

Chapter 12

The New Mormon Women's History

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An important aspect of the New Mormon History has always been its interest in women's history. In fact, many of its practitioners have been and are women. In the "old Mormon history" (before such "new history" pioneers as Brooks and Arrington), one is hard pressed to name one woman historian who wrote using professional standards of research, writing, and scholarship, though many women wrote memoirs, diaries, and character sketches that are historical and literary jewels. However, in the New Mormon History women and women's history play a prominent part.¹ When Leonard Arrington, perhaps the central figure in the New Mormon History, described the limitations of the former Mormon history, the second of five major biases he identified was "the male bias."² He wrote, "Anyone who spends a substantial amount of time going through the materials in church archives must gain a new appreciation of the important and indispensable role of women in the history of the LDS church—not to mention new insights into church history resulting from viewing it through the eyes of women." The "male bias" may be especially marked in Mormon culture, in which the main structure of an authoritarian church leadership is exclusively male and in which male priesthood authority is a basic Church doctrine. (In modern mainstream Mormonism, priesthood is still viewed as an exclusively male prerogative.)

Mormon women's history thus is closely connected with the woman's movement in Mormonism, and Mormon women's history has been one of the most controversial strands of the New Mormon History. Since a basic axiom of feminism is that women should have rights and opportunities that are equal with men's, the women's movement—which would expect that women should have full equality within the Church, and thus priesthood opportunities—has been viewed with suspicion by the Church hierarchy. Women's history in the New Mormon History has given support to those women who see the need for women to hold expanded opportunities and rights—including, for some,

1. Roger D. Launius, "The 'New Social History' and the 'New Mormon History': Reflections on Recent Trends," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Spring 1994): 109-27, 122-26; Thomas G. Alexander, "Toward the New Mormon History: An Examination of the Literature on the Latter-day Saints in the Far West," in *Historians and the American West*, edited by Michael P. Malone (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 344-68, 357.

2. Leonard J. Arrington, "The Search for Truth and Meaning in Mormon History," *Dialogue* 3 (Summer 1968): 56-66, reprinted in *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past*, edited by D. Michael Quinn (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 1-11, quotation p. 7. Quinn makes a similar statement in his introduction. The "new history" (Mormon or American) "examines the experiences of 'common people' and reverses the lack of emphasis on women, children, families, and ethnic minorities" (vii). The other three biases that Arrington listed were the theological marionette bias, the solid achievement bias, the centrifugal bias, and the unanimity bias.