

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Essays on American Indian and Mormon History. Edited by P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4j74w1tq>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 43(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Mann, John W. W.

Publication Date

2019-06-01

DOI

10.17953/aicrj.43.3.reviews

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

REVIEWS



Essays on American Indian and Mormon History. Edited by P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019. 372 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

Twelve essays comprise this volume, most of which were workshopped at a 2015 seminar held at the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University. The goal of that workshop, the editors explain, was to “make American Indians the subject rather than the objects of discussion in relationships with Mormons by reframing critical and scholarly questions from an American Indian/Indigenous point of view within a framework of truth-telling while increasing understanding, and without contention” (xviii). While the essays are diverse in discipline and methodology, on the whole they adhere or contribute to the objective of the seminar that gave rise to this anthology, and for that reason it serves as a corrective to the colonialist discourses that characterize past scholarship on interactions between American Indians and Mormons.

Following the editors’ introduction, the book offers three personal narratives—four poems by Tacey Atsitty (Diné); a childhood recollection about the role of the LDS Church in her Cattaraugus community by Michalyn Steele (Seneca); and a blog post by Darren Parry (Northwestern Shoshone) reflecting on the legacy of the 1863 Bear River Massacre and current tribal relations with LDS neighbors—all intended to “establish a nuanced tone of Native perspectives and voices that can inform” the scholarly essays that follow (xvii). All three identify as Indian and Mormon, and their narratives provide insight into the varied lived experiences of Mormon Indians.

The essays that follow are grouped into two parts. The first, “Native Experience with the early LDS Church, Interpretations of Mormon Scripture, and Literary Representations,” provides multiple perspectives on the Mormon belief that Indigenous peoples are the descendants of fallen Lamanites who can be saved through conversion. Drawing on Dakota histories and worldviews to challenge the master narrative of Dakota as Lamanite, Elie Boxer (Dakota, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes) argues that the Book of Mormon has served as a tool of Mormon settler colonialism by racializing Indigenous peoples and obscuring their histories and claims to land. Other writers aim to decolonize the Book of Mormon by highlighting similarities between Mormon scripture and Haudenosaunee oral traditions and histories. Thomas Murphy, for instance, compares Haudenosaunee perspectives on dreams, visions, seers, prophets, and siblings to Mormon scripture; similarly, Lori Elaine Taylor speculates, admittedly without evidence, that Joseph Smith may have been influenced by the Seneca religious leader Handsome Lake in providing “a Mormon creation story,” chapter 3’s subtitle. A single archival document, an illegible letter penned by the Timpanogos Ute leader Wakara in 1851, is read by Max Perry Mueller as a refutation of the “paper Indians”

that Mormons constructed to justify dispossession of Indian peoples. The aim of this part's final essay, to "(un)settle Mormonism in the literary record," surveys the work of nineteenth and early-twentieth century American Indian writers for perspectives on the Church. Michael Taylor suggests that reviewing how John Rollin Ridge, Sarah Winnemucca, Charles Alexander Eastman, Simon Pokagon, John Milton Oskison, and Laura Cornelius Kelly describe Indian-Mormon relationships helps readers "to reconsider and rearticulate the simultaneously brutal and beautiful past and present relationships of American Indians and Mormons in order to forge more mutually thoughtful, considerate, and critical relationships into the future" (108).

The essays in part 2, "Native Mormon Experiences in the Twentieth Century," range widely in topic, but generally employ historical methodology. Stanley Thayne recounts how Mormon missionaries effected the LDS Church mass conversion of South Carolina Catawba people—an estimated 90 percent by the 1920s. The Catawba embraced a Lamanite identity and one group, migrating west, became the Western Catawba. In Erika Bsumek's compelling case, rather than separate enterprises, Mormon ideas of "redeeming Lamanites" and "reclaiming the desert" were connected, especially in the eyes of Mormon politicians like Senator Arthur Watkins. Focusing on federal efforts among the Navajo to promote reclamation in the Colorado Basin and a policy of termination, Bsumek provides a nuanced account of how Navajo leaders, while both resisting and accommodating federal Indian policy, simultaneously sought to protect sacred places like Rainbow Bridge and benefit economically from water projects like the Colorado River Storage Project and Glen Canyon Dam.

Farina King's study likewise focuses on the Navajo, who received among them Indigenous Mormon missionaries from the Pacific Islands, especially Hawaii, in the second half of the twentieth century. King demonstrates that in their shared indigeneity, experiences with settler colonialism, and syncretic worldviews, these "Lamanite cousins" found common ground. The final three essays likewise describe LDS Church mission initiatives designed to win influence among American Indians. Essay authors Jay Buckley, Kathryn Cochran, Taylor Brooks, and Kristen Hollist provide a history of the LDS Northern Indian Mission to tribes in Montana, Wyoming, and the Dakotas, founded in 1964 and headquartered in Rapid City. They are the first to use the records of the president of the mission. Because these institutional records are celebratory, the authors include oral histories, memoirs, and correspondence from Natives as counterbalance, hopeful that "readers will come to understand that instead of viewing LDS ecclesiastical and educational efforts among Native nations from a binary of right or wrong, they will realize that the history of the LDS Northern Indian Mission contains more nuances than they initially supposed" (185).

Megan Stanton provides a history of the Indian Student Placement Program, which encouraged Indian families to place their children with white Mormon foster families during the school year, returning to their biological family during the summers. From the program's inception in 1947 until its end in 2000, some 70,000 Indian students participated. Stanton argues, emphasizing Indian agency, that Native people "sought to influence the program in order to protect themselves and their interests" (212). Closing the anthology is an overview of Indian students and programs at Brigham

Young University from 1960 to 1983. Warren Metcalf notes that in the termination era, the university's assimilationist Indian program was the largest in the country and perhaps the most successful. Nonetheless, Indian students at Brigham Young still found themselves with a foot in two worlds. With the advent of Red Power came reassertion of sovereignty programs focused on Indian studies, rather than Indian students, which became more attractive to Native people.

One would expect to encounter a good deal of redundancy in a collection of this sort; nonetheless, the volume breaks new ground. As Brendan Rensink concludes, the "essays open as many doors and pose as many unanswered questions as they do resolve existing ones" (247). There is much to recommend here. One wonders how the experiences with Mormons of those chronicled here would compare to those of other specific tribes. The interactions between Mormons and non-US Indigenous peoples deserve additional research. American Indian studies scholars, as well as students of the history of the American West, will find this volume to be thought-provoking.

John W. W. Mann

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock. By Dina Gilio-Whitaker. Boston: Beacon Press, 2019. 212 pages. \$25.95 cloth; \$16.00 paper; \$34.99 audio.

Much is said about Indians and the environment in general, and the work on environmental justice is vast, but surprisingly, few studies have focused on the perspectives and politics of Indigenous peoples regarding environmental justice frameworks. In *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*, author Dina Gilio-Whitaker asks why Indigenous notions of sovereignty are difficult to fit within conventional definitions of environmental justice. The events at Standing Rock, Gilio-Whitaker finds, demonstrate that often, environmental justice frameworks overlook Indigenous peoples' long relationships with place and land, and at times recycle myths of pristine wilderness and notions of white supremacy that disempower, displace, and exclude Indigenous peoples.

Gilio-Whitaker's analysis of the history of American environmentalism and the roles of Indigenous peoples within it unpack these myths. The first chapter's comparison of the claims of environmentalism with Indigenous political struggles for territorial rights and sovereignty demonstrates that environmentalists often undermine these struggles. Gilio-Whitaker's take is distinct from previous scholarship that had effectively reduced Indigenous political claims to cultural difference: she instead insists that we must take Indigenous sovereignty seriously. When we do, we not only expose the legal-political limitations of environmental justice law, but we also identify real political disparities between tribes and states that are rooted in colonial difference and that are not simply reducible to racism and classist negligence of rural peoples.