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# “Saints Observed”: Outside Observations of Mormon Life

A Review Essay on *Saints Observed: Studies of Mormon Village Life, 1850–2005* and *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies*

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MATTHEW J. GROW

The vast majority of publications about Mormonism from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century easily fit into one of two genres: works defending or works attacking the controversial faith. This heated nineteenth-century debate about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its adherents, which has received much recent academic attention, profoundly shaped the religious history of the American West and influenced religious discourse throughout the United States. By contrast, Howard M. Bahr, a professor of sociology at Brigham Young University, points our attention toward a set of remarkably insightful books in which nineteenth-century observers examined Mormon communities in the West with a more objective approach, seeking to understand rather than to disparage or advocate. He then traces the rise of academic studies in the 1920s of Mormon villages, which by the mid-twentieth century were attracting the attention of leading scholars.

In *Saints Observed*, Bahr first examines the writings of eight nineteenth-century observers of Mormon life in Utah Territory. Six wrote between 1850 and 1860: U.S. army captain John W. Gunnison, civil engineer Howard Stansbury,

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*Saints Observed: Studies of Mormon Village Life, 1850–2005*. By Howard M. Bahr. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014. xvi + 227 pp. 15 halftones, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$37.95 cloth, ISBN 978-1-60781-320-0.) *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies*. Edited by Howard M. Bahr, with contributions by Edward C. Banfield, Henri Mendras, Thomas F. O’Dea, and Wilfrid C. Bailey. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014. xi + 309 pp. 33 halftones, tables, bibliography. \$40.00 cloth, ISBN 978-1-60781-322-4.) Matthew J. Grow is director of publications at the LDS Church History Department and a general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers.

artist Solomon Carvalho, French botanist Jules Remy, English adventurer William Chandless, and English polymath and world traveler Richard Francis Burton. Two others wrote between 1872 and 1882: Pennsylvanian Elizabeth Kane—wife of longtime Mormon friend Thomas L. Kane—and British journalist Phil Robinson. All these authors, who were outsiders to the Mormon community, attempted to write objectively, discussed their research methods, and spent considerable time among the Latter-day Saints. Bahr argues that these writers were in reality ethnographers, and he uses them as an “ethnographic team” to better understand Mormon society. By closely reading these studies, Bahr paints a composite picture of what they saw, while still being attuned to the individual differences in the observers and their observations.

Historians of nineteenth-century Mormonism have often drawn on the insights of these observers, but placing them directly into dialogue with one another yields additional insights into Mormon life. Nevertheless, one cannot help but wish that Bahr had more explicitly analyzed the writings and engaged with other academic studies. Bahr’s book primarily summarizes the various studies addressing themes of Mormon community life rather than using their writings to make explicit arguments about how their insights should shape the scholarly or popular understanding of nineteenth-century Mormonism. In his chapter examining the writing of Kane and Robinson, for instance, Bahr cites almost exclusively from their works alone rather than engaging directly with previous scholarship on these observers (his bibliography does not include several relevant previous studies on Kane), or with other studies of Mormon life in the 1870s and 1880s.

Bahr then narrates the rise of more professional “Mormon village studies” by academics in the early and mid-twentieth century, beginning in 1923 with Lowry Nelson’s study of Escalante, Utah. Nelson, director of the Extension Division at Brigham Young University, learned the methodology of the “village survey” movement advocated by Charles Galpin, University of Wisconsin professor and the director of Rural Life Studies in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Academics are naturally inclined to see progress in the field when professional scholars, rather than interested laypeople, take up the study of a particular topic, Bahr reminds us that there are also losses in professionalization. In contrast to the more comprehensive approach of the nineteenth-century writers, Nelson and his students produced narrow studies, spent less time in the villages they wrote about, focused on economic and demographic data rather than broader cultural meanings, and wrote for a small academic audience.

However, the scholarly study of Mormon villages was transformed in the 1950s, moving from an academic backwater topic to the mainstream as a result

of the publication of Lowry's *The Mormon Village* (1952) and, more importantly, because prominent academics at Harvard University and the University of Chicago included Mormon villages in wider projects. Inspired by Robert and Helen Lynd's ethnographies of Muncie, Indiana—*Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* (1937)—sociologists increasingly focused on community studies, of which village studies became a vibrant subfield.

In *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies*, Bahr's companion volume to *Saints Observed*, he reproduces previously unpublished studies by four mid-twentieth-century ethnographers: Edward C. Banfield, Thomas F. O'Dea, Henri Mendras, and Wilfrid C. Bailey. *Four Classic Mormon Village Studies*, however, lacks both a discussion of editorial method (a necessity when reproducing primary source documents) as well as an index. A brief introduction and an afterword give some context, but Bahr does not provide annotation or more detailed introductions to the studies. Nevertheless, making them available is a useful service.

Of particular interest to historians of New Mexico, Bahr includes Thomas F. O'Dea's study of Ramah, New Mexico, written in 1950 and 1951. This was part of the "Harvard Comparative Study of Values in Five Cultures" project (1949–1955) in which anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn and a team of researchers studied five communities in New Mexico: "the Mormon village of Ramah, the Zuni Pueblo, a settlement of Texan migrants to New Mexico in the nearby village of Fence Lake, the Hispanic villages of Atarque and San Rafael, and the Ramah Navajo reservation" (p. 177). At least three dissertations resulted from the study of Ramah, including O'Dea's. Best known for his related and now classic study, *The Mormons* (1957), O'Dea is a particularly perceptive observer, and this study should receive attention from historians interested in the religious and social history of New Mexico.

Bahr's books contribute to the religious history of the American West by reproducing these primary studies, by reminding historians that some insightful nineteenth-century observers pierced through the polemical debate about Mormonism, and by examining the scholarly pedigree of Mormon village studies.

