

Chapter 15

Mormon Society and Culture

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The phrase “the New Mormon History” is sometimes carelessly used to refer simply to historical works produced “recently.” But “the new social history” and “the new cultural history,” as these expressions are more carefully used, have reference not to the fact of being produced recently but to distinctive approaches and questions asked. In this sense, it is quite possible for something published this year to not qualify as the “new” history. Much now being written and published about the Mormon past, as well as other historical subjects, is simply the old history perpetuated or extended. It is not helpful to lump it all together as the New Mormon History.

The new social history, since the 1930s and especially since World War II, has the following characteristics:

1. It has been analytical rather than primarily narrative.
2. Where appropriate, it has been quantitative.
3. Where possible it has been interdisciplinary, meaning that it incorporates terms and questions from such adjacent disciplines as sociology and anthropology.
4. It has tended to focus on populations (demographic history) often in small groups such towns and settlements (community studies), families (family history), or elites (prosopographical history).
5. The new social history has shown a heightened awareness of class, ethnicity, race, and gender.¹

Let us consider, then, Mormon social-cultural history in relation to these emphases. A complete bibliography of relevant works is not possible within the space allotted. Instead I shall attempt to give an idea of several fronts on which progress is being made, referring to enough specific recent works to indicate what is being done and where serious scholarship is still needed.

Community History

Not until Mormons existed in sufficient numbers to constitute a community could they be studied in terms of social interaction. But this started quite early, in Kirtland, Ohio. (See also “Mormon Origins: The Church in New York and Ohio,” by Roger D. Launius, in this volume.) Without attempting to review all of the scholarship for the Kirtland period, roughly 1831 to 1838, we can observe that, in some of it at least, we find some social-cultural history. Milton V. Backman, Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints*

1. A good introduction to the newer interests as led by French historians is Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). I am by no means an unqualified champion of the new social-economic history; here I merely describe and, in the remainder of the essay, attempt to gauge its different manifestations in the writing of Mormon history.