

• Book Reviews •

Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies. Edited by Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013. x + pp. 591, acknowledgments, introduction, notes, bibliography, contributors, sources of previously published chapters, index.)

In an essay delivered to the American Folklore Society in 1998, William A. “Bert” Wilson lamented the predominance of the supernatural in the study of Mormon folklore and, echoing Leonard Primiano (1995) and David Hufford’s (1995) earlier pleas, called for greater reflexivity in future Mormon folklore scholarship. Recent publications within the genre, including the works of Spencer Green (2013), Tom Mould (2011), and Jared Rife (2013), suggest some folklorists are heeding this call in their study and analysis of Mormonism as vernacular religion. The essays compiled for *Latter-day Lore* demonstrate that the personal and private aspects of religious belief and behavior of Latter-day Saints, even the ways they communicate their religiosity, may still be gleaned from the depth, breadth, and richness of the Mormon folklore scholarship over the past eight decades.

In *Latter-day Lore*, editors Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould select twenty-eight formative essays in Mormon folklore scholarship, including the works of mid-century historians and folklorists such as Wallace Stegner (1942), Austin and Alta Fife (1948; 1956), Richard Dorson (1959), and Barre Toelken (1959) and more contemporary folklorists such as William A. Wilson (1982; 1988), Margaret Brady (1987), Jill Terry Rudy (2004), and Steve Siporin (2009), to provide a comprehensive survey of the field. While this impressive (both in size and content) anthology is an indispensable resource for amassing these works within one volume, the collection’s true value lies in the extensive introductory essays that elucidate the historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts of the six sections: the society, symbols, and landscape of regional culture; formative customs and traditions; the sacred and the supernatural; pioneers, heroes, and historical imagination; humor; and the international contexts of Mormon folklore.

Latter-day Lore begins and ends with a discussion of Mormondom’s move from a regional to an international subculture and an analysis of how this growth has or has not been reflected in folklore scholarship. As the majority of Mormon folklore analyses of the

past have been conducted within the Mormon Corridor—a geographical region defined by the editors as encompassing parts of Utah, Idaho, Arizona, Nevada, and other neighboring states—early Mormon folklore scholarship assumed, as Eliason and Mould write, “a natural confluence with regional identity” (25). Part I identifies such “confluence” as problematic and, by providing examples of this regional approach such as Richard Dorson’s “Utah Mormons,” warns that studies that hinge on regional observations are limited in scope, especially when the “culture group extends beyond confined geographical boundaries” (26). Other essays articulate the formation of a distinct Mormon cultural landscape through a reliance on material culture such as hay derricks or street grids or persistent symbols such as the beehive or the Salt Lake Temple.

As the LDS Church enters the twenty-first century as a global religion with more practitioners living outside the United States than within, Part VI questions what role, if any, an expanding Mormondom will have in “extend[ing] and transplant[ing] elements of American culture as it transforms people and places with not only Latter-day Saint religion but American hymnody, sports, architecture, organization principles, styles of dress, and a religious historical consciousness grounded in events that happened along the American frontier” (408). The essays that follow by William A. Wilson, David Knowlton, and Jill Terry Rudy examine the folklore of American-born Mormon missionaries. As ambassadors of the Church laboring in diverse and exotic cultures, missionaries often find themselves in a state of conflict and are compelled to reconcile their traditional Mormon beliefs and practices with the customs they encounter.

In recognizing that Mormonism is predominately a *lived* religion, as the editors write, “all Mormons are made” or “all members must *become* Mormon.” Part II examines formative customs and traditions Mormons use as a means to “establish, express, reify, and reaffirm their religious identity throughout their temporal lives” (93, 101). Many of these customs and traditions, Eliason and Mould recognize, are fostered through the institutional structure of the Church but reflect individual vernacular traditions. Other customs and traditions, such as those found in Kristi Young’s creative dating article or Eliason’s formative piece on Mormon nameways, reflect strategies “individuals have found to make

and remake themselves as Mormons in creative, culturally resonant, and individually meaningful ways” (94).

Part III explores the tensions or “blurry boundaries” that exist between the sacred and the supernatural, the divine and the human, especially as recent folkloristic scholarship asserts that vernacular reports of the supernatural represent empirical evidence, not fantasy. In his article on “early Mormon ‘magic,’” David Allred laments that few folklorists have participated in the debates surrounding Joseph Smith’s involvement in magic despite a predominance of folklorists engaged in supernatural studies and the toolkit of key folkloric principles to do so. Allred demonstrates how a folkloric approach using emic terminology, performance, and hybridity provides overlooked alternative explanations. Also included are Margaret Brady’s study of Mormon women’s narratives of visions of their unborn children and Susan Peterson’s examination of how Mormons contextualize apocalyptic prophecies.

The essays included in Part IV, “Pioneers, Heroes, and the Historical Imagination,” discuss ways Mormons have “conceptualized the past and memorialized Mormon leaders and early converts in storytelling, song, and local celebrations” (279). Important in this section is the Mormon construction of a folk history to rationalize beliefs and to serve the individual needs of the people. For example, Richard Poulsen discusses the tales shared by Mormons of the gruesome deaths suffered by those who martyred Joseph Smith as variants of a common tale told in communities where violent acts have gone unpunished. These constructed folk histories demonstrate a shared humanity between Mormons and others and allow Mormons to conceptualize, even glorify, conflict and violence. Other essays examine the legends, stories, and songs stemming from Mormonism’s “Heroic Age”: the years of the Mormon pioneers. Among the topics covered are pioneer commemorative parades, Orrin Porter Rockwell, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and Brigham Young.

This volume’s shortcomings are more indicative of the gaps within Mormon folkloristic scholarship than the failings of the editors. Eliason and Mould are quick to note many of these under-examined gaps, including the study of international Mormon vernacular culture; variations in Mormon folklore traditions as expressed through the

lenses of race, ethnicity, class, and/or sexuality; and the vernacular traditions that emerge in the contested spaces between institutionally-regulated cohesion and individualistic creativity. To their list, I add one shortcoming: the lack of scholarship exploring digital vernacular expression. Future studies in this field would benefit from examining the cultural trends at the forefront of the Mormon experience in the twenty-first century. Specifically, as lay members respond to the digital revolution and are forced to confront their digital identities, folklorists should ask what strategies Mormons employ to share, participate in, and engage with religious experience through the Internet; how has the internet been used for generating, transmitting, and preserving Mormon folklore; and how do Mormons decide which practices continue as folk and which practices become enmeshed in mass culture?

Latter-day Lore traces the major topical, thematic, geographic, and methodological shifts from within the field of Mormon folklore studies over the past eighty years and, as such, is a useful pedagogical sourcebook for research into Mormonism, both the institutional religion and the vernacular traditions of its practitioners. Throughout the collection, Eliason and Mould suggest new or underexplored avenues for future study as a means of encouraging folklorists to continue work in Mormon folklore, to “fill gaps in the existing literature, and to continue to place the study of Mormon folklore near the heart of folklore scholarship” (19).

References

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