



Book Review: On the Way to Somewhere Else:
European Sojourners in the Mormon West, 1834–1930

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BOOK REVIEWS

ON THE WAY TO SOMEWHERE ELSE: EUROPEAN SOJOURNERS IN THE MORMON WEST, 1834–1930

Reviewed by Kim B. Östman

Michael W. Homer, ed., *On the Way to Somewhere Else: European Sojourners in the Mormon West, 1834–1930*. Spokane, WA, USA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2006. 420 pages. Hardcover: \$39.50.

Volume 8 in The Arthur H. Clark Company's "Kingdom in the West" series, trial lawyer Michael W. Homer's compilation of 19th and early 20th-century European travel narratives from the American Mormon West is an interesting contribution to the literature on Mormonism and Europe. The existing literature on the Mormons and the American West is vast, but Homer has succeeded in choosing a fresh viewpoint. He focuses on what it was that learned Europeans were saying about their visits to the "land of the Mormons," first in the Eastern United States and later in the West, Utah.

Homer, currently chairman of Utah's Board of State History, is himself a descendant of Italian emigrants to the United States. Over the years, his scholarly interests have included research on Mormon history in Europe. While his method of choosing which travel narratives to include in *On the Way to Somewhere Else* is not explicitly detailed, the compilation appears to be a result of Homer's decades-long efforts to collect European writings that deal with Mormonism.

One reason for the significance of the new book is the window it provides into the kinds of Mormon matters that were of interest to Europeans at the time. The majority of Europeans had never met Mormons in real life, and thus accounts in books and other publications – even and perhaps especially fictional accounts, as Homer remarks (27) – provided an important part of the stuff for Mormon im-

age formation. This process has had far-reaching effects for how the Mormon “other” is viewed in Europe.

The chapters proceed mostly chronologically, with a few thematic chapters for example on early travel to Southern Utah and the writings of Scandinavian observers interspersed. The book proper concludes with a brief epilogue by Homer on Utah’s situation and changed (but in some ways not) image in modern days. An extensive bibliography is included at the end, and several illustrations are provided throughout the book.

Each narrative is contextualized through a biographical sketch of its author, of whom a total of forty-nine are included in the book. In addition to these featured authors, the book contains references to several other European writers and their comments on the Mormons. The focus of the narratives is on accounts of Utah and the encounters of the travellers with Mormons, not on details about the doctrines of the Mormon religion. Probably due to its nature as a compilation, the book does not in general contain much analysis, mostly only correcting some of the factual mistakes made by the authors. The translations from the original languages into English have been provided by numerous individuals.

As can be expected, one of the main topics dealt with by the European travellers was the Mormon practice of plural marriage that they encountered and were sometimes eager to see. What one may not expect, however, is their widely varying reactions to this practice, all of which were by no means negative. The French feminist Olympe de Joaral Audouard, for example, gives a puzzlingly positive overview of Mormon polygamy (while still offended by it, she preferred it to “the Mormonism of Europeans,” referring to the de facto polygamy of some Parisians, 126–145). The Austrian-born Joseph Hübner, in contrast, lamented what he saw as the stratification of Mormon plural families, with wives who have to “sit by, resigned to their fate, with sad and cross expressions” (152) as the husband concentrates on his most attractive spouse.

The widely varying views on plural marriage illustrate the difficulty that contemporaries had in understanding and assessing the impact of the controversial practice, even after encountering and interacting with plural families. And while the European authors featured in *On the Way to Somewhere Else* often saw Mormonism's doctrines as strange and its adherents as fanatics on the one hand, many seem to have been touched by the Mormons' hospitality on the other. They were not the savages expected by some after all. The Italian physician and journalist Carlo Gardini even remarked how he forgave the polygamy of his host family "since [polygamy] had provided me such a sincere and cheerful welcome" (298). These are but a few of the interesting, and often fruitfully contrasting, observations and musings written down by the European sojourners.

One critical remark has to do with the scope of the book. The inclusive title *European Sojourners* tends to give the reader an expectation of providing a geographically wide and balanced sample of European writings concerning the Mormons in America. With few exceptions, however, the narratives in the book are drawn from France, Germany and Italy, leaving the reader wondering as to why the rest of Europe has not been included to the extent implied by the title.

For example Scandinavia, a hotbed of Mormon activity in the 19th century, is covered in only five narratives, all from Danish or Swedish writers. The Norwegian Lutheran pastor Andreas Mortensen and the Finnish feminist Alexandra Gripenberg are examples of but two other influential 19th-century Nordic writers who visited Utah and disseminated their experiences widely in their homelands. Great Britain is similarly neglected. Considering the impact of such writings on the Mormon image and proselytizing efforts, it would have been interesting to see a geographically more balanced sample. And while it may be the case that such a sample would mostly have produced similar narratives to those now included, that in itself would have served as a useful illustration of a widespread nature of European views of Mormonism.

In summary, Michael W. Homer's *On the Way to Somewhere Else* is a fascinating addition to the literature that connects Europe with Mormonism. This recently published collection of European travel narratives and ponderings provides excellent source material for those seeking to analyze and reconstruct the European image of Mormonism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The book is warmly recommended, especially to scholars that study intercultural encounters and to anyone interested in Mormon history of the Utah or European variety.