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## BOOK REVIEWS

TODD M. KERSTETTER. *God's Country, Uncle Sam's Land: Faith and Conflict in the American West*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006, vii + 213 pp., index, \$36.00 hardback.)

Reviewed by Stephen C. Taysom, Indiana University

In the United States, a nation that claims to hold sacred the freedom of religious expression, there has been a tremendous amount of violence directed against non-mainstream religious groups. Todd M. Kerstetter, associate professor of history at Texas Christian University, explores this paradox through three case studies situated in the American West. Kerstetter argues that the Mormons in the 1850s, the practitioners of the Lakota Sioux Ghost Dance Religion in 1890, and the Branch Davidians who followed David Koresh in Texas in the early 1990s shared certain characteristics that placed them in dangerous positions vis-à-vis mainstream American political and religious culture. The intersection of “liberty, faith, and the West’s mythology”(1) is presented by Kerstetter as a violent crossroads that always ends with the subjugation of dissenting religious traditions to the entrenched republican and Protestant mainstream. By situating his story in the American West, the author simultaneously deepens the irony of the often-empty proclamations of American religious tolerance while further deflating the myth of the West as the ultimate safe haven for iconoclasts and dissenters with its “mythic sympathy for individualism” (176). In the case of religion, at least, “the promise of the West was broken” (3).

Following a brief introductory chapter, Kerstetter provides three chapters that summarize the conflicts between the U.S. government and the Mormons, Sioux, and Branch Davidians, respectively. The book’s concluding chapter provides an insightful discussion of the traits shared by each group that led them down similarly violent paths. Students of each of these groups should not expect to find any strikingly new information. Kerstetter’s book is an interpretative exercise, and he deftly refreshes our understanding of three familiar stories through his skillful use of the comparative approach. In the case of Mormon studies, such interpretive efforts are sorely lacking and long overdue. It would be lamentable indeed if readers interested in Mormonism ignored this book because it fails to feature new documentary evidence. Kerstetter

brings the study of Mormonism into conversation with larger issues, such as religious freedom, religion and American politics, and dissenting religious traditions, and opens up new interpretive vistas born of novel juxtapositions.

The book is strong in argument and clear in prose. Kerstetter's ability to identify and tease out strains of similarity from divergent and complex religious traditions, and then spin these similarities into a clear and bold synthesis is laudable. Kerstetter has an eye for detail and the talent required to capture and hold the reader's interest, even when he is dealing with abstract and theoretical concepts.

There are a few minor problems with the book. Some of these involve the inevitable errors that occur when one is cutting such a broad chronological and thematic track. For example, Kerstetter argues that the Mormon Reformation of the 1850s was largely focused on increasing the numbers of plural marriages (45-47). While plural marriages did rise dramatically during this period, this was only one part of a comprehensive and sustained effort at religious and social retrenchment. On a broader scale, I am not convinced that Kerstetter makes a sufficiently persuasive case that there is something exceptional about the American West when it comes to violent conflicts between mainstream society and new religious movements. Most of the violence directed against the Mormons, of course, did not even occur in the West. The same is true, for example, of violence directed against Shakers and Catholics earlier in the nineteenth century. It seems to me that if Kerstetter broadened his argument geographically he would have enriched it thematically. Limitations of scope are, however, a fact of life in the world of scholarship, so my suggestion is best read as a lament for more of a good thing, rather than as a true criticism.

Overall, this book represents a well-crafted and much-needed interpretive contribution to the field of Mormon studies. Kerstetter's important study deserves a wide audience.

B. CARMON HARDY, ed. *Doing the Works of Abraham: Mormon Polygamy: Its Origin, Practice, and Demise*, vol. 9, *Kingdom in the West Series: The Mormons and the American Frontier*, ed. Will Bagley (Norman, Oklahoma: Arthur H. Clark, 2007, 448 pages. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth: \$39.95.)

Reviewed by Alan L. Morrell, PhD candidate in History at the University of Utah.

*Doing the Works of Abraham*, the ninth of a projected twenty volumes in the *Kingdom in the West Series* edited by Will Bagley, should be read by anyone interested in Mormon history. The object of the series is to create a venue for veteran scholars to publish select primary source documents, many of them previously unpublished, which were significant in the formation of Mormonism. Carmon Hardy, Emeritus Professor of History at California State University, Fullerton, and author of *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage*, was a natural choice for the volume on polygamy. He has spent decades working with the primary and secondary sources dealing with the subject. The volume includes key texts that must be a part of any examination of plural marriage such as the 1843 revelation to Joseph Smith, the 1852 announcement by Orson Pratt, and Wilford Woodruff's 1890 Manifesto. Other selections from sermons, letters, legislation, newspaper and magazine articles, diaries, lawsuits, and memoirs whose themes range from eugenics to patriarchy will surprise and delight even the most informed scholar. But the book is so much more than just the documents. Hardy's introductions to the sources set the context, familiarize readers with the key actors, and identify the main ideas. Moreover, he is a gifted writer whose prose is readable.

The "Introduction" demonstrates that polygyny is much larger than just the Mormon experience. Not only is it still the preferred form of marriage in many parts of the world, but early Mormon leaders adopted arguments developed by advocates of polygyny from Reformation-era Europe to eighteenth-century England. The economic, religious, political, and social tumult that defined the Market Revolution in Jacksonian America created an environment conducive to experimentation. Chapter one traces the development of the principle during the time of Joseph Smith. Chapter two examines the doctrinal defense and justifications that evolved during the Utah years. Chapter three looks at the campaign to convert Latter-day Saints to the principle and explores the dialogue that existed within the Church. Chapter four takes the reader into the plural household and highlights the voices and experiences of polygamous women. Chapter five presents the critiques and observations of non-Mormons and introduces the stereotypical nineteenth-century Mormon of the American imagination. Chapters six and seven shift to the political sphere in their exploration of the national crusade to destroy polygamy. Chapter eight provides the Mormon defense and chapter nine the official resignation in the form of the 1890 and 1904 Manifestos. The final chapter lays the foundation for the fundamentalists' continuation of plural marriage.

In the "Editorial Procedures," Hardy explains that his primary object was to "present as full and balanced a portrait of nineteenth-century polygamous Mormonism as possible" (19). He succeeds. He writes with great sympathy and respect for all of his subjects regardless of the side of the issue on which

they fell. Breaking down the common stereotypes of polygamy, Hardy demonstrates that the experiences in the principle varied as much as one monogamous marriage to the next. Juxtaposed to several examples of heartache and trial experienced by wives whose husbands courted additional partners was the comment of a plural wife who credited plurality for making possible “the consummation of all my earthly wishes” (153). He balances not only the good and bad experiences of Mormon women, but also the voices of women and men, leaders and followers, advocates and critics, Mormons and non-Mormons.

One of the most important contributions of this work is the author’s presentation of the dialogue between Mormons and the rest of the nation. The outrage of editors, religious leaders, politicians, women’s advocates, and every-day American citizens toward the Mormons, as shown by clergyman Thomas DeWitt Talmage, who stated “that unless we destroy Mormonism, Mormonism will destroy us” (277), has been lost on succeeding generations. This point is demonstrated by the fact that most history textbooks end their treatment of the Latter-day Saints with their removal to the Great Basin. *Doing the Works of Abraham* joins other scholarship that connects Mormon history to the larger American story. It is hoped U.S. historians will take note and use more Mormon examples in their studies of Victorian America.

Hardy has not restricted himself to texts, but has included several interesting photographs and illustrations. In addition to one of the ubiquitous “George Q. Cannon in the territorial pen” shots is an ad for “Mormon Elders Damiana Wafers,” which promised to permanently cure “Brain Wreckage, Paralysis, Sleeplessness, Harassing Dreams, Premature Decay of Vital Power, and all Functional and Diseased Conditions of the System dependent upon the Deficiency of the Vital Forces” (298). The images include several portraits of those who penned the documents, a picture of Mormon bishop Ira Eldredge and his three wives taken in about 1864, a 1907 photograph of the Jonathan Heaton family including his two wives, most of their twenty-six children, and several grandchildren, and several cartoons from *Harper’s Weekly*, *Puck*, and other national publications.

It is a credit to Professor Hardy that after four hundred pages, this reviewer wished he had included even more. This was a difficulty he acknowledged when he stated that it would be possible to expand each chapter into a volume of its own. For others who would like more, he points the way with a forty-two page bibliography that includes “Manuscripts, Oral Interviews, and Other Unpublished Materials,” “Published and Unpublished Government Documents,” “Theses and Dissertations,” “Books,” and “Articles and Book Chapters.”

Why read this book? “For the majority of believers, polygamy has descended to them as but a curious, sometimes embarrassing doctrinal heirloom. . . . But recollection of the theme does more. It gives the Latter-day Saint polygamous passage, especially those who lived it, a long overdue heraldic place on the tables of this American Israel’s pioneer epoch, a salute to their proud religious audacity, and the determination they displayed by engaging in one of the longest campaigns of civil disobedience in American history. It is a reminiscence abundant with character and sacrifice, forever tempting our gaze” (392).