

Mormon Culture: A Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

It is a truism that the L.D.S. Church stresses education, that Utah spends more per capita on education than any other state, and that Mormon scholars figure prominently in *Who's Who*. Yet collectively we have made no particular impression on ourselves or on others. We have had no voice or *esprit de corps*. Only a few Mormon scholars are well known both in and out of Mormon circles. It is about time some group consciousness was effected and an "order" for the learned defense of the Mormon faith formed. Such an "order" could be created from among the nearly 4,000 educators listed in the latest (1961) *Directory of Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Higher Education and School Administration*. If such an objective could be accomplished among even a representative group of L.D.S. scholars, it would benefit the Mormon Church and society, and lead to a better "public image" of Mormons as a people. One of the best ways for such a group to coalesce, to communicate among themselves, and to be heard is through a journal, a journal such as *B.Y.U. Studies*.

The promotion budget of the *Studies* is such that I was fully aware of its existence only when a friend at the "Y" sent me Vol. IV, No. 1 (Winter 1962). After reading it, I immediately ordered the complete back-run and, upon arrival of these numbers, read them through at one sitting. The value of the publication and the quality of some of the articles were most apparent. I was convinced that an awakening and potentially powerful cadre of L.D.S. scholars now had a potentially satisfactory voice.

Aside from the worth of articles and similar contributions fostered and disseminated by the *Studies*, this organ should augment its offerings with the usual book reviews, shorter notices, lists of periodical literature, news of the profession, notes, communications, bibliographies, and such features regularly found in scholarly journals. Of these offerings the most

important without question is that of book reviews. The editors are aware of this desideratum, but in the eight issues to date only eleven books have been reviewed. This part of the journal should be greatly expanded to include most publications of the L.D.S. book trade, which is in dire need of constructive criticism. We also need bibliographic essays on Mormon literature. Such an essay on the various studies of Joseph Smith, for example, would be welcomed by many. Speaking of the studies on Joseph Smith, when are we going to write some good scholarly biographies of our Church leaders. There is a real need, furthermore, for specialized bibliographies of Mormon subjects along the line of those by Dale Morgan.

There are, however, other important dimensions to the role of the *Studies* which at the moment either are not envisioned by the editors or are seen only through a glass darkly. Mormon culture has no effective and comprehensive judge, jury, or police system, no journal to point out the frequent disparity between the idea, the dream, the concept, and the realization, the production and the result. The best and worst of Mormon writers and artists face no Mormon critic of their work. The most unqualified amateur with scissors and paste can throw together a poorly conceived, half researched, carelessly written, and popularized pot-boiler, find a publisher, and be acclaimed throughout Mormondom as an authority.

Studies could and should assume the role of critic of our culture. Its pages ought to carry the best possible reviews not only of books about and by Mormons, but of all major creative activity about and by Mormons. A few examples from the recent past will serve as illustrations—*Promised Valley*, *Sand in Their Shoes*, *All Faces West*, *The Book of Mormon Pageant*, the "This is the Place" Monument, the Los Angeles Temple design, the *Book of Mormon Oratorio*, The Cody Murals, B.Y.U. Film Studio productions, and significant Church programs such as those developed annually to commemorate the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood. Such a service properly provided by *Studies* would tend to restrain writers, publishers, and artists of all kinds from prematurely rushing into print and production, would protect the mind and money of the buying and witnessing public, and, hopefully, would curb the rash of nonbooks which are a blight upon Mormon Culture.

It would further result in better works by and through which the non-Mormon world would judge us.

The role of such service was ably stated in the first issue of the *Studies* by William Wilkes in his article on "John Tullidge: Utah's First Music Critic." He wrote, "Certain spirits among us sense this [disparity between the ideal and the reality] keenly enough to tell us when we should do better than we are doing. And they also praise us when we do satisfactorily well enough. These mandarins are a thorn in complacent societies, but a spur to the progressive. Although as humans they often err, mistaking the subjective for the objective, the specific for the universal, prejudice for taste, and pessimism for incorruptibility, still the effect of their critique in the long run is healthy, for they provoke hunger [for better things]"

One word from this quotation should be elaborated upon—the word *complacent*. Perhaps if the number *seven* had not held such mystic significance to earlier minds there would have been eight deadly sins—the eighth being that of complacency. We as a people are woefully afflicted with complacency since religiously we are completely free from all that is good and bad in professionalism, we have built up a tradition of self-satisfied, tolerant, amateurishness in our endless church activities. We are so concerned over the individual, his growth, and his feelings that, for example, when I used to judge M.I.A. festivals the lowest possible rating an individual or ensemble could receive was "good." While all this good fellowship and "you just done grand" level of criticism may be laudable in Primary, Sunday School, and M.I.A., it does condition us to demand and expect little, even in what we pay for, and it certainly does little to prepare Mormon youth for the cold, cruel world. It is of course intolerable in respect to adult creative activity.

In conclusion let us consider how *Studies* can better fulfill its unique role. At the moment it is a fledgling publication, a "quarterly" which appears two or three times a year. It is also rather parochial in concept inasmuch as the Editorial Board is all at the "Y" and since 84% of the articles in the first eight issues came from Utah, 74% from the "Y" alone, and 37% from individuals at the "Y" under the rank of associate professor.

Of uppermost concern is how to bring *Studies* to the attention of all L.D.S. educators and how to improve the balance in geographical distribution and rank of its contributors. Sending out thousands of complimentary copies and commissioning some articles might help solve these problems. Once, however, the editors of *Studies*, who should be commended highly for their vision and courage to launch this journal, realize the full potential of their creation and after *Studies* more completely assumes its unique role as voice of Mormon scholars and critic of Mormon culture, it will sell itself.

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