Announcing the Mormon Literature Database

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY'S Harold B. Lee Library has recently launched the Mormon Literature Database (http://MormonLit.lib.byu.edu), a comprehensive bibliography of all literary writings by or about Mormons, destined to be an invaluable resource to scholars and readers of Mormon literature. Some 2500 authors and 8000 publications are currently entered in the database, with thousands more to come as the database editors complete and expand entries in a variety of genres and media.

"We began with conventional genres such as fiction, poetry, drama, and literary criticism," explains Gideon O. Burton of BYU's English faculty, who oversees the MLDB committee, "but we have expanded our parameters to include other genres that reflect the richness of Mormon literary heritage and that are increasingly the focus of literary and cultural scholars—biographies and memoirs, journals and diaries, letters, folklore, and especially the personal essay. In future phases we will add Mormon speeches, and before long some 2000 films that have been created by or that depict Mormons."

The database also classifies works according to numerous subgenres that reveal the depth and breadth of Mormon writing. These include various categories of fiction—historical fiction, science fiction, fantasy, mystery, scripture-based fiction, romance, etc.—as well as genres more specific to Mormonism, such as missionary fiction, hymns, and even literature-oriented Relief Society lessons. Each genre or subgenre is annotated so that someone looking for "personal essay" is first given an overview and history of the genre, including suggestions of the most important publications or authors in that genre. In this way, the MLDB is something of an online encyclopedia of Mormon literary studies. The records for individual works are annotated with summaries, awards received, and links to other works to which a given work is related.

"We are so excited to have this data in a fully relational database," explains Burton, "because now a given work is linked directly to any other to which it has a relationship–a book review is linked to the book that it reviews, a poem or essay is linked to the collection in which it was

published, a story is linked to the periodical where it appeared, a translation or a film is linked back to the work from which it was translated or adapted, a book or article in a series is linked to a head record that explains and lists the members of that entire series, etc. And any work, of course, is linked to its author and to its publisher or periodical, which also have their own profile pages and bibliographies." Thus, one can quickly see a list of all Mormon literary publications from a given publisher, whether that is Bookcraft, The University of Illinois Press, or Knopf; or, one can just as readily see a list of all Mormon literary publications from a given periodical, whether that is *The Times and Seasons*, *BYU Studies*, or *The New Yorker*.

Mormon authors and creative personnel are a principal feature of the MLDB, which is not only a bibliographic but a biographical database. "This is comparable to an electronic Dictionary of Literary Biography for Mormon writers," explains BYU librarian Connie Lamb. "We intentionally imitated the format of *Contemporary Authors*, where library patrons could not often find information about the LDS authors they were researching." In the MLDB, a "profile page" is established for each author where details can be provided about his or her background, education, career, awards, professional affiliations, etc. Where possible, photographs of authors appear. Appended to each author profile is a complete listing of his or her publications. "We have a long way to go to complete our author profiles," admits Robert Means, the BYU librarian who heads the biographical portion of the database, "but living authors can now submit their own data through an online submission form, and we urge them to complete and update their data."

The MLDB is the result of many years of bibliographic work on Mormon studies, first done by Chad Flake, Scott Duvall, David Whittaker, and others, which has been published over the years in *BYU Studies*. "Eugene England began gathering bibliographies and entering these into an offline database in the 1980s," explains Burton. "While still at BYU, he approached me about finding a way to track and publicize the wealth of Mormon literary writing that he had been working so hard to identify in his own scholarship." During the late 90s, a Mormon Authors project was begun by Larry Draper, Connie Lamb, and Robert Means of BYU's Harold B. Lee Library in which they identified some 1000 Mormon novels and their authors. Burton and the BYU librarians put their data together, obtained sponsorship for the project from the Harold B. Lee Library, and began the new Mormon Literature Database. The Database was officially launched at the February 2003 meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, where Mormon authors and critics greeted the new resource with enthusiasm.

"It took us two years to complete the necessary prototypes and to get the parameters and programming pounded out," Burton explains. "But

now that it is up and running, we can hardly enter data fast enough. As we work through various periodicals and publisher lists to enter data, we are continually astounded at how industriously literary the Mormon people have been. Not everything published is of compelling aesthetic quality, of course, but the literature shows the shape and shaping of our culture over time. We have every proof that the Mormon experience has sparked a huge outpouring of literary expression, and more reasons than ever to appreciate Mormon literature as a thriving ethnic literature to be studied in its own right."

"With this expandable database, students of Mormon literature will be able to mine countless topics to study, and the intelligent accessibility of both biographical and bibliographic data will promote scholarly dialogue within and beyond BYU," explains Brad Westwood, Chair of BYU's L. Tom Perry Special Collections at the Harold B. Lee library. "Within seconds, students and scholars will be able to set research parameters by author, genre, topic, span years, or publisher; find and often read the latest literary criticism; read excerpted works; find links to complete literary works found on stable Internet sites; study biographical data on hundreds of authors; and read listings of complete oeuvres. What would have taken days to assemble for reading and examination, can be brought together in only seconds. This scholarly literary resource will, in my opinion, do more to monitor, appraise and encourage the study of Mormon literature than any academic/reference product of the last decade."

Visit the Mormon Literature Database at http://MormonLit.lib.byu.edu or write its editors at MormonLit@byu.edu.