of Juanita Brooks. A menagerie of figures on the fringes of the LDS church make their appearance on the stage Peterson has created for his drama, including, for example, A. C. Lambert, Melvin T. Smith, Stanley Ivins, Harold Bentley, and M. Wilford Poulson—even Sterling M. McMurrin and the “Mormon Seminar” (or what would come to be called the “Swearing Elders”) make a cameo appearance (214–15). A few of the Church leaders (for example, Elders Stephen L Richards, Delbert L. Stapley, J. Reuben Clark, Jr., LeGrand Richards, and David O. McKay) also appear, but the ordinary, faithful Latter-day Saints Brooks knew and lived among, including the bishops and stake presidents who served with her when she was stake Relief Society president in St. George for seven years, appear on Peterson’s stage only as anonymous, faceless spear-carriers. In general, they are portrayed as either thoughtless, parochial believers or representatives of stifling Church authority.

It is true that from her earliest efforts as an amateur historian, Brooks came into contact with dissidents on the fringes of the Mormon community, including initially Dale L. Morgan and Fawn M. Brodie. Even though she spurned their efforts to fashion plausible naturalistic accounts of Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims, her association with such people furnishes Peterson with the polemical nexus for his book. It also provides him with the ground for the two myths he advances: that Juanita Brooks was a powerful symbol of dissent, which he wishes to celebrate and promote, and that she was highly influential in Mormon society.

When he labels Brooks a dissenter, Peterson does not seem to have in mind her willingness to disagree, or her self-assurance or independence, or even her misgivings about inane lesson materials prescribed for teaching situations in the Church or the vapid instruction that may occur. What he means by dissent seems to be exemplified by those cultural Mormons who reject the historical foundations of the faith and who are essentially hostile to the Church. He strives to turn Brooks into an archetypal and heroic “Mormon dissenter,” even though she was what others have correctly described as “a devout Latter-day Saint” who approached the world with the convictions and also the conventional morality of a primitive believer. Though Peterson describes the many signs of what he pictures as naive piety in Brooks, they
are for him unfortunate, and he parts company with his heroine when he finds her telling of the charismatic gifts and miracles that she witnessed. From his perspective, these indications of her faith were the remnants of a primitive credulity she never managed to outgrow. Peterson is interested in celebrating Juanita Brooks as a dissenter and not as a faithful Latter-day Saint.4

It is not surprising, given Peterson’s agenda, that he is vague about what constitutes dissent. He never looks carefully into the varieties of dissent. He makes no effort to distinguish dissent directed against the host of evils, illusions, or trivia of this world, or disagreements within the faith, which may be quite legitimate and even healthy, from dissent directed against the Church and its teachings and against God. So we are never quite sure in which context or setting and against what it is that Brooks can be appropriately described as a dissenter. She developed a different, more complex understanding of John D. Lee and the Mountain Meadows Massacre than was common among the Saints. The reason for considering her a “dissenter” seems to be that she looked into some obscure, embarrassing incidents and came up with accounts that differed from previous understandings. But it would have been the fate of anyone who cared sufficiently to look into such matters to end up debunking the residual ignorance.

At the time Brooks was doing this research, some Church leaders evidently preferred not to have the old quarrels that still infect Utah’s “Dixie” agitated once again. On that issue she held a different opinion, even while she remained a primitive believer. Her positions on such matters are even less crucial to the truth of the Restoration than a difference of opinion over whether the “Garden Tomb” is the actual site of the resurrection of Jesus, or a host of other similar questions over which the Saints may disagree. Peterson neglects to address the question of why he should label a devout Latter-day Saint a dissenter. Is one a dissenter if one finds reasons for doubting some folklore about ultimately insignificant persons and events, or if one is troubled by some aspect of the culture? Some measure of disagreement over the details of Mormon culture, as distinguished from the gospel of Jesus Christ, is the fate of thoughtful Latter-day Saints including even the Brethren. Nor was Brooks the first or anywhere near the best critic of Mormon culture.

Being the champion of radical dissent against the faith, Peterson lacks the distance from his image of Brooks to assess the crucial episodes in her life dispassionately and accurately. If he is correct, the Brethren were unwilling to assist Brooks in furthering her literary ambitions; they were, of course, also unwilling to
endorse her historical accounts, even though they may never have bothered to get clear on what they were. Peterson finds nothing astonishing in Brooks’s notion that her account of John D. Lee and the Mountain Meadows Massacre needed Church endorsement. She seems to have insisted on getting either the endorsement of the Brethren for her views or their hostility. When the Brethren did not lash out at her, as her cultural Mormon friends expected or hoped they would, she may have been disappointed. She and her friends assumed that Church leaders had rejected the “truth” about the past that she felt she had uncovered. But the Brethren seem to have been indifferent to the history done by Brooks. Peterson does not ask why that is so. Instead, he reports gossip from her friends about the possibility of her being excommunicated, though they never articulated actionable charges. In that way he allows unfounded rumors to constitute reality. He is not inclined to examine the little conceits, ambitions, pettiness, and vanity that were never entirely absent from his heroine and that seem to have grown as her sentiments were corroded by the constant flattery of ideologues critical of the Church. But a thoughtful reading of Peterson’s account makes all of that quite obvious.

Nor does Peterson notice that there is something odd about the way Brooks dealt with Church leaders. First, she adopted the stereotype of the Brethren provided by her cultural Mormon friends, who saw them as opposed to the truth being told about the Mormon past. Second, though Peterson praises the honesty of Brooks, he admits that her perception of Church leaders induced her to “dissemble”—his cautious word for “lie”—when she sought their assistance and endorsement. She seemed to act on the premise that, when dealing with an Apostle, a lie is at times better than the truth. Might Brooks have gotten more of what she wanted if she had simply told the truth?

The whole question of dissent could have been considered or presented in such a way as to allow the narrative to rest on a more evenhanded understanding of the larger context of Juanita Brooks’s conscious separation from Morgan and Brodie on the crucial fundamental issues. Given Morgan’s claim that he and Brodie were on one side of a “Great Divide” that separates the believers from the unbelievers, and Brooks was on the other, why would it not be appropriate to examine why Brooks stood, as she did, on the side of faith against those who operate from the other side of that Great Divide? One striking thing about Brooks was that she was able to maintain her standing among the faithful while being subjected to the flattery, arguments, and clever rhetoric of Morgan and Brodie and the endless parade of gossip about Mormon
things that filled the life of the cultural Mormons with whom she came in contact. She could refuse to accept much of their constant anti-Mormon haranguing and still remain on friendly terms with them. With a faith grounded in encounters with the divine, she was more or less able to withstand some of the corrosive effects of the hostility of her friends to spiritual matters.

Peterson's emphasis on Brooks's supposed influence must be understood as the corollary of his effort to turn her into a heroic symbol of dissent. He both begins and ends Juanita Brooks with that theme (3–6; 422–23), and it is inserted elsewhere in the book (for example, 169–72, 204, 243, 266–69), as well as in a series of related essays.5 "Few persons," he asserts, "outside the central hierarchy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have had a more significant influence upon Mormon society than Juanita. The details of that influence, I hope, will be evident in my book."6 But nothing in Peterson's book shows that Brooks was especially influential in Mormon society—not even with Mormon dissenters, for whom she was merely an example of an essentially harmless historian they liked to picture as threatened by authoritarian bigotry. At most she was a colorful figure, but of little influence in the Church. Her cultural Mormon friends seem to have convinced her that the Brethren would loathe her work; they conjured a picture of a malevolent church intent on harming a truth-telling historian. They imagined that Brooks was struggling against a community they believed to be founded on lies and shielded by cunning leaders. Something like that scenario also seems to constitute Peterson's stereotype of the Church. Hence he makes much of the brief encounters Brooks had with a few of the leaders of the Church. These encounters are crucial to his thesis, but his treatments of them are among the least satisfactory portions of his book, for he has made no effort to probe for information that might have helped explain the stance taken by the Brethren, nor has he asked whether other assessments of those incidents might be possible, even if we assume that Brooks got the details straight.

Peterson prefers to cast Brooks as a heroic dissident who was the leader of an "informal network of intelligent Saints" striving for an "enlightened religion" in "defiance of ecclesiastic regimentation," thus battling the authoritarian power, superstition, and historical myths of a community badly in need of being civilized at the hands of dissenters. This is itself a myth of no small proportions, which needs some demythologizing.

In a 1968 essay, Fawn M. Brodie opined that the leaders of the Church must realize—"as Jewish leadership did long ago—that if
it is to keep its intellectuals it must eliminate its constant testing for signs of apostasy. It must find a way to embrace the doubters along with the faithful—with respect as well as compassion. Otherwise it will never keep “the chosen people” intact.” For Brodie and now Peterson, being an intellectual presupposes not being a believer:

Let me say at the outset—though many Mormons will not agree with me—that to qualify as an intellectual a Mormon must reject the divinity of the golden plates and the authenticity of the Book of Abraham. If he accepts either as a divinely inspired historical document he is not an intellectual but a sentimentalist. Once a Mormon resolutely faces up to the mundane origin of these holy books . . . then it matters very little whether he concludes that Joseph Smith was a paranoid, a charlatan, or a profound religious mystic. The important decision the Mormon intellectual makes is that Joseph Smith was not talking to God.7

In this view, the dissent of so-called “intellectuals” is based on a rejection of the foundations of the faith. Such question-begging attempts to charter dissent by celebrating the intellectual superiority of the liberated dissenter have been a rather typical ploy of those anxious to rid the Church of those features that make of it a community of faith and memory. For such people, the Church is a social club in which they may want to participate, but on their terms. Brodie described the plight of these cultural Mormons “who have abandoned the faith if not the faithful.” They long for a brotherhood in which they can share “wry Mormon stories, similar feelings of guilt, exasperation, and liberation” as they unburden themselves on “the problems imposed by a still faithful wife, or husband, or still devout children,” or renounce the evils of what they see as a parochial culture dominated by a stultifying, authoritarian church.

Peterson is sincere in casting himself among the “Mormon intellectuals” as defined by Brodie: those equipped with “an alert, active, and questioning intelligence,” those “curious and adventurous” whose “respect for reason” is such that they “base their convictions upon evidence and logic.” Such people may be seen as caught in an unhappy “state of spiritual estrangement from an organization that, for emotional reasons, they cannot abandon.” Much like Brodie, Peterson feels that

Mormon intellectuals do not lead an enviable life. Often they sense keenly the distance between themselves and the rest of the Church. Isolated from one another, they may suffer guilt and doubt; at times they may well wonder whether their evolving values, seemingly unpalatable to other Mormons, are not perverse or insane. For this reason, it is important that they form their own communities, both for comfort and for enhancing their effectiveness as agents of change.8
Book Reviews

In generating the myth of Brooks as a Mormon dissenter, Peterson appears to have furthered, if not exactly initiated, a new brand of Mormon apologetic hagiography. Unlike some of the earlier idealizing biographies of the Brethren that critics denigrate as “faith-promoting,” this new hagiography centers on Mormon historians (or on litterateurs who have dabbled in Mormon history), and it is also “faith-promoting,” but it promotes a fundamentally secular faith. Gary Topping’s review of Juanita Brooks celebrates it as part of a flowering of “Mormon historiography,”9 which for him includes the publication of Morgan’s fragmentary effort to fashion a plausible naturalistic account of Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims,10 a scanty assessment of Mormon historians by Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington,11 even the publication of materials on and by Bernard DeVoto (a non-Mormon critic of Mormon things), and finally “the happy news that Newell Bringhurst is preparing a biography of Fawn Brodie.”12 The thread that presumably ties this bizarre list of books to Juanita Brooks is what Topping labels “liberal Mormonism.”

Juanita Brooks, like biographies generally, is an interpretation and at crucial points tends towards veiled autobiography.13 Precisely because the book is the fruit of deep passions, it lacks symmetry; it reflects its author’s sentiments and ideology too much, and the ideology provides the plot and generates the picture presented by Peterson. To begin to understand the rich complexities and anomalies surrounding Juanita Brooks, it is necessary to discount the sentiments and certain of the biases that animate the account provided by Peterson, especially his enthusiasm for what he calls the “liberalization of Mormonism.”14

Nevertheless, if we are aware of its controlling ideology, the book can teach us about the past and about the present, though the lessons it teaches may not be exactly those its author had in mind. Juanita Brooks was an independently minded, bright, amateur historian and essayist; before the unfortunate waning of her powers stripped her of her gifts, her discipline and perseverance produced some fine books on individuals and episodes connected with Utah’s “Dixie,” as well as editions of texts relating to those matters. But Brooks was also a conventionally devout, moralistic Latter-day Saint. In none of her writings did she touch upon the deeper issues raised by the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith. Those claims and certain of their implications, which she accepted at face value, at least partly because of experiences that she firmly held to be genuinely charismatic, served as an anchor for her life in the face of the best arguments that her cultural Mormon associates such as Morgan and Brodie could mount against the faith. These
experiences, coupled to an attachment to the Church in which she was raised, served for Brooks as the justification for her place in the Church and for her services to the community of Saints. Peterson praises Brooks “for the ability to reconcile faith and critical reason” (423) but pictures her as “a complex mixture of the critical and the credulous” (36). That kind of formulation allows him to imply that the critical, which presumably includes dissent, is somehow separable from and clearly superior to faith, which for him appears to be merely a manifestation of credulity.

For Peterson to have striven to cast Brooks in his own ideological mold is a disservice to her, and to his readers, whatever else might be said about his valuable service in making available a store of details about her and her associates. The distance between his subject and his own position is greater than he is willing to admit. The emotional intensity of his attachment to Brooks may wrongly persuade his readers that he has gotten clear on the central theme of his book. The qualities manifest by Brooks are not consonant with the radical dissent advocated by Peterson that spurs the core of the Restoration.

NOTES


3Alexander, “Toward the New Mormon History,” 353.


7This and the following quotations are taken from Fawn M. Brodie, “The Mormon Intellectual,” an essay commissioned by a magazine entitled Western Review: A Journal of Humanities in 1968, but never published.


Book Reviews

135

1"Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, Mormons and Their Historians (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988). In "History of Historians," Dialogue 22 (Spring 1989): 156–58, Topping faults this volume because of the false assumption that "the rise of a scientific, objective Mormon historiography began, according to the authors, barely thirty years ago," an assumption that slights "the agents of that reorientation, Bernard DeVoto, Fawn Brodie, Dale Morgan, and Juanita Brooks." Talk about scientific, objective, or naturalistic history, by Bitton and Arrington or by Topping and others, does not confront crucial intellectual issues, but is, instead, part of a mythology being invoked in the political struggle going on over control of the Mormon past within the Mormon history profession. Celebratory biographical treatments of Mormon historians are a new feature in this struggle. For a fine treatment of the political dimensions of professionalized history, some of which are closely matched by developments in Mormon historiography since World War II, see Peter Novick's That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).


3This is made clear in "Juanita Brooks: My Subject, My Sister."

4Juanita Brooks as a Mormon Dissenter," 29.