

Brief Notices

GENE A. SESSIONS

After a veritable flood of local publicity and a few media blurbs outside Mormonism, the World Conference on Records came off at the Salt Palace in Salt Lake City the week of August 11. Providing the Church with a golden (pardon the expression) opportunity to showcase its devotion to recordkeeping in general and genealogy in particular, the meeting attracted some 11,000 registered participants from around the world but mostly from the Great Basin. President Kimball opened the affair with an announcement that the Church would build a lustrous new genealogical library and church history museum just west of Temple Square. Alex Haley called upon everyone to have family reunions, and the other speakers in more or less similar tones extolled the virtues of family awareness and ancestor adoration. For many less devoted and more curious visitors to the conference, however, the really big show was in the exhibition hall where approximately 150 displays set up in a county fair atmosphere did everything from brag about family lines to huckster church history tapes. To be in that hall was a staggering experience. If Mormonism was once considered a radical aberration of the American scene, it no longer bears any resemblance to its former self. For those among Mormon intellectuals who keep thinking that the wonders of nineteenth-century Mormonism still exist, such events as the World Conference on Records have a disabusing effect: The Mormon past is just for fun and faithbuilding. Today's church is multinational, ultrarespectable and very modern. The dream of those last-century pilgrims who gathered from Babylon faded long ago into the computers, the buildings, the hype, the microfilm and the tape machines that contain a Zion that is no more and can never be again.

Inasmuch as longing for lost virtues of the past is very unfashionable, it goes

without saying that such old ideas as having very large families are also out of vogue. Then along comes a delightful little book called *My Home Runneth Over* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980, x + 133 pp. \$5.50) and even the most modern and socially responsible among us might slip and exclaim (to the great shock of our sophisticated friends): "The devil with zero population, give me eleven kids!" (Well, maybe ten would do.) Written by a gregarious English professor named Gordon T. Allred, this sometimes cutesie look at life in a contemporary big family illustrates beautifully the blessings of having a "quiver" full of children. Oddly enough, though the scenes are current, the story seems out of sync, almost anachronistic. In a world of live-ins and abortion, here is a family right out of the nineteenth century praying together, staying together and all that trite stuff. Full of humor and reality, Allred's book makes the two-child family and its concomitant middle-class values seem ultimately boring.

Nothing close to dull is G. M. Warren's pulp novel entitled *Destiny's Children* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979, 404 pp. \$2.50). Unlike Allred's book, Warren's has little to do with kidstuff. The children in the title are none other than the same mid-nineteenth-century Mormons that Vardis Fisher also thought of as children. One critic has likened this novel to "Gunsmoke, Mormon Style," indicating that the flavor, the characters and even the plot display all the attributes of a rough-and-tumble horse opera with the Mormon story stirred in for texture. The real tragedy in a book like *Destiny's Children* is that the reader cannot possibly take the characters seriously. As a result, they trivialize the things they represent. So in Warren's hands, Joe Smith is a hard-drinking, foul-mouthed charismatic. Is there any harm in that? Only if we try to imagine how something like Mor-

monism sprang from his being. Good fiction creates plausible, three-dimensional images. *Destiny's Children* cuts everything from the same flat cloth, and nothing of what made a movement such as Mormonism stands out but the names, the dates and the places.

Perhaps even more distasteful than the bludgeoning Mormon history takes in the hands of such writers as G. M. Warren is the continuing stream of books on the Mormon market that seek to flesh out revered characters and events from the past for faith-promoting purposes. Two "profiles" of ancient prophets that have appeared in recent months finish in a dead heat for the quarterly Milk the Mormons Award. In fact, these two works are so watery as to merit their authors only 2% awards. Recognizing that most faithful Mormons who do not read the Book of Mormon or the New Testament will instead buy rehashes of portions thereof, Donald W. Hemingway and Peggy Barton tell us all about their heroes in (respectively) *An Introduction to Mormon, A Native American Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1979, 65 pp. \$3.95) and *John the Baptist* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978, 24 pp., illus. \$3.95). The trouble is that anyone can pick up the scriptures involved and come up with interpretations perhaps more suited to his or her own perceptions of scriptural figures and their place in the pageant of God's relationship with humankind.

In a change from the typical, John C. Lefgren analyzes a sacred date rather than a sacred name in *April Sixth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1980, 80 pp. \$5.95) and does so with some success and some intriguing conclusions. Truman Madsen's meandering "Foreword" undoubtedly helps sell the book but provides few insights into the issues Lefgren scrutinizes, which is somewhat unfortunate because the author plays games with mathematics and calendars but never really comes to the point of telling us what it all means. Do we decide that Joseph's ability to "associate a particular night in Judea as being 1,830 solar years before April 6, 1830" is proof of his divine calling? And do we

neglect the volumes of biblical scholarship that dispute the actual date of Christ's birth among the days and months of a five-year period (1 B.C. to 4 A.D.)? Perhaps this is another case of Von Daniken's Disease, where an author begins with the answers and then seeks for the questions. The most troubling part of such works as *April Sixth* is their tendency to encourage the Saints to hang their testimonies on hat racks made of facts. Facts are cold and hard, and they break.

Testimony—its presence or absence, its degree—seems so often to be the very nexus of Mormonism. Nothing holds together without it. H. Stephen Stoker and Joseph C. Muren realized that fundamental aspect of the faith and consequently compiled statements on the subject from the writings and sermons of the twelve latter-day prophets. In order to give *Testimony* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980, 172 pp., author index, \$5.95) the flavor of a "General Authority" book, they also included comments from nineteen current church leaders in addition to President Kimball. All the popular church book authors are there—Bruce McConkie, Neal Maxwell, Paul Dunn, Hartman Rector and S. Dilworth Young, to name a few. Other past general authorities also get in a word here and there. The result is a fine compendium on the question of what a testimony is and how to get one. But what these two Ph.D. educators fail to give us is much counsel from the brethren on what to do with one once you have it. It is ceaselessly intriguing to notice all the Saints who can bear a mean testimony and who at the same time have not the slightest idea how to live it. Maybe Muren and Stoker can produce a sequel called *Evidence*, for where there is testimony there must be a coexistent demonstration of its effect.

What all the general authorities both past and present end up saying in *Testimony* is that in the final analysis the Spirit must bear witness. To help us comprehend such a deep concept, the Mormon book market has served up Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Seeking the Spirit* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978, 112 pp. \$4.95) and John D. Whetten, ed., *Living by the Spirit* (Salt

Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980, 142 pp., index \$4.95). McConkie offers a series of bland platitudes after the order of the following: "All men are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among them are eternal life, spiritual liberty and the endless pursuit of happiness." Whetten chose instead to excerpt statements on "spiritual living" from the *Journal of Discourses*. While his name will certainly not sell as many books as will McConkie's, Whetten's book is much more worthwhile. It fits well into the category of a gospel-study shortcut. Using its index, a student of the Holy Ghost can find virtually everything there is in the *Journal of Discourses* on the subject in a matter of minutes. Although Whetten argues that the nineteenth-century leaders of the Church preached doctrine on the subject perfectly in harmony with modern teachings, his selections bear out the historian's suspicions that the old-time religionists relied much more on the Spirit than they did the teleprompter.

Among efforts to bridge the gap between such inbred Mormonisms as "testimony" and the broader concerns of the outside world, Jacob Neusner's *The Glory of God Is Intelligence: Four Lectures on the Role of Intellect in Judaism* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1978, xxi+ 55 pp., biblio., indices, \$4.95) fails miserably in the attempt. Harris Lenowitz, noted scholar of Jewish studies at the University of Utah's Middle East Center, found the book so lacking in positive qualities that he refused to publish a review largely because he did not "see any real purpose in being publicly nasty about a work that might thereby gain more attention than if left alone." Lenowitz agreed to allow us to mention his name in our notice and in a subsequent letter made a fascinating point about the whole business of pretentious Mormon Theological Symposiums and BYU Religious Studies Centers and so on: "Generally," writes Lenowitz of Neusner's book, "my objections are to the slimness of the enterprise. . . . I am

alarmed at the over-simplifications in which he indulges himself, I think, to meet the audience at its chosen level." (Italics added.) When we become convinced despite the evidence that what we are studying is of such importance and of such a calibre that we have arrived in the big leagues of theological enterprise, then we are in serious trouble as a faith and as a culture. If scholars such as Lenowitz can become so offended by the pabulum we perceive as delicious, then perhaps it is time to spew it out and analyse its ingredients before we poison ourselves.

In a real sense, many among the Saints seem to relish poison. In *Dialogue* (XII:4), Sociologist L. Kay Gillespie noted the proclivity of so many Mormons for unorthodox medical treatments, or what we snidely call "quackery." Gillespie has since published an extensive study of *Cancer Quackery: The Label of Quack and Its Relationship to Deviant Behavior* (Palo Alto, California: R & E Research Associates, 1979, viii+ 126, biblio., \$10.00) in which he takes a long look at the whole value system surrounding so-called quackery. While Gillespie's study concerns itself with the total issue, it spends considerable time on the Mormon connection, hoping to perceive reasons for so much attraction among faithful Latter-day Saints to non-medical cures. An impressive aspect of his effort is his careful refusal to condemn or condone specific treatments and his ability then to analyse them with reference to their sociological implications. It is a rare scholar who can so effectively remove his own biases from his work.

Bias is the basic problem with so much of the literature dealing with or impinging upon Mormonism. Either the author seeks to debunk or to fortify the faith. The obvious observation is that only when writers (as a few have) contemplate the Mormon experience with neither goal honestly in mind do they successfully accomplish one or the other, and sometimes even both.