

Book Review

Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*

By Eugene England

Review of Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), 495 pages. Hardback, \$10.95. Paperback, \$7.95.

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WHEN I WAS an undergraduate at the University of Utah, in the 1950s, it was already fashionable there to condemn the LDS Church as invincibly anti-intellectual and the “local culture” as a wasteland. I remember one barrage of letters in the student newspaper about Mormon literature, music, etc. A proudly disaffected graduate student, after a caustic but actually quite accurate description of Mormon artistic achievement, said the deficiencies resulted from our theology and Church practice—our emphasis on opportunity for expression and development for all members as part of the very process of salvation; lie then, with effective sarcasm, described the prototypical Mormon artistic offering as a rather sentimental Christmas cantata, sung in sacrament meeting by a large but somewhat unbalanced and unsteady choir made up of and led by volunteers and even joined in the climactic chorus by all the rest of the congregation, including the leaders on the stand, to form an unbroken ring of what he saw as mere enthusiastic mediocrity. Recently I participated in just such a Mormon artistic endeavor—one of the dedication sessions in the Solemn Assembly Room of the Washington Temple. At the climax of the service, after we had all stood to express our joy in that unique Mormon ritual of celebration, the “Hosanna Shout” following the dedicatory prayer, a volunteer choir, which like nine others for the other sessions had traveled by bus hundreds of miles from one of the various regions in the Temple District, remained standing in their places to the side of the room, facing at an angle both the audience on the main floor and the General Authorities and other leaders on the stand, and sang the “Hosanna Anthem.” We, our leaders, and the choir, all still standing and facing each other, then joined in singing at the Anthem’s close, “The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning,” while the choir voices soared above us in a descant, welding us together in one unbroken ring of—not aesthetically great art, perhaps, but what is much more important—unparalleled spiritual unity and power and beauty, which the musical quality of the choir (diminished partly by the emotion they felt along with all of us) did not create but did in fact contribute to. I’ve heard and deeply appreciate some great music, written and performed by great musicians, including some great religious music by

people of sincere faith, but I have never experienced any other music nearly as moving—or pleasing—or “worthwhile” as that singing in the Temple.

And I have come, gradually I must confess, to a similar conviction about literature. I know much of the world’s “great” literature well—well enough to teach it and write about it and love it and to be continually refreshed and strengthened and challenged by it as I engage in the lonely task of working out my salvation. And I know that we have not yet produced in “Mormon culture”—nor are we likely to produce, I think—any literature that can be called “great” by the general standards that I refer to in using the term. Yet I feel absolutely no need to apologize for Mormon literature—nor (a more subtle form of apology) to make extravagant claims for its future. My main criticism of *A Believing People*, which is the first significant anthology of the literature of the Latter-day Saints, is that the editors, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert of Brigham Young University, still appear a bit too defensive, too apologetic (including claiming too much for the future), though they are certainly better in this respect than those who have preceded them in critical attention to our literature.

The editors introduce their volume with a quote from Orson F. Whitney that we must assume expresses their own perspective and hope:

We shall yet have Miltons and Shakespears of our own. God’s ammunition is not yet exhausted. His highest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God’s name and by his help we will build up a literature whose top shall touch heaven, though its foundation may now be low on earth.

But, if I may differ with Brother Whitney, I don’t believe God held his highest spirits in reserve that they might come forth in the latter days as our great writers, certainly not as Ernest Hemingways or Norman Mailers, but not even as Miltons or Shakespears, who, whatever they may have contributed to the aesthetic pleasure and sensitivity or even moral and philosophical insight of us all, most likely have brought few, if any, souls to Christ. That, after all, is God’s first concern and would seem to be his primary mission for his “highest spirits.” Yes, I believe God held in reserve the sensitive and articulate Apostle, Parley P. Pratt—and also the plain-spoken and stubbornly courageous handcart pioneer, Mary Goble Pay—both of whom produced good (not “great”) literature that is included in this anthology; but the reason they were sent to us in these latter days, and the reason I most value them, is not for the greatness of their writing, but for the greatness of their lives.

Why should anyone be anxious about a great Mormon literature? In fact, given that, at least in America “great” literature has almost invariably grown out of the religious failure of a group (e.g., *The Scarlet Letter*) or the religious despair of an individual (e.g., *Moby Dick*)—and more, given that, at least in the twentieth century, “great” literature (meaning usually that it is commercially or aesthetically successful) has itself most often been shot through with serious moral or philosophical error, should we not better be pleased to have been spared such greatness? This point was made profoundly clear by an independent observer, Robert Scholes, the fine critic from Brown University. Speaking here at St. Olaf College, he reviewed the work of four major figures in the “great tradition” of Midwestern writing, Ole Rolvaag, Willa

Cather, Sinclair Lewis, and William Gass; he explored the influence on that literature of a particular social and religious vision (the pioneers, “prairie consciousness,” which he saw as “deeply and tragically wrong” because full of the arrogant delusion that the land offered them limitless resources to be exploited), and he then examined the literature’s satirization of that vision’s inevitable heritage of materialism and Babbitry in the Midwestern society of the second and third generations. He admired the literature but was forcefully critical both of the original vision and its social aftermath. In later conversation, Scholes and I discussed the less materialistic and exploitive pioneering vision of certain mountain people, particularly, the Mormons. (The humbling physical constraints of mountain and desert seemed to us an important cause, though of course the Mormon consecration to an ideal of salvation through personal and group development was also crucial.) Then he ventured the startling conjecture that those other pioneer enterprises did not produce such a successful literature as the Midwestern, at least by orthodox criteria, precisely because they were more successful religiously! *Deja vu*: I thought how often I had heard (though they were offered *condescendingly* by Gentiles and *apologetically* by Mormons—obviously thought to be a kind of cop-out) similar explanations for the lack of great Mormon literature, that Mormonism answers well so many basic questions and provides such a satisfying way of life for most of its people that there is not sufficient tension or tragedy—and besides, Mormons have been too busy doing more important things. *But there is no need to apologize*. Religious success is certainly preferable to literary success, and Scholes frankly said he would choose great religion over great literature every time.

Of course, we may not necessarily have to choose; it isn’t always a simple either-or situation. But for me the insight Scholes was exploring about an almost inverse relation between “great” art and “great” religion and the experienced reality of my preference for that singing of the “Hosanna Anthem” in the Temple over a “greater” performance of Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion” must be accounted for in our (still undefined) Mormon aesthetic and in any criticism of our literature. The central point would seem to be the need to responsibly include, in our evaluations of literature, a special consciousness that life is larger than art, that our assessment must include the literal truth of the religious and moral vision expressed and the rightness of the religious and moral response evoked. Mormon literature, in particular, must be approached with criteria that do not underestimate the special values of our best and naturally characteristic work, that is, certain autobiographical and confessional forms which give the sense of genuinely successful human life lived day by day. And our literature must not be subjected to the traps laid by various forms of cultural relativism—especially those rampant in psychological and mythological criticism and in regionalism: I mean the tendency to create as writers, and then describe as critics, structures of thought and experience and perspectives of life which are implicitly valued mainly because complex or paradoxical or exotic—or for mere correspondence to archetypal (or Freudian, etc.) categories, without reference to any kind of ultimate or historical truth. As the editors of *A Believing People* point out, “readers must never forget that for the Latter-day Saint, his church, as the Doctrine and Covenants declares, is ‘The only true and living church on the

face of the whole earth,' and a literature, or criticism of a literature which fails to examine Mormonism on these terms is not only unfair, it is futile." The Church makes such absolute (and unusual) truth claims (including claims about literal historical events) that it is impossible to merely ignore those claims as "interesting" ideas and focus on the "independent reality" and relativistic literary values of Mormon *culture*, in the way, for instance, that people can and do with Judaism or Norwegian Lutheranism. The Church's claims are either essentially true or else the Church is a terrible fraud; if the latter, "Mormon culture" is built on sand, implicitly incapable of producing great literature or even of being taken very seriously. The editors seem to see this clearly and are clear in pointing out that "Mormon writing is outside the mainstream of modern literary fashion," particularly heretical to adherents of the prevailing literary orthodoxy, humanistic existentialism. But they still seem somewhat too apologetic about this and don't say (at least as clearly as I feel a need to hear) that when it becomes necessary, as it does sometimes and perhaps will increasingly, for the Church, or the individual Mormon writer or reader, to choose between great literature and great religion, there is no question where our commitments and greatest needs call us.

But let me be more optimistic. I realize that in fact the lives of Parley P. Pratt and Mary Goble Pay exert a good part of their saving power through what they wrote about those lives—his polished *Autobiography* and her unsophisticated "reminiscences." And I know that a proper study of literature can hone our perceptions and deepen and broaden our sensibilities so that we can read those writings in a way that makes possible fuller response to the saving power of those lives. We do have a fine literary heritage as "a believing people," and there is great value in knowing it well. As I have suggested, that heritage shows to best advantage in various forms of personal witness to faith and experience, genres in which the truth of actual living, and of quite direct confession, is at least as important as aesthetic or metaphorical truth—I mean journals and diaries, letters, sermons, lyric poetry (including hymns), autobiography and autobiographical fiction, and increasingly, the personal essay. The editors give us a fine selection of these, well edited and attractively published. Most of the selections that I would have hoped to find are there, besides many valuable new "discoveries" (the poignant humor combined with unpretentious conviction in Dan Jones' "Some Early Mormon 'Fast Days'" give it a radiance nearly unparalleled in frontier literature). There are helpful, perceptive notes and introductions (if anything, too brief) to the genre sections. And one of those introductions has an important insight that particularly interests me here: "... as the Church finds itself increasingly at odds with the moral values of the encroaching world, the personal essay will undoubtedly assume a larger role as a vehicle for the expression of the values of a people as manifest in the individual life of a sensitive writer." I hope the editors are right, because for our time and for the widest possible appreciation by readers and participation by writers I believe the personal essay is the form that best suits the particular needs and possibilities of a literature for "a believing people." The editors give us some good examples and encouragement.

Because the editors recognize that their work is "tentative and growing and open

to change and improvement,” I can’t resist making a few suggestions—perhaps for the second edition. (This first edition, which every literate Latter-day Saint should obtain for a source of delight and encouragement, of emotional sensitivity and moral and spiritual strength, should certainly sell out completely—25,000 right at BYU, I would hope.) I suspect a better selection of letters could be made from our rich resources, especially from the twentieth century, and that journals and diaries from, and history about, the modern, increasingly worldwide Church could be included. The whole volume tends to focus too much on the nineteenth century and to reflect the Utah Church syndrome. I missed some of our finest lyrics—Clinton Larson’s “To a Dying Girl,” from *The Lord of Experience*, Karl Keller’s “Manti Temple” (*BYU Studies*, Autumn 1959), and Sylvia Ruth’s “For Our Consummate Passover” (*Dialogue*, Spring 1968); and two of our finest pieces of autobiographical fiction—Wayne Carver’s “A Child’s Christmas in Utah” (*Carleton Miscellany*, December 1965), and Carole Hansen’s “The Death of a Son” (*Dialogue*, Autumn 1967). It would have been good to see (particularly examples that could be found that are literature rather than mere theology because the style and tone make them into moving expressions of personal faith) one of Lowell Bennion’s fine essays of practical theology or one of Sterling McMurrin’s or George Boyd’s fine pieces of theoretical theology. And there should have been room for an example from the sermons of Elder Hugh B. Brown, with his unique combination of intellectual and literary with spiritual power, and from President Spencer W. Kimball, with his unique vigor and imagery, and from President Marion G. Romney, with his uniquely personal and moving power to witness concerning Christ. Finally, I guess I just don’t understand what principles of selection would lead the editors to include May Swenson (yes, she is the most prestigious writer with a Mormon background and did in fact come from Utah, but she is fully expatriated and her writing and vision seem to have nothing at all to do with a believing people) and yet exclude Wallace Stegner (yes, he is not a Mormon and thinks our theology only a powerful myth, but he has adopted “Mormon country” as his own and has written with deep empathy, and more skillfully and movingly than anyone else in the twentieth century, about our pioneer experience, e.g., “Ordeal by Handcart,” *Colliers* [6 July 1956]). Nor can I in conscience avoid mentioning the outrageous critical slip of giving over ten percent of the book (56 pages) to a decidedly inferior drama, “And They Shall Be Gathered” by Martin Kelly, while allowing us only four pages of what is probably our best piece of Mormon literature to date, Maureen Whipple’s *The Giant Joshua*.

However, *A Believing People* is, as the editors hoped, “a good beginning.” And I urge everyone within earshot (you and all the friends, relatives, colleagues, or fellow Saints you can influence) to buy a copy and to communicate reactions to each other and to the editors. I also urge you to support the work of Mormon writers, both those included in this volume and others, by buying and responding to their work and the publications in which they appear. Literature is important and valuable (though I have been at some pains to remind us of what is more valuable) and we have now a community large and self-conscious enough to support our own literary traditions (3.5 million people, over 2 million English-speaking, certainly larger than Shakespeare’s or Milton’s audience) without worrying at all about “modern literary

fashions.” Our need is mainly to encourage the talent we have and keep it in good perspective by building a supportive literary community in the Church—of both writers and readers, speakers and hearers. To do this we must explore our heritage and articulate principles of criticism appropriate to that unique heritage and its modern possibilities. And especially must we build religious unity in that community: We must be *less* (rather than *more*, as has sometimes been the case) willing than our Gentile friends to excommunicate, verbally or in our hearts, the too orthodox or the too unorthodox, the apparent “egghead” or the “philistine” among us. We must cultivate both a Christ-like love of truth and a Christ-like humility and tolerance of those brothers and sisters who see some things differently from ourselves. We should not expect the Church to directly foster such a community, nor even in any decided way to foster good literature; its primary function is to help us with our primary task—that of using true principles to learn to love the Lord and thus each other; and the Church knows, even if we sometimes forget, that, despite Shelley and Matthew Arnold and even T. S. Eliot, literature is not a substitute for religion.

“Great” literature has helped prepare me to be more sensitive to certain spiritual experiences, and it has helped me see, and especially to feel, some important truths—and I am grateful. But conversations with my pioneer grandmother have done the same, and so have many good pieces of good Mormon literature from *A Believing People*, and these things (largely because of their power to convey lived, not merely imagined, religion) have also strengthened my faith—for which I am much more grateful.

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