

Book Reviews

FELL, BARRY. *America B.C.: Ancient Settlers in the New World*. New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company, 1976. Illus., appendix, biblio., and index, 312 pp. \$12.50.

Reviewed by John L. Sorenson, professor of anthropology and sociology, Brigham Young University.

America B. C. will be welcomed by thousands of Latter-day Saint readers. In it Fell gives a vigorous blow to anthropological and linguistic orthodoxy by claiming, and to some degree demonstrating, that a wide variety of European peoples crossed the Atlantic repeatedly to North America over a period of thousands of years. He pictures, discusses, and interprets scores of inscriptions and artifacts many of which appear to be in languages and scripts related to Hebrew. With this kind of content the book is sure to interest some Mormon readers, but they will do well to consider carefully its weaknesses as well as its strengths.

Is the book any more reliable than others of this kind which have periodically made their appearance—with the fanfare of ringing cash registers—only to prove full of hokum? The answer is yes. While the volume in some ways claims too much, is sloppily presented, and lacks the niceties of scholarship, it does represent enough solid research that its effects will be felt among the acknowledged experts, who are totally unprepared for it.

Fell glosses over his qualifications in his introduction to the book. Actually his preparation is more solid than he lets on. Marine biology is his profession and he is currently at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. But his study of Latin and Greek in secondary school in New Zealand and Gaelic at the University of Edinburgh led to an expanding interest in inscriptions throughout the Mediterranean and via Spain into Atlantic Europe. He definitely has a knack with ancient languages, having deciphered, for example, the hitherto-baffling Mohenjodaro script of western India. He has expressed delight, in correspondence to me, "that one of the Israeli scholars recently mistook me for a Hebrew on the basis of my

Semitic decipherments!" He definitely has the scholarly power to deal with the inscriptions he has confronted, although the burden of carrying on two careers has led to his cutting corners in the presentation of the results of his epigraphical scholarship in the present volume.

Since word began to get around a few years ago about Fell's interests and abilities, many people have sent him materials and a few workers have assisted him professionally. As a result he has a large collection of inscriptions, numbering in the hundreds, from the Pacific Basin and New World. He now claims to have identified in the American inscriptions no fewer than eleven scripts from across the Atlantic, representing at least five languages: Basque, Iberian Punic, Libyan (of the Semitic family), Celtic, and Egyptian. Dates for the Old World use of the scripts range forward from 800 B. C. *America B. C.* prints many of these inscriptions and his readings of them. It also shows and treats artifacts and sites found in the United States whose equivalents are associated in Europe with Celtic rituals.

Some of the most startling items, however, are long-known texts which Fell reexamines. He compares a "sacred creation chant of the Pima Indians" recorded authoritatively around 1902 with Arabic with startling results. He finds a heavy admixture of "Libyan" in the language of Zuñi in New Mexico. And, in one of the most impressive analyses, he clearly relates the previously-known writing system of the Micmac Indians of Maine (supposed to have been invented by an early Catholic priest among them) to Egyptian hieratic glyphs which seem to have been in use in Maine before Christianizing began. I am assured by colleagues competent in the material that there is indeed solid substance at this point.

Among the variety of material Fell has brought forward much is indeed significant and interesting. That doesn't mean that he sweeps all opposition in front of him. Flaws abound. Documentation for many assertions is slight or absent. Some of the inscriptions are so crude one wonders whether they really are what he claims. His statements about when certain scripts were used are vague and sometimes inconsistent. On point after specific point Fell will probably be rebutted by more conventional and careful scholars.

For example, on page 283 Fell claims that the word for "tree" in "the Wabanaki dialect" of Maine is *abassi*, which is also said to be a Hebrew or Phoenician word instead of the normal word for tree in other Algonquian languages across northern North America.

A colleague of mine thoroughly prepared in a number of Semitic languages recognizes no such word in Hebrew, the nearest being a term meaning "wild grape." The author plays fast and loose in other places, too, stretching a meaning here or a spelling there. This is all the easier to do since his inscriptions show only consonants. And why refer to "African" language (pages 178-90) when surely he must have had something more concrete in mind. Still, the author has apparently been unaware of supporting evidence which can be pointed out in some instances which make his case even stronger.

Altogether the book is paradoxical. The sloppy methods cast considerable doubt on the significance of what is offered, yet every now and then the work strikes a vein of pure gold. The easy way out would be for critical people to pick at the weaknesses and dismiss the whole. I am afraid that is precisely what most professionals will do, particularly since few are prepared in more than one of the disciplines involved. Their lives will be easier, for awhile, if they do so. But someday, in a more sophisticated form, these impressive finds will no doubt be presented with the power they deserve.

Meanwhile Fell has much more information in his files. New Libyan material is in his hands which he says is connected with the enigmatic early Hohokam culture of Arizona. Nor does *America B. C.* contain any of his Pacific material, which seems to show the presence of Semitic-speaking voyagers in the Pacific islands who came via the Indian Ocean in B. C. times. (Ironically, our Mormon tradition about Israelites in the islands could prove correct without reference to the questionable Hagoth tradition, as 1 Nephi 22:4 may have been trying to tell us all the time.)

The Book of Mormon is nowhere mentioned in this volume, but if, as I expect, a good deal of Fell's evidence holds up under closer scrutiny, the effect will be felt by Latter-day Saints. For instance, if voyaging across the oceans proves to have been commonplace in ancient times, Mormons as well as orthodox archaeologists will need to do some reinterpreting.

Fell will no doubt be smitten vigorously by hostile critics. He and his handful of collaborators are in a vulnerable position professionally. Their limited resources could be augmented significantly by sales of this book. Mormons who wish to assist one who shares some of their position in the face of opposition from the professional establishment could strike a blow by buying this book. They may enjoy it, too.