

Chapter 1

Mormon History and the Conundrum of Culture: American and Beyond

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In a spirited letter to Dale Morgan discussing Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, Bernard DeVoto took aim at the notion—implied in Brodie's work—that the study of the relationship between Mormonism and American culture was an enterprise of significance or importance. "Practically everyone who writes about Mormonism," he argued, overstates "the importance and the typicalness of Mormonism in the United States of its time. It was not typical of American life at that time and it was, even in sum total, of exceedingly minute importance in or to American life. It is at best a minor thing in America as a whole, and at best an aberration of the principal energies involved in it."¹ Though Morgan, not surprisingly, took exception to such strong opinions, DeVoto had hit upon a major issue in Mormon historiography: the significance of Mormonism's place in American culture.

Excellent overviews of this topic are the "Introduction" to *Mormonism and American Culture*, edited by Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen (New York: Harper & Row, 1972): 1-9; and Thomas G. Alexander, "The Place of Joseph Smith in the Development of American Religion: A Historiographical Inquiry," *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978): 3-17. Important for the early period is Howard Clair Searle, "Early Mormon Historiography: Writing the History of the Mormons, 1830-1858" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1979). My own study inevitably overlaps somewhat not only with these studies but also with others in this volume because the theme of culture is such a broad one. Although it would be desirable for this essay to achieve comprehensiveness, such a goal is compromised less by space limitations than by my idiosyncratic reading in Mormon and American history.

Although DeVoto's eruption of temper resulted primarily in hyperbole, ironically, he was at least in partial agreement with a group of writers for whom he professed noth-

1. 28 December 1945, in Wallace Stegner, ed., *The Letters of Bernard DeVoto* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), quoted in William Mulder, "Preface," *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 4. Morgan had taken exception to some of DeVoto's comments in his review of Brodie, which was on the whole favorable, published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, on December 16, 1945.