

# Introduction

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Over the past sixty years a growing body of historical literature has emerged, examining diverse aspects of Mormon history. In 1952, Fawn M. Brodie noted “the phenomenon of the Mormon writer” or “new group” of writers having “the ambition to be serious . . . historians [striving] earnestly if not always successfully for impartiality.”<sup>1</sup> In 1969, Moses Rischin called this scholarship the “New Mormon History.” In the quarter-century that followed, a vigorous debate has waxed and waned over whether there is, in fact, a “New Mormon History,”<sup>2</sup> its characteristics, and the pros and cons of scholarship produced under its rubric. Senior Mormon historian Marvin S. Hill, for example, said in “The ‘New Mormon History’ Reassessed in Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins,” *Dialogue* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 116-27, that he did not “believe that there actually exists an entirely ‘new Mormon history’” (115), even though he conceded that “certainly the quantity of scholarly studies has greatly increased, and often the quality as well” (116). Among the heaviest critiques are Boyd K. Packer, “The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect,” *BYU Studies* 21 (Summer 1981): 259-78; David Earl Bohn, “No Higher Ground: Objective History Is an Illusive Chimera,” *Sunstone* 8 (January-March 1983): 26-32; his “Our Own Agenda: A Critique of the Methodology of the New Mormon History,” *Sunstone* 14 (June 1990): 46-54; and Louis Midgley, “Which Middle Ground,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22 (Summer 1989): 6-8.

It is not my intention to become involved in either debate. Rather, I accept the historiographical fact that a body of scholarship has emerged in Mormon studies that differs in significant ways from its predecessors. One of these distinctive characteristics of recent Mormon scholarship, has been its sheer volume. “The years stretching from the 1950s on,” note Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1988), 126, “saw an incredible volcano burst: dozens, scores, of historians [taking] up the subject of Mormon history, writing more books, articles, and dissertations than ever before.” Mormon studies by the late 1960s, had attracted “an array of sophisticated scholars” that “had no parallel in the history of any other religious group in America—with the single exception of the Puritans,” noted Moses Rischin (49). But the

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1. Fawn M. Brodie, “New Writers and Mormonism,” *Frontier Magazine*, December 1952, 17.

2. Moses Rischin, “The New Mormon History,” *American West* 6, March 1969, 49.

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flood had barely begun. In their editors' introduction, James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whittaker, *Studies in Mormon History, 1830-1997: An Indexed Bibliography with A Topical Guide to Published Social Science Literature on the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), ix, list almost 15,000 items.

Also writing in the 1960s, P. A. M. Taylor, "Recent Writing on Utah and the Mormons," *Arizona and the West*, August 1962, 252, identified a second characteristic of recent Mormon scholarship—its growing "professionalization." This characteristic has also only intensified as new generations of academically trained historians have taken up their tools. Robert Bruce Flanders, "Some Reflections on the New Mormon History," *Dialogue* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 35, observed that "most of the new historians are professionals whose work exhibits critical-analytical techniques." True, Paul M. Edwards, "The Irony of Mormon History," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 1973): 408, noted that "in history as in no other discipline the amateur is vital. For it is the interest, the love of the past, the willingness to become half lost in the imagination of previous days that is the historian's first tool and the one which few graduate students learn to use." Still, he also characterized the "large majority" of New Mormon historians as "professional," and, in "The New Mormon History," *Saints' Herald*, November 1986, 474, listed as evidence: the 1972 appointment of Leonard J. Arrington, trained scholar and noted author, as the LDS Church's first professional appointment to the office of Church Historian; followed by the calling of Richard Howard, also professionally trained, to a similar position over the Historical Department of the Community of Christ (then Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). Further facilitating professionalization was the creation of "networks of historical-minded persons" enabling scholars and interested students to discuss, debate, and exchange information. Edwards noted the Mormon History Association in 1965, followed the next year by the appearance of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action* (1970), and the creation of the John Whitmer Historical Association (1972).

Recent Mormon scholarship has reflected a third outstanding characteristic: use of heretofore unavailable and/or unused manuscript source materials. Important in this process is the availability of primary materials in the LDS Church Archives in Salt Lake City. For the decade of Arrington's tenure as LDS Church Historian, archival materials, including papers of General Authorities and official minutes and records, were relatively open to scholars. It was a period Davis Bitton, one of Arrington's Assistant Church Historians, commemorates in "Ten Years in Camelot: A Personal Memoir," *Dialogue* 16 (Autumn 1983): 9-33. Arrington explained his approach to the historical enterprise in "Historian as Entrepreneur: A Personal Essay," *BYU Studies* 17 (Winter 1977): 193-209.

By the mid-1980s, and particularly after the Mark Hofmann forgeries and murders, such access became more restrictive with particular caution applied to the papers of Mormon General Authorities. However, most reputable and patient scholars have continued to be granted access to various other manuscript and documentary materials. Also somewhat offsetting Mormon Church restrictions has been the publication of important manuscript collections, particularly those of Joseph Smith, thanks to such scholars as Dean C. Jessee, Scott H. Faulring, Andrew F. Ehat, Lyndon W. Cook, Dan Vogel, and others.<sup>3</sup> A

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3. Notable examples include Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, Vol. 1, *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book, 1989); Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Journal, 1832-*

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recent and welcome development is the digitalized image publication in *Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, [Dec. 2002]), of more than 400,000 manuscript pages of archival material, including journals of Joseph F. Smith, J. Golden Kimball, Franklin D. Richards, and others. Another is the multi-volume effort to collect and publish all of Joseph Smith's papers, private and public, being undertaken as a joint effort of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at BYU (the successor unit of Arrington's History Division at Church headquarters), the LDS Church Archives, and a somewhat revived BYU Press.

A fourth characteristic of recent Mormon scholarship has been the expanded variety of techniques and methodologies in research and writing. D. Michael Quinn, "Editor's Introduction," *The New Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), vii, noted that Mormon scholars "have adopted new techniques and emphases in reexamining familiar topics," mirroring wider trends in the writing of other types of history since the 1950s. Mormon scholars have begun to consider the "experiences of 'common people'" and of other heretofore neglected groups, including "women, children, families and ethnic minorities." Another important technique is what Quinn termed "cross cultural comparisons" (vii). Such efforts began with Whitney Cross's foundational *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950; paperback reprint, Harper Torchbook, 1965), which considered the origins and development of early Mormonism within the broad context of antebellum American society. Efforts to contextualize the Mormon experience are evident in such works as Davis Brion Davis, "The New England Origins of Mormonism," *New England Quarterly* 26 (June 1953): 147-68; Mark Leone, *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (1987; rev. ed., Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Dean L. May, *Three Frontiers: Family, Land, and Society in the American West, 1850-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Furthermore, as Quinn noted in his editor's introduction, recent Mormon historical scholarship has become increasingly sensitive to "methods and theories of the social sciences," including those of sociologists, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, and psychologists (vii). Flanders characterized Mormon studies as "a modern history, informed by modern trends of thought, not only in history but in other humanistic and scientific disciplines as well, including philosophy, social psychology, economics, and religious studies" 35). Edwards, in "The New Mormon History," 12-13, found it "more wholistic" (*sic*) in its approach with its practitioners more willing to acknowledge that

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1842, Vol. 2, *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book, 1992); Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Signature Books, 1989); Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1993); Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974).

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“Mormonism did not arise unaffected by the people who brought it forth or the environment in which it originated.”

A conscious quest for objectivity represents a fifth characteristic evident in recent Mormon historical writing. As early as Flanders’s 1966 essay, he noted a “trend to detach the Mormon past from American mythology or hagiography” (27). Eight years later in “Some Reflections on the New Mormon History,” Flanders added: “Their point of view might be described generally as interested, sympathetic detachment.” Such writers were “interested in more than the narrowly sectarian experiences of Latter-day Saints” or “morality play” of good versus evil—a “cast of characters” composed of “White Hats and Black Hats.” Such writers, Flanders concluded, are “more aware of and sympathetic toward the ambivalence of the human condition” (36).

Similarly, William Mulder, “Mormon Angles of Historical Vision: Some Maverick Reflections,” *Journal of Mormon History* 3 (1976): 13-14, observed that “Mormon scholars have come of age: they have learned the tools of their trade and have achieved a certain objectivity and composure in dealing with their extraordinary history.” Or as Quinn put it more colorfully in his introduction: Mormon historians have tried “to avoid using history as religious battering ram,” instead approaching “their task from the perspective of functional objectivity.” But Quinn also conceded that “ultimate ‘historical objectivity’ is an impossible task because the observer historian brings his or her own limitations to the study of the past” (viii). Thomas G. Alexander, “Toward the New Mormon History: An Examination of the Literature of the Latter-day Saints in the Far West,” in *Historians and the American West*, edited by Michael P. Malone (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1983), 344-68, made perhaps the most acute observation about the parameters of the New Mormon History: “It derived from a belief that secular and spiritual motivation coexist in human affairs and that a sympathetic but critical evaluation of the Mormon past, using techniques derived from historical, humanistic, social-scientific, and religious perspectives, could help in understanding what was at base a religious movement” (345).

The genesis of what became the New Mormon History can be deduced from the work of five important writers of the 1940s: Bernard DeVoto, Dale L. Morgan, Juanita Brooks, Wallace Stegner, and Fawn McKay Brodie. Their influence forms the thesis of Gary Topping’s foundational study, *Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), esp. 331-40. Brodie and Brooks were, in Topping’s words, “the spearheads of a thrust toward a new Mormon historiography”—Brodie by her controversial 1945 biography on Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History* and Brooks in her 1950 *Mountain Meadows Massacre* chronicling “the darkest deed of Mormon history.” Less than a decade later, the publication of Leonard J. Arrington’s *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints* was, as Topping put it, “probably the greatest single forward leap in Mormon historiography” (333).

This volume of essays attempts to critically evaluate the general body of recent Mormon scholarship—that is, historical books, monographs, articles, and other scholarly works published over the past sixty years—reflecting the emergence of a “new” Mormon history. This work provides a general overview of what has been accomplished, while at same time noting areas in need of further exploration. Such a “progress report” is inevitably a moving target, largely conditioned by the reading interests and awarenesses of their respective authors. Some works will have been slighted or overlooked altogether, while

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some will, viewed from the judicious perspective of another decade or two, have been given too much weight. .

Because each chapter was prepared as a stand-alone survey of the topic and an analysis of it, we have made no attempt to reduce repetition of citations between essays. Indeed, many works, such as Leonard J. Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), is so foundational in the field of the New Mormon History that it is relevant even to surveys of literature that begin decades later and that cover fields far distant from economic history.

Furthermore, the project has its own historical development. It originated in about 1990 in the fertile minds of Roger D. Launius and Paul M. Edwards, who saw the usefulness of tracking our own historiography. They did the initial organizational work, and a significant number of these essays have existed in draft since at least 1992. A number of roadblocks delayed the project, necessitating various revivals and resuscitations. When first Paul, then Roger succumbed to the pressure of other projects, Roger turned existing manuscripts over to Craig Foster and Newell Brighamurst in the fall of 1996; and they began encouraging completions and updates of the existing manuscripts. Newly organized Greg Kofford Books showed enthusiasm for the project; and when Craig's other commitments became overwhelming, Lavina Fielding Anderson came on board to chivvy authors and copy edit the results. The authors, all of whom agreed about the importance of the project and manifested commendable professionalism in looking up recently published works, lamented, even as they complied with the deadlines, the landscape of "what I could have done with two more weeks." As both an editor and a contributor to this volume, I can only express my sympathy; but it seemed quite clear that another delay would mean only another period of updating later. It seemed better to provide a Polaroid of the Mormon history field as of February 2004 than to linger over the brushstrokes of a master piece that might never be completed.

Despite the very real limitations imposed by these working conditions, these sixteen essays trace the exciting youth and early maturation of the New Mormon History. Each is an original work, published here for the first time, by scholars chosen for their expertise on a particular topic. Two essays—Klaus J. Hansen's "Mormon History and the Conundrum of Culture: American and Beyond" and David Paulsen's "The Search for Cultural Origins of Mormon Doctrines"—provide two different perspectives on scholarship concerned with Mormon origins as it interfaced with American culture and society during the early nineteenth century.

Three essays evaluate scholarly writings concerned with the early Latter-day Saint experience in New York and Ohio, in Missouri, and in Illinois, during 1830-46. They are Roger D. Launius, "The Church in New York and Ohio: Writing the History of Mormonism's Early Period"; Stephen LeSueur, "The Mormon Experience in Missouri, 1830-1839"; and "The Nauvoo Experience" by Glen M. Leonard.

Another cluster of three essays evaluates scholarship concerned with the Mormon experience among those Latter-day Saints who accepted the leadership claims of Brigham Young following the death of Joseph Smith. Presented within a chronological framework, the three, taken together, cover from 1846 to the present. The first, "Mormonism on the Frontier: The Saints of the Great Basin, 1846-1890" is by Craig L. Foster, and the second

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by M. Guy Bishop is “Mormonism in Transition, 1890-1945.” Jessie L. Embry’s “The LDS Church in the United States Since 1945,” is an insightful interpretation of the Church’s “headquarters” response to both internal and external pressures since World War II. In “Growth and Internationalization: The LDS Church Since 1945,” Kahlile B. Mehr, Mark L. Grover, Reid L. Nielson, Donald Q. Cannon, and Grant Underwood look beyond the borders of the United States to chronicle the historiography on the LDS Church as an international movement.

Focusing on division and dissent is Danny L. Jorgensen in “Studies of Mormon Fissiparousness: Conflict, Dissent, and Schism in the Early Church.” Mark A. Scherer, “Travelers on the New History Trail: Community of Christ Contributions to the New Mormon History Movement,” focuses on the historiographical contributions of historians in the Community of Christ (formerly the RLDS Church), the major group that emerged following the death of Joseph Smith to reject Brigham Young’s leadership. These contributions are especially significant since the rise of the New Mormon History coincided with a general theological liberalization in the RLDS Church, something that did not happen to anywhere near the same degree in its Utah-centered counterpart.

The remaining essays deal with scholarship on particular topics important in the broader sweep of Latter-day Saint history. Todd Compton explores “The New Mormon Woman’s History.” Evaluating writings on the highly controversial topic of plural marriage is Martha Sonntag Bradley in “Out of the Closet and Into the Fire: The New Mormon Historians’ Take on Polygamy.” I examine what is arguably the largest sub-genre in the New Mormon History: “Mormon Biography: Paradoxes, Progress, and Problems.” Davis Bitton’s essay is concerned with scholarship on “Mormon Society and Culture,” and Lavina Fielding Anderson evaluates the role of Mormon historical fiction in “Fictional Pasts: Mormon Historical Novels.”

This volume is intended not only for individuals directly involved in the research and writing in Mormon history but also is a basic, readily accessible reference guide for scholars in the larger fields of American studies, the history of the American West, and the history of religions.