

The Mormons. Produced by Helen Whitney.

Melbourne, Fla.: PBS Video, 2007

Reviewed by Brian Q. Cannon

Commented on by Mario S. De Pillis

and Richard E. Bennett

Brian Q. Cannon:

Producer Helen Whitney described her goal in producing *The Mormons* as communicating “the defining ideas and themes and events in Mormon history that would help outsiders go inside the church.”¹ The first half of the four-hour documentary discusses the prophetic calling and career of Joseph Smith; the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; the Latter-day Saint saga in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois; and the exodus to Utah. These topics comprise just over half of the script for part 1. The balance of part 1 focuses exclusively upon two perennially fascinating facets of Mormon history: the Mountain Meadows Massacre and the origins, practice, and legacy of polygamy. Equally significant but less familiar aspects of Mormon history in the nineteenth-century West, including colonization and settlement, Mormon-Indian relations, and cooperative economic policies, are not discussed.

Part 2 telescopes the Church’s history in the twentieth century into a handful of vignettes, offering only glimpses of the Church’s past one hundred years. The “Great Accommodation,” or the Church’s embrace of monogamy, political pluralism, capitalism, and American nationalism at the turn of the nineteenth century, is largely told through the lens of the Reed Smoot hearings. The Tabernacle Choir and clean-shaven David O. McKay in his white double-breasted suit are introduced briefly as additional emblems of the new Mormon image as assimilated Americans. The denial of the priesthood to blacks, the development of independent Mormon congregations in Ghana, and the June 1978 revelation on the priesthood are described in the context of the Church’s continuing Americanization. The balance of part 2 focuses on elements of contemporary Mormonism and controversial issues facing the Church: humanitarian aid, missionary work, the family, the temple, and genealogy all receive

attention, as do dissent and excommunication, gender roles, feminism, and homosexuality. Even a four-hour documentary cannot discuss everything: the Word of Wisdom, the Church's auxiliaries, the rise of correlation, and the Church's educational system are not discussed. The Church's expansion internationally is mentioned only as it pertains to Ghana. Likewise, core doctrines including priesthood, the Godhead, belief in the Bible, and the relationship between faith and works are neglected.

Whitney's cast of talking heads includes General Authorities, active lay members, lapsed Mormons, and outside observers, including scholars. Despite significant omissions in the cast—nearly all reside in the United States and Canada and just under 25 percent are women—the talking heads do represent a broad array of viewpoints. About half of the interviewees in the documentary are active Latter-day Saints, approximately one-fourth are lapsed Mormons, four are fundamentalist polygamists, and the remainder are non-LDS.²

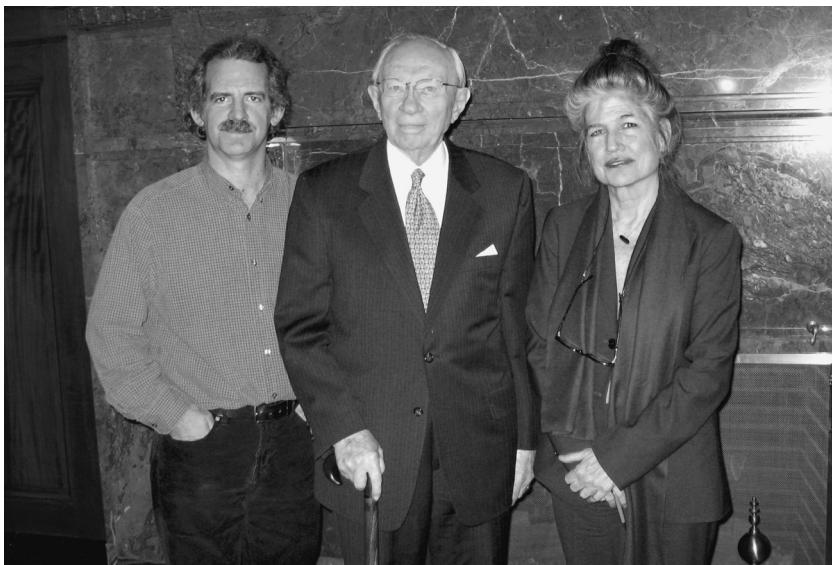
As a safeguard against error, historians try to corroborate the information in any source, including interviews, with data from other sources. Unfortunately, *The Mormons* gets some of the historical details wrong because of its heavy reliance on interviews. Some errors are minor, such as Terryl Givens's inflated claim that "we have literally hundreds of accounts of eyewitnesses who heard rushing of wind and heard angelic choirs" in the three months surrounding the dedication of the Kirtland Temple.³ Historians have identified only a few dozen eyewitness accounts. Other errors, like Judith Freeman's description of her ancestor Prudence Karchner's plural marriage, have more consequential implications. Freeman's inaccurate recounting unintentionally marginalizes women by ignoring the agency wives exercised and the roles they played in decisions regarding polygamy. Illustrating the difficulties of plural marriage for women, Freeman says, "It was so full of heartbreak, just heart-wrenching moments in advance, when a husband came home and said to his wife, 'Emma, the bishop has said that I have to take another wife, and I have my eye on Prudence. She is sixteen years old. Prudence Karchner. And you know her. We've grown up with her in the community. And the bishop has said that I'm to take her for a wife.' And this is exactly what happened to my great-grandfather. . . . She [the first wife] was thirty. That sixteen-year-old girl was my great-grandmother." There may have been instances like the one Freeman describes, but they were atypical, and Prudence Karchner's marriage was not one of them. Karchner did marry William Jordan Flake as his second wife, but under different circumstances. She was eighteen years old at the time, rather than sixteen, and the first wife's name was Lucy White Flake rather than Emma. The bishop did not require William to take a second



Producer Helen Whitney interviews Sarah Barringer Gordon for the documentary *The Mormons* (2007). A wide diversity of those interviewed brought conflicting perspectives, particularly concerning the place of Mormon women in the Church. Courtesy Paul Sanderson, Our Town Films, Inc.

wife. Lucy's autobiography indicates, "There was no compulsion to entering into it." Nor did William summarily announce his intention to Lucy. Rather, Lucy and William jointly agreed to embrace plural marriage out of religious convictions, after reflection and prayer. Lucy recalled, "I knew without my consent William would not and could not take another wife." Months later, the marriage was performed and Lucy wrote in her diary, "Sister E. R. Snow asked me was I willing. Said yes. She asked do you think you can live in that principal. I said am quite willing to try. My Mother and sister live in it and I think [I] can do as I was willing."⁴

Thanks to the diversity of those interviewed in the documentary, viewers learn about Mormonism from conflicting perspectives and are implicitly invited to arrive at their own conclusions. For instance, neuro-radiologist Anne Osborne Poelman appears on the screen stating that "as a woman in the Mormon Church, I feel very comfortable. I don't feel denied any opportunity to serve and to do good for people in the Church and in the ward and in our neighborhood, and so on." She is followed by historian James Clayton who asserts that Church leaders opposed the Equal Rights Amendment because it would permit each Mormon woman



Left to right: Paul Sanderson, Gordon B. Hinckley, Helen Whitney. From such films as *John Paul II: The Millennial Pope*, Helen Whitney gained a reputation as being respectful and objective. She therefore had, for an independent filmmaker, unequalled access to LDS leaders. Her access also showed an increased willingness of Church leaders to make themselves available for projects that they do not control. Courtesy Paul Sanderson, Our Town Films, Inc.

to “make . . . decisions [regarding her roles as wife and mother] for herself.” Similarly, two General Authorities bear witness of the First Vision, while Yale archaeologist Michael Coe asserts that Joseph Smith “started out faking it.”

Despite the advantages of crosscutting between interviews to tell the story of Mormonism from a variety of perspectives, the film’s reliance upon multiple interviews occasionally breaks up the narrative, omits key details, and fosters confusion. Such is the case in the film’s coverage of a speech that Elder Boyd K. Packer delivered to the All-Church Coordinating Council in 1993. Gail Houston, a professor who was not present when the speech was given, introduces viewers to the topic, indicating that Packer “basically said one of the greatest dangers to the Church were gays, feminists, and intellectuals.” The camera then shifts to an interview with President Packer. We do not hear the interviewer’s question, so we do not know whether the interviewer used Houston’s paraphrase or not. We only hear his answer: “I suppose—I think I remember saying those things. If it’s in print, I said it.” Nowhere in the documentary do we hear what Packer

actually said in his speech. The printed version of the speech demonstrates that it was more sensitive and moderate than Houston's paraphrase. The Apostle cautioned that there are three "areas where members of the Church, influenced by social and political unrest, are being caught up and led away." He did not say that homosexuals, feminists, or intellectuals endangered the Church but focused instead upon the salvation of individual members who were drawn to those movements. He advised leaders to minister to these members' concerns sensitively on an individual basis, teach them the "plan of redemption," and help them to envision their circumstances in an eternal perspective.⁵

In discussing the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the film's reliance upon multiple interviews also invites confusion. Whitney ably uses excerpts from several interviews to establish the indirect causes of the Mountain Meadows Massacre: drought, the zealotry of the Mormon reformation, fear of Johnston's Army, the murder of Parley P. Pratt in Arkansas, the yearning to avenge the blood shed at both Carthage and Haun's Mill, and Brigham Young's military alliance with Indians. But none of the excerpts included in the documentary explains the direct causes of the massacre. The Cedar City leaders are suddenly deciding to "take some cattle, using the Indians, 'And by the way, if some of those bad guys are killed, we won't truly be sorry.'" No motive for the killing aside from these opaque references to cattle and the behavior of "bad guys" is mentioned. What did the "bad guys" do that so enraged the Cedar City Mormons? Further complicating the picture, the documentary does not mention differences of opinion among the Cedar City Mormons over how to respond to the emigrants, the people's appeal to Brigham Young for advice, and Young's response in which he advised the Mormons, "You must not meddle with [the emigration trains]." Instead, without providing sufficient background for understanding the reasoning behind either historian's conclusions, the documentary merely shows Will Bagley claiming that the massacre was "ordered from the very top" and Glen Leonard averring that Brigham Young "didn't order it."

Occasionally Whitney abandons her practice of allowing viewers to judge for themselves between competing perspectives and instead nudges the viewer through her editorial decisions. For instance, the documentary shows archaeologist Michael Coe claiming that Mormon excavations in Central America have "never found anything that would back it [the Book of Mormon] up." Whitney fails to balance Coe's assertion with any rebuttal from Mormon researchers. Instead, one must consult the documentary website in order to find the transcript of Whitney's interview with Daniel Peterson in which he says, "We do have evidence of those civilizations. . . .

We just don't have much inscriptional evidence from the Preclassic Period of Mesoamerica. I would argue, though, that some of the chronology, as we're beginning to understand it, of Mesoamerica matches in outline broadly the chronology of the Book of Mormon, and that's very striking." Similarly, the documentary includes footage from interviews with three authors who have written extensively about Mountain Meadows, novelist Judith Freeman and historians Will Bagley and Glen Leonard. But the producer seems to favor some views over others: the comments by Leonard, coauthor of a Church-commissioned manuscript on the massacre, tally only 160 words, whereas Freeman relates her views in 374 words and Bagley in 476 words.

If Whitney gives more orthodox positions short shrift in her coverage of some topics, her coverage of other topics favors the Church and its members by omitting countervailing evidence. For instance, describing the Mormon War in Missouri in 1838, the documentary indicates that Mormons retaliated against Missouri mobs by forcing some Missourians from their homes, but the only atrocity the documentary describes in detail is the slaughter of seventeen Latter-day Saints at Haun's Mill. Incendiary speeches by Sidney Rigdon, including his July 4, 1838, oration in which he threatened that the Mormons would exterminate Missourians, are not mentioned, making Governor Boggs's Extermination Order seem almost entirely unprovoked.⁶

Part of what makes *The Mormons* appealing despite its flaws is the engaging stories it relates. Many of the most memorable vignettes focus upon the religious experiences of individual Latter-day Saints. Trevor Southey wistfully recounts his quixotic quest to reconcile his homosexuality with his yearnings for celestial glory and an idyllic home and family. Betty Stevenson, a plainspoken convert, powerfully describes the appeal of the Gospel for the down-and-out. It is a "message of hope, of family that could be together forever, of raising my children and learning how to be a good parent, not drinking, not smoking, not cussing every word, using the Lord's name in vain." Elder Marlin K. Jensen describes his spiritual awakening as a young missionary in Germany, "when my hope and my tender belief turned into something really solid, which has been the foundation for the rest of my life." These intimate stories convey the impact of Mormonism upon individual lives. In these accounts of formative experiences, what actually happened is less important to the individuals involved than their understanding and perception of what happened. Thus, in many ways these personal reflections lie beyond historical methods of verification.

On the other hand, stories about the collective Mormon past, culled from folklore or documents and related in the documentary by individuals

who did not experience the events personally, are more susceptible to evidentiary tests employed by historians; some of the most delightful ones fail those tests. One example is the film's fanciful tale of the Mormon migration. Documentary filmmaker Ken Verdoia taps into Mormon folklore in describing the pioneers' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley. "In Brigham's eyes he looked and he saw a desert. 'This is the right place. Drive on.' It is one of those very rare moments where people literally are gathered around Brigham and saying, 'Are you serious? I have been in that wagon for 60 days. I'd gladly do another 60 just to get to a better place than this.'" The story is dramatic and appealing because it entails sacrifice, prophetic insight defying reality, and faith in the paradoxical ways of God. Yet the most reliable historical evidence undermines the story. Due to illness, Brigham Young entered the valley two days after most of his traveling companions. Members of his pioneer company wrote enthusiastically about the Salt Lake Valley, describing the valley as scenic, apparently fertile, healthful, and crisscrossed by numerous creeks and streams.⁷

Even some stories from the film that have derived from old documents are suspect: in recounting Joseph Smith's First Vision, Daniel Peterson claims that Smith was "actually scared" when he saw a glorious and brilliant light descending toward him, because he expected that when the light "touched the trees, they would burst into flame." Peterson's emphasis on fear goes one step beyond Smith's own surviving accounts, which only describe his "unspeakable joy" as light replaced the darkness. Although it is possible that Smith's initial reaction to the pillar of fire was fear, followed by joy when he realized that the source of the light was good, caution is warranted because Peterson's version of the story grows out of a second-hand account of the First Vision written and published by Orson Pratt in 1840 in Scotland.⁸

Other stories as told in the PBS production are also suspect because they involve historical inference, imputing motives, or implying consequences that go beyond the documents. This is the case with Will Bagley's engaging tale of Brigham Young's transformation on his sickbed in February 1847 from "self-doubt" to inspired self-assurance as a result of a dream. Brigham Young's office files corroborate Bagley's description of Young's dream and indicate that it occurred on February 17. But the files do not sustain Bagley's assertion that Young was worn down by gnawing self-doubt prior to the dream or his claim that the dream replaced doubt with certainty. In fact, over a month earlier, on January 14, Young had dictated "'The Word and the Will of the Lord' to the Camps of Israel," and on January 17, he "addressed the Assembly showing that the church had been led by Revelation just as much since the death of Joseph Smith as before."⁹

My reactions to *The Mormons* derive from my training as a historian. However, neither Whitney nor most of her informants are professional historians, and their methods of measuring truth claims differ from mine. As a filmmaker, Whitney plays more freely than most historians with metaphors and symbols. For instance, she uses scenes from the red rock country of southeastern Utah to illustrate the Saints' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, not because she thinks the Salt Lake Valley looks like Goblin Valley but because she believes red rock landscapes convey deeper emotional truths about the Great Basin in 1847. Similarly, novelist Judith Freeman's description in the documentary of the psychological impact of the semi-arid desert landscape aims at impressionistic insight rather than documented fact: "You were living in fire, red, orange, yellow fiery land and rocks. Red, it's like blood red. And when the wind blows, it creates a kind of excess, a zealotry. I think the very land itself infused people with a sense almost of doom that the end was nigh." No discipline monopolizes truth, and the impressionistic insights of the filmmaker or novelist may be more satisfactory and valid in some situations than the historian's exacting attention to the specifics of time, place, and documentary provenance.

Frustrated by those who insisted upon chipping away at the grand sweep and patterns he identified in his written work, the French Enlightenment era philosophe Voltaire quipped, "Confound details."¹⁰ If one role of the historian is to remind storytellers that the past is not infinitely malleable, one role of the filmmaker as artist may be to juxtapose discordant elements from the past in fresh, creative ways. By showing viewers how rich, vibrant, and contested the Mormon experience is, Helen Whitney deserves praise despite the limitations of her sources and methods.

Filmmaker Helen Whitney attended the 2007 annual conference of the Mormon History Association in Salt Lake City on May 25, 2007, and fielded questions about her PBS documentary, The Mormons. After Whitney showed the "Dissenters and Exiles" portion of the film and gave introductory remarks to conference attendees, Dr. Mario S. De Pillis and then Dr. Richard E. Bennett presented the following responses, which have been edited for publication.

Mario S. De Pillis:

Let me say first of all that this is one of the best documentaries ever done on any American religion. It is fair to the Church, insightful on the role of persecution paranoia in Mormon history, shrewd in using Harold Bloom to disarm certain critics by noting that revelations in *all* religions

could be called superstitious, clever in using Ken Verdoia as Grand Interpreter and Terryl Givens as the expicator of Mormon doctrine, and extremely fortunate in getting the testimony of Elder Dallin H. Oaks.

I felt that there were three significant omissions: (1) details of temple worship (admittedly hard to get at), (2) the role of women, and (3) the enormous power of community in Mormonism.

Turning to the segment on dissenters and exiles. Most viewers I talked to—both Mormon and non-Mormon—were enthralled, perhaps stunned, by the passionate witness of Margaret Toscano.¹¹ Toscano's eloquence and her ruthless cogency diminished the talking heads all about her. Psychologically, the harrowing nature of excommunication is possible only because of the intensity of Mormon community, a community that extends to the afterlife, or, as Mormons say, "beyond the veil." Thus, the Mormon community includes eternal salvation and eternal progression. The Church excluded Toscano from those blessings because of her public feminism.

While the Toscano sequence, along with the remarks of Elder Oaks, were stunningly informative, I wish to single out two moments in this sequence, both of which may speak to the central theme of the film. That theme, or more precisely, the premise of the film is "Why are the Mormons so weird?" That was the question raised in the prerelease advertisements. The film rightly assumes that all Americans are curious about the Mormons. The Mormons must be explained.

The first filmic moment that illustrates the explanatory premise is visual. In the Toscano sequence, we see a barren, ominous landscape of 1950s wooden chairs and tables. No persons are present, implying a nameless, cruel emptiness. For me the room evokes the set for Clarence Darrow at the Scopes Monkey Trial.

Mormons I've talked to find the scene offensive. The clear message of the empty courtroom is that Mormonism is an authoritarian, male-dominated religion that callously harms its adherents on issues of sex and gender identification, feminism, and free expression of scholarship. It implies that Mormonism needs to change immediately and alter its weirdness. The use of the late Beethoven quartets for the background music drove me up the wall, but that is another issue.

The second moment that illustrates my "why-are-they-weird?" theme is the historian Jon Butler commenting on the role of history among the Mormons. Butler says that the Mormons are afraid of confronting their history, which, he says, is "thrusting itself up in front of the Mormons day after day, almost hour after hour, and it's difficult to deal with. And like much of the past, it's very messy."

Mormonism, he adds, “is a movement that celebrates its history, and yet seems to be quite afraid of its history, oftentimes afraid of real historical investigation. What did Joseph Smith think about the practice of magic? To what extent did Joseph Smith really practice money digging? To what extent did he forge documents? To what extent did he engage in illicit sexual behavior? . . . We want a kind of sanitized Mormon history.”

Now, the assertion that Mormons do not confront their history is a half-truth. Butler believes that the Mormons should distance themselves from their messy past, like good academic historians.

Yes, the Mormons *do* celebrate their history. But one must point out that Mormon historians also conscientiously try to confront the messy, uncomfortable aspects of their history—and not just in the newer works of Richard L. Bushman and Richard E. Turley.

So I conclude that Butler’s unstated thesis here is that the Mormons should emulate the Germans, who confronted their evil Nazi past and overcame it by rejecting it. The cliché among the German intelligentsia for some fifteen years was *Überwältigung der Vergangenheit* (conquering the past). So also must the Mormons confront their weird past, and, as Butler hopes, reject the messy parts of it. That is good liberal dogma, and I agree with its premise.

But, alas! The Mormons are not eager to become good Germans conquering their past—simply because much of their allegedly strange and messy past is connected with core beliefs.

If Mormons are asked to countenance a picture of Joseph Smith as a deeply, deeply flawed prophet, it is tantamount, in my opinion, to asking them to discount the Book of Mormon and the revelations. In short, the Mormon historian cannot so easily saunter down Jon Butler’s academic road.

So I feel that the legitimate assumption of the film, namely that the peculiarities of the Mormons have to be explained to the American people, has led the filmmaker to a corollary: that the Church should abandon its stance of extreme control from the top. The film shows that the Mormon system of control can be used for noble ends like welfare work for the poor, the Church’s remarkable operation to help the victims of Katrina and other natural disasters, the miraculous feat of crossing the plains and building Zion, and so on.

But there is a downside to central control, and the film emphasizes its cruel and painful cost in the lives of dissidents like Toscano. Thus the film aims to persuade the viewer that the Church should liberalize its strange beliefs and oppressive practices.

In short, if we return to that forbidding courtroom, I conclude that the film wants those empty chairs to be occupied by nondogmatic humans,

half of whom are female and one-tenth of whom are homosexuals. . . . Do you think this will happen?

Richard E. Bennett:

There are several commendable things to say in defense of Helen Whitney's new PBS documentary entitled *The Mormons*. One is that it may represent how many view "the Mormons" and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—an external perspective and barometer of current American opinion that may be as instructive as it is difficult for some to accept. Many of my friends outside of the Church have told me how much they liked this piece. And, although likely a public relations nightmare for the Church, it may have served as a wake-up call. If Latter-day Saints want to tell their own history more credibly, they must take the more inclusive view of all their history and not merely practice selective memory. If, as has been said, one of the great achievements of the Church in the twentieth century was to live down its nineteenth-century past, in this day of research, the Internet, and mass media attention, we must live up to it and take it in all its ups and downs, divisions and difficulties. That Whitney's presentation touched a sensitive nerve is obvious from the surprisingly frank recent *Church News* article saying that because of the interest generated by Whitney's work, the *Church News* will embark on a "series of occasional articles in which troubling questions and adversarial criticisms against the faith" will be addressed.¹² We can only hope that this will be the case.

These pluses notwithstanding, I believe *The Mormons* missed an opportunity to be fair, balanced, and accurate, particularly in its portrayal of the history of intellectualism, intellectual debate, and dissent within the Church. I have several criticisms. First is the definition of terms. I quote: "To be a Mormon intellectual means that you are opening up yourself to being called into a Church court." Really? Just what constitutes a Mormon intellectual anyway, may I ask? Who decides who is one? And how is it that the term "Mormon intellectual" has become an appealing synonym for Mormon dissent? Dissenters are a faction and a fraction of the many gifted Mormon thinkers and writers. As one observer elsewhere put it, the intellectual dissenters are "a rather narrow mutual-admiration society" who feel that "if only the benighted 'average' Mormon and the well-meaning but narrow-minded Church authorities would acknowledge the clear intellectual superiority of the experts and freethinkers, then the path to future progress would be open."¹³

I also take exception with the sense of inevitable confrontation and imbalance. Whitney makes intellectual confrontation appear unavoidable,

when in fact it has not been so for a great many of us. Are the “Mormons” to be defined intellectually by the few dissidents who have left the Church or by the many other intelligent and highly educated Latter-day Saints who remain confident and committed in their religious views?

A page from Church history may be illustrative. Just as there was minority dissent at the time of Wilford Woodruff’s Manifesto, and some even in high places left the Church, thereby giving rise, as Carmon Hardy has rightly observed, to modern Mormon fundamentalism, so there was majority if not overwhelming acceptance of and obedience to the new directive. Why stay focused on the 2 percent to the neglect of the 98 percent? While it is acceptable to study the causes of dissent and the plight of those now out of the Church, it is incumbent that historians highlight the many who followed Woodruff in 1890 and the many others who continue faithful today through modern challenges.

I readily admit that there are areas of ambiguity. In the packaging of the message for a worldwide audience, there is repetition, sameness, and more standardization than some of us would like to see. In the ongoing essential effort of Church leaders to “keep the doctrine pure,” some intellectuals may feel left out and ostracized, their deep and meaningful questions not addressed adequately. Church curriculum does not satisfy everyone’s needs, nor is Church “correlation” everyone’s favorite word. Our history need not be “sanitized,” and opportunities must exist for more advanced discussions of difficult issues. The Mormon community cannot afford the closing of the Mormon mind any more than it can tolerate irresponsible criticism.

Another misunderstanding in the documentary is the “them versus us” concept, the gulf between ordinary members and the austere, high-level Church leadership who, as was said, are supposedly keeping files on many of us and are trying to control the message and the members. The truth is, the ordinary members take responsibility for running this Church. A characteristic of Mormonism is that it is constantly rejuvenating itself through the miracle of lay leadership and humble discipleship. Although the public face of the Church may indeed be Gordon B. Hinckley, it is at the local level where men and women on their own time and expense make the everyday decisions that affect us all. To my knowledge, this is a phenomenon not seen in any other church. In my imperfect arithmetic, I count some 340 mission presidents, 2,700 stake presidents, 27,000 bishops and branch presidents, 33,000 high councilors, 90,000 female Relief Society presidents and their counselors, 250,000 youth leaders, and upwards of half a million teachers, all serving at any one time and without remuneration. These callings are constantly in flux and their places



Helen Whitney pores over a thick binder of notes. Most nationally released documentaries take an unusual amount of research and compiling footage followed by excessive editing out and redaction. A comprehensive film is nearly impossible, for the final cut is usually an extremely small slice of what the filmmaker encountered. Courtesy Paul Sanderson, Our Town Films, Inc.

rotate so that over just a very few years, literally millions are serving. They do so happily, willingly, humbly, and teachably. They love the Church and recognize the power for good it brings into their lives and the lives of their family members. They don't shun intellectual debate but are too busy making the Church work to worry about it.

Another criticism is perspective, especially in regard to Church discipline. Occasionally there must be discipline, especially when apostasy or fighting against the Church and its teachings is at stake. As a former stake leader, I have presided over several Church disciplinary councils. However, rather than being embarrassing punishments for nonconformity, they are invitations to repentance. The Church has a right to protect itself, its membership, and its teachings; and while we, as local, unpaid, and unprofessional Church leaders may stumble occasionally in our procedures, Church courts are not meant to be "vicious niceties" but opportunities for personal growth and recommitment.

Missing also in the documentary is any mention of our long-established historical tradition of educational excellence that goes as far back as the exodus, the many thousands of Latter-day Saints who pursue higher educational research and debate in the sciences, arts, and social sciences at

Brigham Young University and other centers of higher learning around the world. There are probably more Mormons with college degrees per capita than most any other religion. They are not on a collision course with intellectual pursuits; rather, they welcome, encourage, and pursue advanced academic research in a thousand and one fields. The inquiring mind does not surrender itself at the gate of baptism. Conversion does not negate questioning, for it stems from such and encourages it. Indeed, the freedom and encouragement to ask the great questions has ever been a hallmark of Mormonism. It began, after all, with a questioning, young teenage boy. It continued in 1978 with President Spencer W. Kimball's courageous questioning of past policies on the priesthood. "Ask, and ye shall receive" (D&C 88:63) is as true in 2007 as it was in 1820. The key is to ask in faith, not critiquing negatively but questioning positively.

My one final criticism pertains to the underlying theme of blind or controlled obedience and fanatic, unthinking allegiance to the Church and its principal leaders; that the extreme, if not militant, devotion of Mountain Meadows is still alive in those who, if asked today, would blow themselves up in the cause of missionary service. Missing here is the dominant dimension that most Mormons are "peaceable followers of Christ": at peace with their faith in God, at peace with their leaders, and at peace with their fellowmen. Are we still to be judged by the wartime hysteria and raw frontier mentality of those disreputable few who disgraced themselves at Mountain Meadows? Must Catholics ever be judged by their terrible inquisitions, Protestants by their medieval pogroms, Christianity by the Crusades, Muslims by their extremist terrorists, or Marines by their My Lai massacre of 1968? The parking lots of modern Church meetinghouses are filled every Sunday and on many weeknights not by constraint but by devotion, not by zealous fanaticism but by quiet faith.

To conclude, I suggest that Mormonism's rise in growth and influence is not because it shuns or dismisses intellectual discourse or debate but rather because it seeks to engage with them. And as to the writing of Church history, it was said as a blanket statement in the documentary that "when Mormon scholars challenge their church's official history, they risk serious sanctions." Perhaps for some, but not for many of us. What constitutes our official history is still being hammered out. As academic editor of *BYU Studies*, I see almost every day evidences of those questioning, probing, analyzing, and expanding the borders of our own understanding.

As for me, I can only say that I have ever been encouraged in my research and writing. Not long ago I published a serious article on, of all topics, temple work and on the beginning of endowments for the dead, and I did so without recrimination or suspicion but with encouragement

and support. My experience has led me to conclude that the principles of modern revelation, lay leadership, an amazing adaptability to change, a continuing soft underbelly of practical religion, a recurring optimistic message that man is a literal child of God—these and more are the profound issues that continue to define “the Mormons.” The strength and very identity of the Church from its beginning is written large on the backs and in the wagons, in the fields and in the libraries, and in the homes and in the lives of those Latter-day Saints who have overcome “by study and by faith” (D&C 88:118), by repentance and by covenant, and that quiet desire to know “the truth of all things” (Moro. 10:5).

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1. Scott D. Pierce, “A Documentarian Looks at ‘The Mormons,’” *Deseret News*, April 27, 2007, W1, W15.

2. For biographical information on many of the individuals interviewed in the documentary see Dave’s Mormon Inquiry, “Who’s Who on ‘The Mormons,’” http://mormoninquiry.typepad.com/mormon_inquiry/2007/05/whos_who_on_the.html.

3. All quotations from the documentary are taken from its transcript, available at <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/>. For references to firsthand accounts of Pentecostal experiences in Kirtland see Karl Ricks Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s Kirtland: Eyewitness Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 169–91; Steven C. Harper, “A Pentecost and Endowment Indeed: Six Eyewitness Accounts of the Kirtland Temple Experience,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 327–72; Milton V. Backman Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838*

(Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 284–309; Gregory A. Prince, *Power from On High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 160, 184–85.

4. Lucy Hannah White Flake, *To the Last Frontier: Autobiography of Lucy Hannah White Flake*, ed. Roberta F. Clayton (privately published, 1964), 58–59; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *Saints without Halos: The Human Side of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1981), 77; Osmer D. Flake, *William J. Flake: Pioneer – Colonizer* (privately published, n.d.), 49. The 1850 Utah Census indicates Prudence Karchner was born in 1849. 1850, Manuscript Census, Population Schedule, Utah Territory, M432_919, p. 143, Image 290. Vicky Burgess Olson, “Family Structure and Dynamics in Early Utah Mormon Families, 1847–1885” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1975), 105–9, found that over 90 percent of first wives consulted with their husbands prior to their husbands’ taking a second wife.

5. Boyd K. Packer, Talk to the All-Church Coordinating Council, May 18, 1993, available at www.lds-mormon.com/face.shtml.

6. For information on the Mormon War of 1838 in Missouri see Alexander L. Baugh, *A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and BYU Studies, 2000); and Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987).

7. For reactions of the Saints upon arriving in the Salt Lake Valley see Richard H. Jackson, “Righteousness and Environmental Change: The Mormons and the Environment,” in Thomas G. Alexander, ed., *Essays on the American West, 1973–1974* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 23–27.

8. Pratt’s account is printed in Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in Welch and Carlson, *Opening the Heavens*, 19–21; and Alexander Neibaur’s report (1844) twice calls the light “fire,” and places the appearance of the fire after Joseph said that he already “felt easier,” 26. For a discussion of Joseph Smith’s own accounts and Pratt’s 1840 publication see James B. Allen and John W. Welch, “The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820,” in Welch and Carlson, *Opening the Heavens*, 35–76, esp. 50–51.

9. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 129; Brigham Young, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1846–47*, ed. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: E. J. Watson, 1971), 505; Brigham Young, vision, February 17, 1847, Brigham Young Office Files, 1832–1878, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, also available at www.josephsmith.net/portal/site/JosephSmith/.

10. Paul K. Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, *The Heritage and Challenge of History* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971), 54.

11. Margaret Toscano was interviewed primarily during the “Dissenters and Exiles” portion of *The Mormons*, where she describes her excommunication from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

12. *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, May 12, 2007, 14.

13. Ralph Hancock, “What Is a Mormon Intellectual?” www.mormonmomma.com/mind/intell.html.