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REVIEW – THE MORMON MENACE: VIOLENCE AND ANTI-MORMONISM IN THE POST-BELLUM SOUTH

Reviewed by Jordan T. Watkins

Patrick Q Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Post-bellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Hardback: \$29.95

In *The Mormon Menace*, Patrick Mason adeptly traces the contours of anti-Mormonism in the late nineteenth-century South and explains how proselytizing, polygamy, and extra-legal violence shaped southern reactions to the threat of the Latter-day Saint (LDS) Church. Mason attends to the ways in which southern honour, characterized by a communal estimation of the individual and often deployed to protect or avenge the virtuous female, provided justification for illicit actions against Mormon missionaries. While granting that anti-Mormon violence paled in comparison to racial and political attacks against African Americans, Mason contends that “Mormonism was unique in the way it inspired southerners to set aside general norms of civility and religious tolerance” (13).

In his thematic treatment, which primarily relies on newspapers and periodicals, Mason provides two case studies of anti-Mormon violence—the murder of Joseph Standing (1879) and the Cane Creek Massacre (1884)—explores the ecumenical, bipartisan, and national nature of attacks on polygamy, outlines three overlapping southern approaches to its eradication—vigilantism, evangelism, and legislative reform—and quantifies and qualifies southern anti-Mormon aggression. Though focused on anti-Mormonism and its violent aspects, Mason also describes how Utah Mormons constructed an oppositional identity in relation to southern hostilities and suggests that the LDS emphasis on difference contributed to the violence. While he provides a rather focused account, Mason is not simply filling a gap in the historiographical record. He uses southern anti-Mormonism to address some of the larger issues facing post-bellum American society, including questions about the limits of religious toleration, the process of national healing and reunion, and the politics of domesticity. In Mason’s account, Mormons are both subjects and objects, illuminated by the light of

southern and national contexts, while also providing new perspectives from which to survey late nineteenth-century American culture.

Mason argues that polygamy propelled southern anti-Mormonism. In two of his most illuminating chapters, he traces the emergence of a national bipartisan anti-polygamy movement, most evident in the widespread support of *Reynolds v. U.S.* (1879) and the Edmunds Act (1882), and describes the ecumenical nature of the southern Protestant repulsion toward the practice. Building on Sally Gordon's study on anti-polygamy legislation, Mason characterizes the national campaign against polygamy as a second Reconstruction.¹ He also makes use of David Blight's argument in *Race and Reunion* to describe the southern reversal on federal intervention, shrewdly explaining that "anti-Mormonism...served to subsume regional and partisan identities by uniting southern Democrats with their erstwhile northern Republican foes in a common religious and national cause" (100).² To highlight this shift, Mason demonstrates how Representative John Randolph Tucker of Virginia refused, despite his condemnation of polygamy, to support the Edmunds Bill, only to later change his position and back the federal crackdown on LDS Church.

At times Mason attends to Mormon responses to anti-Mormon violence and this subject receives extended treatment in the penultimate chapter. LDS speakers used the memorial services of Elders John Gibbs and William Berry to reinforce their identity as a persecuted people with ties to suffering saints of the primitive church and forbearers of the immediate past. In describing how Utah Mormons positioned themselves within a tradition of religious persecution, Mason utilizes the scholarship of D. Michael Quinn, R. Laurence Moore, and Jan Shippis.³ Persecution narratives emerged in the pages of the *Deseret*

¹ Sally Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

³ D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 93; R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 25-47; and Jan Shippis, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois University Press, 1985), 51-54. See also D. Michael Quinn, "Us-

News, missionary reports, and autobiographies. Mormons pinned the violence on the southern press, local anti-Mormons, and a bigoted Protestant leadership. As Mason argues, “violence and other forms of resistance experienced in the church’s southern hinterland considerably shaped Mormon identity in the western hinterland” (151).

Mason’s study is sensibly structured, well written and carefully argued. He admirably narrates a neglected story in southern and Mormon history and in the process illuminates national developments and explores broad themes. I’m left with only a few questions. Mason rightly stresses the qualitative and quantitative differences between racial violence against African Americans and religious violence against Mormons, while still addressing points of overlap. He explains how questions of honour and manhood informed southern attempts to check LDS proselytizing efforts and, in doing so, notes the parallel characterizations of the Mormon “home wrecker” and the “black beast rapist” (66–68). Beyond these loose rhetorical connections though, one wonders if southerners racialized Mormons or contributed to the claim that these practitioners of polygamy had committed what one scholar labels as “race treason.”⁴ If southerners did not view Mormons as a “new race” or a “new ethnic group,” that also begs some explanation.⁵

Them Tribalism and Early Mormonism,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 29 (2009): 94–114.

⁴ Martha M. Ertman, “Race Treason: the Untold Story of America’s Ban on Polygamy,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 19, no. 2 (2010): 287–366.

⁵ On the claim that Mormon polygamy produced a “new race,” see Roberts Bartholow, “Sanitary Report—Utah Territory,” in *Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States*, prepared by Richard H. Coolidge (Washington: George W. Rowman, 1860), 302. On the idea of Mormons as an ethnic group, see Dean L. May, “Mormons,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, edited by Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 720–731; and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 282. Understanding Mormons in racial terms presents a number of potential problems, including equating race with non-racial projections of difference, universalizing race, and implicating the targets of racism in the construction of race. See Barbara J. Fields, “Whiteness, Racism, and Identity,” *International Labour and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall 2001): 48–51; and Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America” *The Journal of American History* 89 (June 2002): 161–163. Describing Mormons in terms of ethnicity likely presents its own range of possible conceptual flaws.

Perhaps the answer is simple. The presence of a perceived real racial other and the development of scientific racism ossified racial hierarchies in such a way as to preclude the racialization of a white other. Forthcoming works by W. Paul Reeve and J. Spencer Fluhman will likely shed some light on these and related issues.⁶ W. Paul Reeve's forthcoming work, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*, will likely shed light on at least some of these issues.

Mason does not pretend to offer a complete account of the Mormon experience in the post-bellum south and indeed he explains that his work is "less about the experience of Mormons in the South than the reaction of southerners to their presence" (11). Still, at times Mason's discussion seems to present the South as monolithic and this owes in part to his focus on necessarily circumscribed anti-Mormon reactions and representations. In other words, the emphasis on southern anti-Mormonism, a phenomena constrained by narrow views of the Mormon other, can be mistaken for a consensus southern response to and representation of Mormonism. Mason does note instances of southern hospitality and even highlights a few cases in which non-Mormons risked their person and property to aid and defend the missionaries. And yet, while we should not collapse southern anti-Mormonism with southern responses to Mormonism, Mason's efforts rather successfully demonstrate that southern reactions to Mormon presence often partook of anti-Mormon sentiment.⁷ Mormon proselytizing efforts, their polygamous beliefs and practices, and notions of southern honour all contributed to this sentiment. The reach of this

⁶ W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, under contract); and J. Spencer Fluhman's work on nineteenth-century American anti-Mormon rhetoric, which is forthcoming with the University of North Carolina Press.

⁷ James B. Bennett's recent article, which analyses late-nineteenth century anti-polygamy writings of African Americans in the Methodist Episcopal Church, supports Mason's claim of southerners' nearly unanimous disdain for polygamy while adding more voices and new perspectives to southern anti-Mormonism. He also addresses issues of racial contestation. Bennett, "Until This Curse of Polygamy is Wiped Out: Black Methodists, White Mormons, and Constructions of Racial Identity in the Late 19th Century," *Religion and American Culture* 21 (Summer 2011): 167-194.

sentiment may have also had to do with antebellum North/South debates about slavery.

This is not to suggest that the South's response to Mormonism was monolithic after all, but perhaps the extent to which post-bellum anti-Mormon sentiment permeated southern discourse about Mormons corresponds with an antebellum proslavery consensus. Southerners were hardly of one mind on slavery and indeed some in the Upper South preferred racial exclusion to racial subordination, but most agreed that the institution, legitimated through historical and biblical explanations, was divinely ordained.⁸ Thus, as Eugene and Elizabeth-Fox Genovese note, when Mormons defended the widely condemned practice of polygamy on similar grounds this "plunged Southerners into a quandary." Indeed, Mason suggests that this quandary persisted into Reconstruction, as southern Democrats remained opposed to federal intervention and to some extent awkwardly sided with Mormons until the menacing threat of polygamy overwhelmed their erstwhile intransigent position on popular sovereignty. But it seems that much of the political and economic appeal of this position had been wiped away by the Emancipation Proclamation and the subsequent military defeat. Mormon arguments for polygamy had undermined the South's stance on slavery and sovereignty, which likely fuelled their shift from a careful defence of their anachronistic system to a wholesale castigation of Mormonism's relic of barbarism.⁹

Pointing out Mason's relative neglect of antebellum slavery, though, is tantamount to critiquing a book that he did not write. Indeed, one of *The Mormon Menace's* great strengths is its tight and focused discussion and incorporating antebellum debates over slavery into the mix might have overwhelmed the focus on post-bellum anti-Mormonism. Mason's work, in short, gives us a lot to think about and directs us to ask further questions. In attempting to answer these questions, *The Mormon Menace* will prove invaluable.

⁸ Lacy K Ford, "Making the 'White Man's Country' White: Race, Slavery, and State-Building in the Jacksonian South," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (Winter 1999): 713-737.

⁹ Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth-Fox Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the South Slaveholder's Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 513-15, quote on 514.