

BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review for *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History*

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Essays on American Indian and Mormon History, Edited by P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink, University of Utah Press, 2019. \$45.00, ISBN 1607816903

In this book, editors P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink curate 12 essays that tease out the problematic history between the U.S. Native population and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Saints (often called the Mormon church or LDS church). These essays show the concepts of Indigeneity that originate from within the church, and they also feature a whole range of believing Natives' experiences within Mormonism. On the one hand, the collection addresses colorism and paternal behaviors within the Mormon tradition; on the other hand, it also presents accounts of Natives finding meaningful community within the religion. The divergent points of view here allow for complex understanding of how settler-colonialism has erased Native cultures and offered a new sense of Indigenous identity for Native members.

The collection begins with an introduction written by P. Jane Hafen, which lays bare Mormon beliefs about Native populations from the church's sacred text, *The Book of Mormon*. Within the church, this book of scripture is believed to be the ancient records of the Native people of North America, translated by Joseph Smith through divine power. Central to the events captured in *The Book of Mormon* are the Lamanite people, a group said to have immigrated to North America from Jerusalem in 589 BC. The Lamanites, who Joseph Smith said were the ancestors of North America's Native population, were once a chosen people whose skin was darkened because of their disobedience to God. As the story goes, they could eventually become "white and delightsome" through repentance. Hafen posits that the decolonization of such beliefs is a benefit to all people within the Mormon diaspora. It can strengthen the conduct and ethics of believers, give space for Natives to reclaim language and culture within the religion, and also explain why many have left the faith. The collection does not concern itself with disproving Mormon truth claims; rather, it persists in the historical record and ethical implications of the institution. Following Hafen's introduction, there are a few personal reflections in the book's introductory materials: 4 poems from Navajo poet Tacey Atsitty's *Rain Scald*, a personal account from Seneca writer Michalyn Steele of her childhood congregation's blending of Seneca and Mormon cultures through their weekly Corn Soup Socials, and Shoshone Darren Parry's reflection on how the 1863

Bear River Massacre is misrepresented as a battle in a Utah community celebration to this day. These personal reflections set a tone of subjectivity and diverse human experiences amongst LDS Natives.

Part 1 of the collection focuses on early LDS church history. In Chapter 1, “The Book of Mormon as Mormon Settler Colonialism,” Elise Boxer argues that the religion’s sacred text shows a thoroughly 19th-century ethos of settlers wrestling with colonial guilt. Boxer argues that settler-colonialism erased tribal identity and racialized Natives in order to destroy and replace Native culture. The paternalistic relationship was as such that the White settlers had a group to uplift and therefore maintain their own racial superiority. Chapter 2 traces the Native influence on *The Book of Mormon*. In “Other Scriptures: Restoring Voices of Gantowisas to an Open Canon,” Thomas W. Murphy traces several tropes from *The Book of Mormon* to Indigenous origins, particularly the Mohawk and Seneca Iroquois people. Murphy includes ample evidence of *The Book of Mormon* as a text imbued with 19th century ideas, but stops short of asserting that Joseph Smith authored the book, rather than miraculously translating it as Mormons believe. Concepts about dreams/visions, seership/ the use of a seerstone, and the prophetic role all have origins in Iroquois’ Handsome Lake tradition. Murphy also presents the similarity of sibling rivalry and the trope of opposition in all things as different from the general Christian notion of “good vs evil” and more akin to the specifically Mormon doctrine of “opposition in all things”. Seeing these similar tropes as appropriated from the culture rather than as a historical record from the past, Murphy states that it is “untenable to present the Book of Mormon as *the history* of Native America.” Chapter 3 further builds the case for Native-influence on Mormon ideology. In “Joseph Smith in Iroquois Country: A Mormon Creation Story,” Lori Elaine Taylor presents the Native counter-history that Joseph Smith approached the Iroquois for help and inspiration with the Book of Mormon, and that he forged the gold plates from the gold bars that the Natives received as payment from the British for fighting for them in the War of 1812. The folklore serves as a counter to the mainstream messaging of the church, which claims itself as the paternalistic source of redemption for Native peoples.

Chapters 4 and 5 shift to the Early Utah period. In “When Wakara Wrote Back: The Creation and Contestation of the ‘Paper Indian’ in Early Mormon Utah,” Max Perry Mueller analyzes the Native leader Wakara’s pseudo handwriting as his attempt to speak out against the villainized depiction of Natives in the Utah newspapers. The chapter details the killing of several dozen Utes in Timpanogos and similar atrocities in Utah Valley. This violence was justified because of Brigham Young’s application of Joseph Smith’s idea that Natives were “better off on the other side of the veil [sic] than continue to live in open opposition to Zion.” In Chapter 5, “In the Literature of the Lamanites: (Un)settling Mormonism in the Literary Record of Native North America, 1830-1930,” Michael P. Taylor presents Indian-Mormon relations in the through Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the*

Dunes as well as Cherokee author John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murrieta*. The literature subverts the notions of the "unredeemable Indian" and the "vanishing Indian."

Part 2 of the collection, "Native Mormon Experiences in the Twentieth Century" captures later interactions between Mormons and Natives. In Chapter 6, "Mormonism and the Catawba Indian Nation," Stanley J. Thayne reveals the myth of tribal "purity" and stagnation prior to colonization. The chapter also reports one of the more positive messages about how the Catawba people rapidly converted to Mormonism and saw it as a progression in the age of colonization that honored their forefathers and ancient Native peoples. Chapters 7 and 8 both focus on the Diné Bikéyah people. In Chapter 7, "Reclamation, Redemption, and Political Maneuvering in Diné Bikéyah, 1947-1980," Erika Bsumek explores how the Hoover Dam was presented as a way to "uplift" the Navajo people and "teach them how to fish." Government officials stressed "self-help" assimilation and ignored the impact to Native spirit lands and practices. Chapter 8, "Aloha in Diné Bikéyah: Mormon Hawaiians and Navajos, 1949 to 1990" details the success of Hawaiian missionaries in Navajo communities as well as affinity between the "culture of aloha" and the Navajo notion of "walking in beauty". This chapter emphasizes the positive connections that resulted from shared understanding about colorism and the pressures of assimilation within a colonial system.

Chapter 9, "Grafting Indians and Mormons Together on Great Plains Reservations: A History of the LDS Northern Indian Mission," makes account of the missionary efforts in the north. Spencer W. Kimball, a Mormon apostle at the time who later became the President of the church, promoted these efforts. This chapter documents the paternalistic relationship between Mormons and Natives in this region, as well as the tendency for missionaries to treat Mormon covenants as revisions of ancient Native practice. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on Natives within Mormon educational systems. Chapter 10, "The Indian Student Placement Program and Native Direction," explains the voluntary program in which Natives, predominantly Navajos, could send their children to live with White Mormon families during the school year as a method to assimilate. The results were decimation of language and a whitewashing of culture for the generations involved—some 70,000 students in all. This chapter details the relative failure and lack of retention for this program. R. Warren Metcalf presents similar problems in Chapter 11, "'Which Side of the Line?': American Indian Students and Programs at Brigham Young University." Metcalf illustrates the problems Native students faced at BYU, and how this effort in higher education was a continuation of the Indian Student Placement Program. The chapter documents admirable attempts by students to leave their mark at BYU and the subsequent dissolution of the Native Studies department in the late 1980s.

This collection provides a strong contribution to both Native Studies and Mormon history. Some of the collection's greatest strengths reside in the ability to present overwhelmingly negative historical events and paradigms about the

Mormons as settler-colonists, yet the collection never vilifies the religion. The studies refrain from conjecture or unnecessary finger-pointing; the facts are evidence enough. This is a strength in that a Mormon believer could read this scholarship and still appreciate a decolonized conception of Natives from a believing standpoint. If there is a perceived weakness in this text it might be from a reader that desires a more scalding castigation of the Mormon church for the harms it has inflicted upon Natives through their doctrines and conduct. This book does not deliver this kind of blow, but through its restraint, provides true bridges of understanding.



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