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## Book Reviews

TERRYL L. GIVENS. *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xvii + 414 pp., illustrations, end-notes, index, \$29.95 hardback).

Reviewed by Jed Woodworth, a PhD student in American history and education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The question Terryl Givens sets out to answer in the latest of his books on Mormon history and culture published with Oxford University Press is not a particularly Mormon question. What is the relationship between a religious culture and its art? By art, Givens means high art or “serious” art; by culture, he means—somewhat ironically—the Raymond Williams definition, not the T. S. Eliot definition: general habit of mind, intellectual development of a society, and the general body of arts. His purpose, Givens tells us, is to “plumb in tentative fashion the range of Mormonism’s intellectual and artistic productions, to see if one can find there the contours of consistent themes and preoccupations, a unity between theological foundations and history, on the one hand, and cultural production on the other” (vii-viii). This is a book about Mormon high art within the Western tradition. He leaves it to others to write about tapa cloths and quilts.

The unity Givens discovers is a standard literary device set within a group of Mormon binaries often thought to be insoluble. The central argument in *People of Paradox* is that the heart of Mormon thought is paradox, which in turn provides the “productive stimulants” (xiii) for artistic expression. Givens defines paradox as “tensions that only appear to logical contradictions” but really are not, poles that look like cancellations of each other only on the surface. Givens prefers to call them “thematic pairings” (xvi). Four such pairings in Mormon belief, he says, have provided especially fertile ground for Mormon thinkers, writers, and artists: (1) authoritarianism and individualism; (2) searching and certitude; (3) the sacred and the banal; and (4) integration and exile. Givens does not tell us what other paradoxes Mormonism might have at its core, nor exactly how he came to decide on these four. He hints there may be more. Part I of the book explores the nature of these four paradoxes, and Parts II and III trace their appearance from 1830 to the present, with two rich,

descriptive chapters each on intellectual life, architecture and city planning, music and dance, theater, literature, and the visual arts.

The four paradoxes look very much like opposite sides of a debate. But instead of rejecting one side or the other, as debates about Mormonism in the public sector often do, Givens embraces both sides as inherent features of Mormon thought. The agonistic tussles between authoritarianism and individualism seen in the Mormon scriptures are manifest in events like the Pratt-Young conflict over the nature of God or the academic freedom wars at BYU. Likewise, the love of certitude and ceaseless searching, joined in the First Vision and the idea of eternal progression, can be found in creative tension in the poetry of Carol Lynn Pearson or the films of Richard Dutcher. The collapse of the sacred into the banal, rooted in everything from eternal “increase” to Mormon sacred cities, manifests itself in cultural production like temple architecture, pioneer dancing, and meetinghouse cultural halls. Finally, the tension between exile and integration, the prepossession to be the one true church and to treasure all truth wherever it is found, can be seen prominently in Mormon hymns and pageants; the novels of “Lost Generation” writers like Maurine Whipple and Virginia Sorensen; and theater, which was forcefully illustrated by Brigham Young, who once said: “If I were placed on cannibal island...and given the task of civilizing its people, I should straightway build a theatre” (146). These tensions are, of course, found to some degree within all religions, but Givens argues convincingly for their dominance within Mormon artistic expression. Although he does not insist on the point, he suggests that Mormonism’s distinctiveness may lie in its bridging of binaries that other religions and cultures have taken to be unbridgeable (8, 28, 42, 59). It is “fortunate” for Mormonism that these paradoxes do not dissolve or turn uni-polar (344).

The great appeal of *People of Paradox* is its ranginess. It synthesizes a tremendous amount of material and does so in a confident, knowing style. The paradox trope introduces dynamism and indeterminacy into Mormon historical writing, a refreshing move with potentially revolutionary implications. Most noticeably, Givens has pushed beyond the particular to the universal, linking Mormon art to everything from Marlow’s *Dr. Faustus* to Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*. In a brief two-page span, Givens quotes Chateaubriand, William James, C. S. Lewis, Mary Shelley, Heidegger, Einstein, and Wordsworth in a discussion about the Mormon idea of the sacred (50-51). Such worldly wise are often invoked to add gravitas to Mormon thought, as though his audience was unaware. Unfortunately, this lovely garnish can leave a slightly bitter aftertaste. The authorities have a tendency to make the story hover above time and place, a literary style that will frustrate hard-nosed historians who are looking to pin down influence. Givens leaves it to others to assess where

Mormon artists got their ideas and to figure out why one pole of a paradox seems to prevail in some events and apparently even in some epochs.

Moreover the major debates that animate cultural studies today—the exchange between high and low art, the authority of art, the power of imperialism, to name just three—are not taken up directly here. That may be an issue of space limitation or intended audience as much as anything. Givens holds an endowed chair in literature and religion at the University of Richmond; he doubtless knows these debates backwards and forwards. For whatever reason, he chose not to engage this literature here, and in so doing he misses a golden opportunity of critiquing the establishment Mormonism has always challenged. That sidestep will leave readers wondering who this book is arguing with and where it fits within the larger set of debates about cultural production in American life. Perhaps unwittingly, the book as a whole perfectly illustrates the exile-integration paradox Givens so ably articulates. With so few gestures to the larger academic literature, I am left to conclude that *People of Paradox* addresses primarily an American public who believes that Mormonism is either empty or weird. Givens powerfully turns this thinking on its head. Mormon culture is not only important in its own right. It is also timeless, universal, and profoundly human.

REID L. NEILSON and TERRY L. GIVENS, eds. *Joseph Smith, Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, xi + 284 pp., index, \$24.95 paperback.)

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It is a mark of the fascination that Joseph Smith inspires in students of religion and religious history (the present author not excepted) to the present day that, despite the plentitude of biographies, specialized studies, movies, hymns, visual art, and all the rest that his life has evoked even only in the past sixty years, this volume is still welcome. And perhaps, given that admission, it will not seem harsh criticism to say that the book seems both utterly necessary and yet, in both the whole and in some of its parts, insufficient—not so much to its particular scholarly goals, but to the larger task of apprehending the man. The haunting cover art, a portrait of Smith the night before his death entitled “Monday, 24 June 1844, 4:15 AM; Beyond the Events” (a title incorrectly rendered on the back cover of the paperback edition) by the Italian LDS artist Pino Drago, captures the enigma. Smith, rendered in the naïve style originating in the work of Henri Rousseau, seems simultaneously flat, and perhaps

because of that, otherworldly; his hands are powerful, his clothing unnaturally stiff, his face half in and half out of shadow. And his eyes are unreadable.

As with Mormonism in total, academics have generally used historians' tools to grapple with Smith's life. And, as editors Reid Neilson and Terryll Givens argue—a point Laurie Maffly-Kipp later unpacks with great vigor and clarity in an essay that itself might have served as a good introduction to the collection—too often this strategy has led to a conceptual dead end: “the difficulty of moving beyond the question . . . whether Smith was a prophet or a fraud” (7). And indeed, much of the work on Smith's career since Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (1946) can be characterized as a war over Smith's trustworthiness, as scholars skeptical of Smith's claims have striven for epiphenomenal ways to account for him, only to find themselves vigorously rebutted by believing historians. Maffly-Kipp suggests that this problem is perhaps a case of improperly reviving a question that St. Augustine resolved centuries ago when he confronted the Donatists; in a sacramental religion like the one Smith established, exactly how relevant are the personality flaws of the founder? But Maffly-Kipp here sidesteps another issue, and one which suggests that the pile of combative monographs could, potentially, rise upward without end. That is, quite simply, the historian's tools do not equip her to render the verdict. As Robert A. Orsi has recently noted, the modern discipline of history is premised upon knowledge that footnotes can replicate; what Orsi calls “abundant events,” such as Catholic visions of Mary, overflow such categories, and history (and historians) are too often incapable of dealing with them.<sup>1</sup>

The solution Neilson and Givens propose is to multiply the number of tools in the scholar's chest. This is wise, and useful. The volume should, one hopes, introduce many historians of Mormonism to a wide variety of other disciplines that will not only enrich their everyday work, but may also indicate new frameworks to approach the seemingly eternal conundrum of Joseph Smith. Included in this collection are essays by literary critics like Richard Dilworth Rust, Givens, and Richard R. Brodhead; students of religious studies like Catherine Albanese, Douglas Davies, Neilson, and Maffly-Kipp; specialists in the Hebrew Bible like Margaret Barker and Kevin Christensen, and Richard Mouw, an evangelical theologian; in addition to historians James Allen, David Whittaker, Richard Bushman, and Klaus Hansen.

Many of these essays are enlightening, and they offer the reader a Joseph Smith colored in surprising ways by the shadows of new contexts. The essays Maffly-Kipp and Brodhead provide are already classics, and both, interestingly enough, redirect us away from Smith himself. To what extent, they ask, can we collapse Mormonism into the seemingly unique ideas and experience of a single man? Maffly-Kipp notes that perhaps Mormonism should be un-

derstood not as the faith Joseph created, but as the diversity of experience that followed in his wake. Reid Nielson's essay on the Mormon encounter with Asia in the nineteenth century, though primarily focused upon the American side of things, offers a tantalizing glimpse of the fruits of such labor. Similarly, Brodhead and Wayne Hudson, in another essay, propose readings of Smith that contextualize him in religious ways, as a prophet among prophets, an exemplar of a type.

Mormon historians are used, by now, to thinking of Joseph Smith as an American; scholars since Brodie have credited him with the expansive optimism and rough-hewn can-do-ness of the early nineteenth century. The contributions of Catherine Albanese, Klaus Hansen, and James Allen indicate that despite how well trod the path is, there is still more to be gained from such a strategy. Tired as comparisons to Jacksonian egalitarianism might be, rooting Smith in other historical contexts—antebellum constitutional politics, in the case of Allen, and folk culture, in the case of Albanese—still provides us with useful insight. However, as the insights Brodhead and Hudson show, arguments from other disciplines (perhaps because, curiously, most of the great historians of Mormonism until the past decade or two have not been historians of religion) that describe Smith's religious experience as something other than blazingly unique are still somewhat unfamiliar.<sup>2</sup> Douglas Davies's essay, relying most particularly upon the theology of Paul Tillich, and that of Richard Mouw, who examines Joseph Smith in dialogue with the evangelical tradition, illustrate usefully the ways such contextualization reveals both the continuities and the divergences of Mormonism's relationship with the Christian tradition.

All of these essays, and others—Kevin Christensen's application of the Old Testament analysis of Margaret Barker, giving us a Joseph Smith who reinvented (or, the two would have us believe, revived) Biblical tradition; Givens's thoughtful and useful essay positioning Smith as a romantic in the school of no one so much as William Blake, one for whom the process, rather than the result, of religion making was all; Richard Dilworth Rust's comparison of Smith and Herman Melville, which might be read as an interesting application of Givens's theory—grandly illustrate the editors' success at their stated goal: to show, via a "variety of interpretive strategies," that there is much still to be learned about Joseph Smith, and new paths are only beginning to open (7). The combatants in the old historical wars over his honesty would do well to pay attention.

But despite these frequent observations—by both these scholars and others, such as Bushman—that Smith himself is hardly the total story of Mormonism, scholars (again, perhaps fascinated) frequently have an inclination to paint Mormonism as a heroic and largely theological narrative, an intellec-

tual and religious achievement flooded in every cranny by Smith's inimitable brilliance. This tendency appears at times in this volume when authors like Givens, who emphasizes—perhaps overly so—Smith's labors "to free himself from the burdens of theological convention, intellectual decorum," and—and perhaps most especially—"the phobia of trespassing across sacred boundaries" (107). In one stroke, Smith here is separated from two thousand years of complex and diverse Christian thought, a wild and overgrown field in which one might struggle to find any consistent "convention." Hansen offers a similar paean, separating the "Joseph of history" from "Joseph the prophet" (33). Mormonism as a whole, Hansen posits, offered a set of values and ideas which struggled with evangelicalism for the soul of Americans. When he turns to Smith himself, however, Hansen cites Harold Bloom to label the man as simply a genius, someone whose accomplishments are not reducible to explanation. Both of these arguments, interestingly enough, use the implicit metaphor of the artist—Hansen draws upon Bloom's poetics, while Givens presents us with a Smith drinking deep of the same cultural mood as Wordsworth and Whitman. The mystery of prophetic genius seems almost Byronic.

But Hansen's strategy also brings to mind, perhaps, the work of theologians like Martin Kahler, who discuss the division between the "Jesus of history," whom diligent research might learn about, and the "Christ of faith," whose power can only be encountered through religious experience.<sup>3</sup> And it is here that we seem to run into the same problem all over again—how much closer have we gotten to the mind and heart of Joseph Smith himself? I do not wish to minimize the value of this collection—it is, in a word, groundbreaking, and I suspect it will be cited as an inspiration for future interdisciplinary studies for years to come. The new strategies these essays offer—of literary criticism and religious studies, wider historical contextualization and philosophical theology—have gotten us closer to what Joseph did and how he did it, and to a deeper understanding of who his contemporaries understood him to be.

But these strategies are essentially phenomenological; that is, they avoid the questions of truth and inspiration that historians have been beating against for decades. Richard Bushman, in his own thoughtful essay, takes precisely this tack—it is his intention, he states up front, to examine the function of Joseph Smith, not to "explore questions about the sources of Smith's lasting influence" (94). This is, perhaps, the best academics can do. But the nagging question still remains, because those sources—the possibilities of visionary experience that Smith experienced, and, as importantly, imparted to followers like Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and others—lie exactly at the heart of who Joseph Smith was. In another context, the eminent theorist of religion Jonathan Z. Smith warned us that if students of religion hid behind words like

“demonic” and “crazy” instead of seeking to understand the religious creation of Jim Jones, they might as well abdicate their claim to understanding.<sup>4</sup> It may be that, as Orsi laments, the critical apparatus given to scholars in the humanities is insufficient to apprehend Joseph Smith, and we must continue to use words like “genius” to describe the puzzle of Joseph Smith. But, one hopes, the sort of work this volume offers may eventually bring us a sword capable of cutting through the Gordian knot Joseph presents to us.

### Notes

1. Robert A. Orsi, “Abundant History: Marian Apparitions as Alternative Modernity,” *Historically Speaking* 9, no. 7 (September/October 2008), 12–16.

2. Most such work to date has compared Joseph’s early visions to evangelical conversion experiences. See Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 38–40.

3. Martin Kahler, *The So-Called Jesus of History and the Biblical Christ*, Carl Bratten, trans., 1892 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964).

4. Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 102–120.

WILLIAM THOMAS ALLISON AND SUSAN J. MATT, EDS. *Dreams, Myths, & Reality: Utah and the American West*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008, viii + 310 pp., \$29.95 paperback.)

Reviewed by Jedediah S. Rogers, a doctoral candidate in American history at Arizona State University.

*Dreams, Myths, & Reality: Utah and the American West* is a collection of essays originally delivered by established historians at the Critchlow Lecture Series at Weber State University. Contributors include well-known historians of Utah and Mormon history and a few others, such as James P. Ronda, Wayne Carver, and David Haward Bain of national fame. The editors—William Thomas Allison, former history professor at Weber State University; and Susan J. Matt, of the same school—insist the essays represent the New Western History in that they “expand our knowledge of the West, often from surprising angles because the voices of Utah have been many” (vii). Indeed, the volume features the diverse voices of Mormon leaders, a nineteenth-century feminist, the founder of Ogden, a secretary of the interior, Native American women, Utah’s centennial delegates, and other individuals and groups; and topics in political, religious, environmental, social, intellectual, and print-culture history. As is sometimes the case in this type of compilation, the essays are linked



by their association with the lecture series more than any thematic or literary coherence. Like an assorted box of chocolates, there is something for everyone in this book, Mormon history connoisseurs included.

Because the essay topics are wide-ranging, they are not easy to categorize. The biographical essays are more narrative than analysis, but the stories—especially those of William J. Critchlow III, Valeen Tippetts Avery, and Carol Cornwall Madsen—are vivid, detailed, and engaging. Critchlow delivers a compelling account of James Brown's travels, including harrowing crossings of the Sierra Nevada and the Great Basin desert only a year after the Donner disaster. I found Davis Bitton's essay on George Q. Cannon's business dealings disappointing only in that Bitton notes contemporary critics of Cannon; and his refutations do not attempt to resolve the points of contention.

While the subject matter of several essays will be familiar to students of Utah and western history, the essays generally emphasize less acknowledged or understood aspects of the history. In situating Lewis and Clark in the context of explorers using print to advertise their enterprise, Ronda comes to the inescapable but not altogether novel conclusion that books conceptualized and launched the Corps of Discovery—and publicized it. William Moulder's essay on Nordic-language newspapers reveals that Utah was home to a surprising array of publications written and edited by a talented cadre of foreign converts to the Mormon church. In comparing settlement patterns and motivations in the pre-1860s to the post-1860s West, Dean May begins to outline—but stops short of fully showing—how settlers' preconceived perceptions of land influenced their relationships to and permanence in the places they settled.

Thankfully, two of the better essays address woefully underdeveloped topics. Ronald Walker's essay on Utah's native women is a model for how historians ought to put marginalized groups at the center of their own histories and the ones they tell about the West, even when sources are scant. Thomas Alexander's essay on the environmental ethic found in Mormon theology is a timely reminder that Christians may yet return to scripture and core doctrine in seeking sustainable ways of living. Two other essays deserve mention, not merely for their unorthodox presentation but for the illustration that writing history can be an intensely personal experience. Wayne Carver delights readers with a stroll through Plain City, Utah, now nonexistent, where boyhood baseball and the epic travels of John C. Fremont and Kit Carson convene in a common history. David Haward Bain takes a physical and intellectual journey through the West with Mark Twain and Bernard DeVoto as guides.

Despite some essays that are refreshing and new, readers should not expect to find the latest in historical theory and interpretation. The *New Western History*, from which these essays derive, has been with us for a generation and has long been reflected in histories written about Utah and the West. This



volume is a rejoinder of the best of that scholarship, a reminder of how far we have come and a celebration of the historians who helped get us to a point where we can celebrate stories from the margins. Given the quality and diversity of the essays therein, I believe the collection should attract a wide audience, and Signature Books should be commended for making these essays available to the public.