

Brigham Young: Sovereign in America

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Brigham Young: Sovereign in America, by David Vaughn Mason. Routledge Historical Americans Series. New York and London: Routledge, 2015. xiii, 184 pp. Timeline, notes, documents, bibliography, index. \$155.00 hardcover, \$34.95 paperback.

Reviewer Richard E. Bennett is head of the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. He is the author of *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852* (1987).

Colorfully written, fast-paced, and boldly assertive, David V. Mason's *Brigham Young: Sovereign in America*, is a brief, highly critical, tightly drawn biography of one of America's most dominant religious personalities. Although only seven chapters long, the book covers well Young's early life and conversion to Mormonism in 1832; his abiding loyalty to Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of the Latter-day Saint movement; his leadership of the Mormon exodus across Iowa in 1846 and then to the Rocky Mountains in 1847; his successful colonization of the inter-mountain West; and his ardent determination to eliminate poverty and inequality among the Latter-day Saints. Mason is also conversant with much of the current secondary literature on such debatable topics as the "principle" or practice of plural marriage, the handcart disasters of 1856, the Utah War of 1857, the Mountain Meadows Massacre of the same year, and the place of temple ordinances among the Saints. Unlike some other earlier critical biographies, Mason's work does not give in to an overly critical, highly simplistic portrayal of Brigham Young as a lecherous, immoral scoundrel driven by vengeance and violence, essentially a liar and a religious renegade.

Nevertheless, his thesis is clear and consistent as stated on the first page: Brigham Young was "the treasonous reprobate and scourge of American democracy" (1); he was authoritarian by nature and disposition; and, because of the trials he faced during Missouri's persecution of the Mormons, he became a law unto himself, an untrammelled "sovereign" and "a king endowed by God" (81). One senses from the get-go that Young is in for a rough ride.

Its strengths notwithstanding, the fundamental weakness of the book is its lack of original research. Young is a highly complex figure who demands much more comprehensive treatment than the publisher and author were willing to give. Leonard J. Arrington and John G. Turner both found that out in their massive, contrasting biographies of the man. Young's available papers run into the hundreds of thousands of items, an archival avalanche, few of which are used here. Sorely missing are more of Young's own voice and writings, as well as the comments of his contemporaries and colleagues. The sad result is that Mason relies heavily on very negative interpretations of the man. He tries hard to

make Young into another James Strang, the "King of Beaver Island," an egotistical, unfettered dictator and selfish demagogue to be defined more by his rhetoric and his critics than by the archival records. It is, therefore, a one-dimensional, simplistic, and imbalanced portrayal of a highly complex individual.

This lack of primary materials leads Mason to make several assertions that do not correspond to the archival reality, only three of which can be discussed here. First, he calls the Mormons' trek across Iowa in 1846, their tortuous stay at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and their subsequent exodus to the Rocky Mountains in 1847 "a perfect dream to Brigham Young," his "playground," a "new wide-open liberty" and "joyful" endeavor (70), and argues that this undertaking, essentially a selfish enterprise, was "for the sake of all, himself" (62). The reality was that Young found himself at the head of a despised and persecuted religion, that he had not sought his senior position as a member of the Twelve Apostles, that Sidney Rigdon, James Strang, and others had disgraced and disqualified themselves in the eyes of their followers, and that 10,000 Latter-day Saints had to either abandon Nauvoo or be destroyed in an open civil war. It was hardly an "adventure" of his own seeking, and to call it all a selfish exercise when thousands were crowding around him for deliverance grotesquely misses the mark. At least one thousand Mormons died in the Iowa and Nebraska wilderness in 1846 and 1847, but under Young's leadership, only a small percentage of his followers either quit or rebelled. He may have had an imperious nature and authoritarian bearing, but he loved and served his people and they ever honored him because of it.

Second, Mason is correct in saying that Mormonism "almost from the beginning was not merely a Christian church but a temple religion" (45), but to argue that Young made use of the temple "to secure his authority over the community" (60) misrepresents the situation. The truth is that the Saints begged for temple ordinances and looked to Young as their apostolic leader to authorize them. It was their faith and demands, not Young's machinations, that led him and his fellow apostles to perform over 12,000 baptisms for the dead, 5,500 living endowments, and hundreds of temple marriages, or "sealings," in Nauvoo. It was their demands, not his calculations, that led him to postpone the exodus long enough to offer such blessings to his people. The record shows that this was a people who were "wont" to be led as much as Young wanted to lead them. Their voices of appreciation are missing in the narrative.

Finally, the author argues that Young's succession to the presidency in Kaneshville, Iowa, in December 1847 was a power grab and evidence of his becoming a monarch among his people. If so, his people failed

to see it in that light. It surely wasn't his fault that in 1835 he had been appointed a member of the Twelve, that he had led a most successful apostolic mission to Great Britain from 1838 to 1841, and that he was by 1847 in the most senior position to succeed Joseph Smith as president. Running the church by committee or by quorum when their own revelations made clear that the Twelve were to go into all the world was hardly a defensible proposition. And Orson Pratt knew it. While Mason is correct in showing that Young and Pratt were often at odds theologically and in terms of personality, it is significant that it was Pratt who presented Young's name for a sustaining vote as the next president. Pratt's action was not a capitulation to Brigham's right to succeed but a recognition of it.

While Mason's book is a good read—lively, informative, and entertaining—it lacks substance and the authority and credibility of in-depth scholarly research.

The Great Medicine Road, Part 2, Narratives of the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails, 1849, edited by Michael L. Tate, with Will Bagley and Richard Rieck. American Trails Series 24. Norman: Arthur H. Clark Company, an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. 328 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer J. T. Murphy is professor of history at Indiana University South Bend. His research and writing have focused on the military history of the nineteenth-century U.S. West, the Oregon Trail, and frontier settlement, among other topics.

Writing in 1917, Henry Ferguson recalled his family's move in 1849 from their farm in Jasper County, Iowa, to the gold fields of California. He was 11 years old when his parents and six siblings crossed the Missouri River at Kaneshville (today's Council Bluffs), where they joined the "Iowa Company" of 42 wagons and "about three hundred souls." They were "all determined in purpose," Ferguson remembered, "yet seemingly almost making a leap in the dark—none having any personal knowledge of what lay before them" (120).

When the Argonauts of 1849 left for the West, there were guidebooks aplenty on how and where to travel, trails and cutoffs were well marked, ferries awaited at many river crossings, and the American army maintained a presence along the way. Each day's routine, however, might be altered by injury or disease, a real or imagined fear of Indians waiting to steal oxen, or the inability to find grass and water. Decisions had to be made, resolve maintained. "There is no back out now," Sherman Hawley reported to the *Kalamazoo Gazette*. "The gold diggings are ahead, and we are bound to be there" (185).