

You Can't Tell a Book by its Cover

Polygamy Was Better Than Monotony

SAMUEL W. TAYLOR

Polygamy was Better than Monotony. By Paul Bailey. Westernlore Press, Los Angeles, 1972. 200 pp. \$7.95.

Although I question Paul Bailey's choice of a title for his new book, that's about all I can argue with. This is the type of literature badly needed and rarely found within the Zion Curtain. It is an oasis in the parched desert of Mormon literature—regional writing, treating Mormonism as a culture and a way of life, sympathetic, but astute and perceptive. More than that, it is done well. In our literary wasteland, where message is everything and literary quality nothing, Bailey writes with style and economy, unobtrusively excellent in pace and restraint. He puts the story of his life, the Mormon culture, and the gospel, in just 200 pages.

One mark of a good book is that you wish there was more of it. I will add to it now, with an aspect of Paul Bailey's life which he barely hints at. He wanted to be a writer, and so throughout his adult life he has arisen at four in the morning, to satisfy his creative impulse at the typewriter before going to a full day's work, successively as typographer, as newspaper reporter, as editor, and as the publisher of Westernlore Press. This is how hard he worked at the craft of writing, and his mastery of it shows in every line.

The book is a complete picture of the Mormon scene, both doctrinally and culturally. Its first line begins, "I lived before I was born." It is also full of anecdotes that are uniquely Mormon—Primary, Mutual, the foibles of the "peculiar people," and their unity—such as the neighbors in American Fork pitching in to replace the Bailey home after it burned to the ground.

His adolescence in Utah rings true; I was there:

Usual practice was to stalk girls from Lehi or Pleasant Grove. The boys of these towns, in turn, pursued the American Fork girls. . . . In this inter-town quest for dates, one had also to be prepared for the frequent wars between the town boys—primed by inter-town jealousies and the bitter feuds of sports rivalry. These battles took place outside the social halls, outside the chapels at Mutual sessions, and up and down the aisles of the fast-moving Orem cars. . . .

Since the Church condoned no smoking nor drinking at its Mutual parties, and the school was just as adamant, the badge of virility and manhood's rebellious cussedness was somehow to get hold of cigarettes or Bull Durham, and to show up at the dance smelling like a liquor jug.

This isn't the Utah of Church Information Service, but it's the one where Paul Bailey and I grew up.

His last two chapters are worth the price of admission, as he discusses the snares and pitfalls of trying to write with sympathetic objectivity about his own people. His *Jacob Hamblin, Buckskin Apostle*, was banned in Utah because it had a chapter on Mountain Meadows. Later, when the shock wore off, it was a selection of the L.D.S. Book Club. He says,

I cannot but feel that this happy resolution was aided by the fact that even question-

able and controversial chapters of history, once aired to truth and light, lose their spectral danger to the Church image.

To complete the circle: Bailey told me that the sale of *Jacob Hamblin* abruptly ceased when he published a book disapproved by the Brethren, *For Time and All Eternity*.

As a writer, the fact that I am steeped in Mormon lore has been more hindrance than help to me. I have never been able to purge from my stubborn mind a conviction that the Mormon tale is one of the most unique and interesting dramas in the annals of America. It has been my soaring wings; it has been my cement coffin. . . .

I am convinced that this wonderful tapestry has been only superficially scrutinized, and that many books in depth are yet to come. I am equally convinced that, when they are written, it will be well if their authors are not born in the heritage.

Problem is that only those so born can tell the story in depth. Such is the eternal dilemma of the Mormon writer under a managed media. Few have coped with it so well as Paul Bailey.

From its beginning in the early Nineteenth Century, the Mormon movement was revolutionary, pugnacious, explosive and militant. It was a striking out against the "establishment" of those days, and was full of wonderous hope for the sad, the down-trodden, and the spiritually alive. . . . Its young and aggressive leaders . . . planted a future—but they have harvested only a past. . . .

Today the movement is running down into staid conservatism, and monolithic and empirical thought control. The books about the Mormon heritage that are acceptable, are published within the Church. . . . The Gentiles, whose approval they so assiduously court, literally gag on those sanctified effusions.

How true it is. Gentiles can't read "approved" literature; so only mavericks speak for the Church to the outside world. As a fellow maverick, I wear the badge proudly.

If I have inadvertently given the impression that this is a "negative" book, let me say it actually is one of the very best missionary tools I can imagine. It is a book Gentiles can read and enjoy. They will know it is honest. They will be able to accept both Bailey's criticism and his testimony:

The Mormon heritage is a strange thing. Some there are who wear it as a shining armor turned to the world. Others wear it like a tattered cloak of many colors, but few there are who put it entirely away. . . .

Being a Utah boy, the cloak of my heritage is comfortable. . . . By wearing my cloak a bit loose, by opening it to the wind and the storms, I have frayed its edges, and have weather-spotted it a little more than it should be. . . .

My heart and my mind are stuffed full of endless words in love of my heritage. I still wear my comfortable old cloak. I like my comfortable old cloak. I hope it will never be taken from me.

Mormonism as an Eddy in American Religious History

MILTON V. BACKMAN, JR.

A Religious History of the American People. By Sydney E. Ahlstrom. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972. 1158 pp. \$19.50.