

REBECCA BARTHOLOMEW. *Audacious Women: Early British Mormon Immigrants*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995. xv; 288 pp. Bibliography, index. Paperback, \$18.95.

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*Audacious Women* is based on the lives of one hundred women “who were involved with Mormonism in the first fifty years of the British Mission, 1838–88” (xii). The book takes us from their English branches and villages, across the ocean, up the Mississippi, across the plains, and (as far as source documents allow) follows their lives in the new land. This new contribution to Mormon women’s history is a particular goldmine for Latter-day Saints of British descent, who, like Bartholomew, “search for [their] mothers” (ix). Bartholomew concludes that despite often severe trials, such as “the patriarchal realities of the time,” homesickness, poverty, and polygamy, these “women seemed to have as great a shot at happiness in a caring Mormon setting as in an indifferent Old World environment” (249).

Bartholomew is a believing and rigorous LDS historian. Those wondering about the tone of her women’s history will find her interested in reviving the lives of these women rather than criticizing male hierarchy; in general, she finds that “women’s disappointments usually centered on dead-beat husbands rather than on church leaders” (249). I was impressed with her research expertise and her obvious familiarity with source archives. Although Bartholomew had hoped to have “quality” records for all one hundred women (“contemporary documents created by a directly-involved party”), she had to settle for thirty-four—the remaining sixty-six women come alive through autobiographies or biographies written later in life by the woman, her husband, or another relative (xiii). She excluded from her study women whose lives had already been explored well in other places.

The first chapter investigates nineteenth-century anti-Mormon writing that characterized British Mormon women immigrants as “ignorant,” “naive,” and “fools” (15). Stereotypes such as Maria Ward’s portrayal of “the [British] shopgirl now ensconced in

a Mormon harem” and other polygamy-inspired fantasies are recounted here (18). Bartholomew finds evidence of sexism on the part of anti-Mormon writers who primarily emphasized the “degraded status” of Mormon women and who “allowed comprehensible if not admirable motives” for Mormon men (15). Although I admired Bartholomew’s far-reaching samples of anti-Mormon literature and realized that she intended to set them as fantasy against her reality, still I found myself anxious to get to the British women themselves because I already knew the stereotypes, generally if not specifically.

The second chapter, which will be of particular interest to descendants of British converts, explores the demographics and origins of these one hundred women. As it turns out, “Mormonism was three-quarters urban” (28), the majority of converts came from blue-collar families, most women had “some formal schooling” (143), and one woman might have sixteen to twenty-one pregnancies. The women in Bartholomew’s study often came from “large, landless families acquainted with grief” (38), and their grief may have been a catalyst to their conversion. Mormonism satisfied the spiritual needs as well as conventional mores of these women, especially before they knew about polygamy.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters cover the women’s conversion experiences and life in a British branch of the Church. Their reactions to the message of the Church are some of the most memorable portions of the book—the women’s voices sound rather “old world,” yet full of spirit. Bartholomew finds that converts expected more persecution from outsiders than they actually received and that “the persecution motif has . . . been overdone in pro-Mormon history” (79). Curiously, much of their “suffering was due to Church responsibilities rather than outside opposition” (77). These chapters are refreshing in their gynocentric view of life in the Church; we find that many uncelebrated women kept early branches alive, even though they had trouble sustaining Relief Societies. Branches would grow only to be depleted by members leaving for America.

The second half of the book proceeds chronologically as we learn more about the women’s emigration, marriages, and lives in a new land. Many of the women’s names, and thus their lives, start

to become familiar, especially since Bartholomew highlights some of them at length. The variety of their lives defies finding “one pattern” that would easily explain their combined experience (xii). Their trials were often excruciating, leading one woman to conclude that it was all “a bubble that [had] burst in [her] grasp” (193). Of the one hundred women in Bartholomew’s study, one-third became polygamous wives in Utah Territory (a polygamous marriage in Britain was rare), and this life-style tried their souls. Some left and returned to Britain. Those who stayed in Utah still often longed for their homeland; one woman wrote to her family in the British Isles, “I seldom go to sleep but I am dreaming about all of you and that I am back there but I am glad I am here” (197).

One complaint I have about the book is the presentation of statistical material. I would have preferred some charts and graphs, or at least numerals rather than numbers written out. For example, I found myself drowning in the following information:

One typically sees the birth of the first child seven to twelve months after marriage, three or four subsequent children born in close succession (sixteen to twenty-four months apart), then later children born at 2.5 to four-year intervals. Women married between ages sixteen and twenty-three and, if not widowed, bore children for the next sixteen to twenty-eight years. (38)

Although her prose could occasionally be smoother, I enjoyed Bartholomew’s personality and the way she puts herself into the book. In the end, the reader has the sense of living the excitement of the research process with her. I felt lucky to find so much previously neglected Mormon history.