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The Secret History of Mormonism

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THE SECRET HISTORY OF MORMONISM

THE REFINER'S FIRE: THE MAKING OF
MORMON COSMOLOGY, 1644-1844

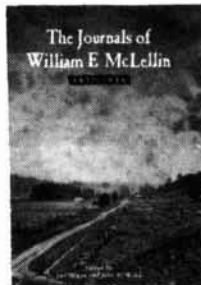
by John L. Brooke
Cambridge University Press, 1994
xix+421 pages, \$34.95

THE JOURNALS OF WILLIAM E. MCLELLIN, 1831-1836

edited by Jan Shipps and John W. Welch
BYU Studies and University of Illinois Press, 1994
xxi+520 pages, \$29.95



Reviewed by Richard L. Bushman



McLellin's diaries are usefully read with The Refiner's Fire because they provide a test of Brooke's arguments that hermeticism influenced early Mormonism.

THE HUNDREDS OF thousands of new converts added each year to the nine million Mormons who now comprise The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are a phenomenon of the present that changes the understanding of the past. Joseph Smith might easily be dismissed as another religious eccentric in a time of chaotic religious creativity had the Mormons not persisted and flourished. But of all the visionaries and sectarian leaders who formed new religions and communal orders in the 1830s and 1840s, Joseph Smith had the longest-lasting and most widespread

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effect. That fact makes us think differently about his place in history. Why did Mormonism survive, while hundreds of movements withered away, and then go on to outgrow all the other survivors? Harold Bloom, noted literary critic and recent commentator on American religion, has called Joseph Smith an authentic religious genius. This extravagant assessment, which would have drawn laughter and scorn in 1844, has to be taken seriously a century and a half after his death, in light of the millions who still regard him as a prophet. Joseph Smith now requires serious explanation.

Beginning with the earliest revelations, interested observers have tried to "situate" Mormonism culturally in an effort to explain the remarkable texts that flowed from Joseph Smith's mind. Where did the revelations come from, what background illuminates their meaning? The first hostile readers of the

Book of Mormon spoke of an old Bible from which Smith and Oliver Cowdery contrived their account. Alexander Campbell said the Book of Mormon tried to answer all the theological controversies that had troubled New York for the past ten years. Nineteenth-century editions of *Roget's Thesaurus* linked Joseph Smith's revelations with Mohammed and false prophets. In the twentieth century, anti-Masonry was brought into the picture. In more recent years, the influence of primitivist restorationism, republicanism, and magic have all received book-length treatments by serious historians, and Harold Bloom has offered a gnostic Joseph Smith who, by dint of pure genius, recovered cabalistic religion for nineteenth-century Americans. Brigham Young University scholars have discovered an extensive, intricate, and detailed context in ancient Israelitish and Middle Eastern culture.

Now, in an ambitious and erudite reading of Mormon culture from the beginning to the present, John Brooke throws still more ingredients into the mix: first, hermeticism (the agglomeration of alchemy, Platonism, Gnosticism, and Egyptian theology that flourished in the Renaissance), and, second, the Radical Reformation, with its millennial, restorationist, and other doctrines. Though admitting that his is not "a well-rounded approach," Brooke claims that the first of these, hermeticism, explains "the inner logic of Mormon theology" (xvii).

The Radical Reformation tradition, which includes Anabaptists, Quakers, and many other sects on the fringes of the Magisterial Reformation, is the better known and, in Brooke's telling, the lesser of the two influences. Though elaborately worked out and ingeniously formulated by Brooke, radical ideas are familiar in their general outlines. Millenarianism, for one, has received full treatment by Grant Underwood. Moreover, when Brooke narrates Mormon history, he downplays the Radical Reformation. He gives considerable space to tracing radical groups like the Connecticut Rogerenes through eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New England, but when he gets to Mormonism itself, radical influences recede. In Brooke's view, radical doctrines contributed to Mormonism, but did not shape its inner logic. Brooke thinks radical beliefs affected the first few years, but after 1831 added only details. His chief interest in the radical sects is that they were open to the hermeticism that he sees at Mormonism's center.

The Refiner's Fire can be read as an extension of the scholarship on hermeticism that

For all of its flaws, Brooke's book enables us to see our own religion in a new light. It was a religion of wonders, of supernatural powers, of belief in visions and divine words, of mysterious histories and awesome futures.

has appeared over the past thirty years, ever since Frances Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Traditions* (1964) reawakened interest in the influence hermeticism had from the Renaissance to the seventeenth century. The name "hermeticism" comes from Hermes Trismegistus, purportedly a divine being whose revelations claimed to precede Moses but who is thought to be, in reality, a creation of second- and third-century gnostics who fused Greek and Egyptian ideas. The Florentine Cosimo Medici acquired a collection of hermetic writings, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in Macedonia in 1460 and ordered his court scholar Marsilio Ficino to work on them. Recent scholarship has demonstrated the wide influence of hermeticism throughout Europe thereafter. Brooke briefly recapitulates these studies and shows how hermeticism's reach extends into eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America, right down to the Smith family. In America, the most complete expressions of hermeticism occurred at the Ephrata Cloister, a German religious community of mid-eighteenth-century Pennsylvania, and in Royal Arch Freemasonry, which had chapters in many early nineteenth-century American towns. Drawing on hermeticism's connections to alchemy, Brooke hints that counterfeiters, miners, and virtually anyone who mentioned the word "gold" could have transmitted hermetic secrets, although he eventually concludes that such shadowy figures drew upon a "thin vein" (93).

Brooke's primary reason for thinking hermeticism must have been transmitted to Mormonism is that he sees similarities to the mature teachings of Joseph Smith: (1) Hermetic philosophy taught that matter emerged from the divine spirit at creation, forming the great division of spirit and matter, along with other divisions such as light and dark, fire and water, and male and female. Mormonism taught that there is no such thing as immaterial matter; spirit is a refined form of matter. (2) Hermeticism sought the reunion of spirit and matter through the analogy of an alchemical marriage, the *coniunctio*. Mormonism made celestial marriage a requirement for exaltation. (3) The goal of hermeticism was to recover divine power and perfection ("divinization" is Brooke's word). Mormonism promised that the

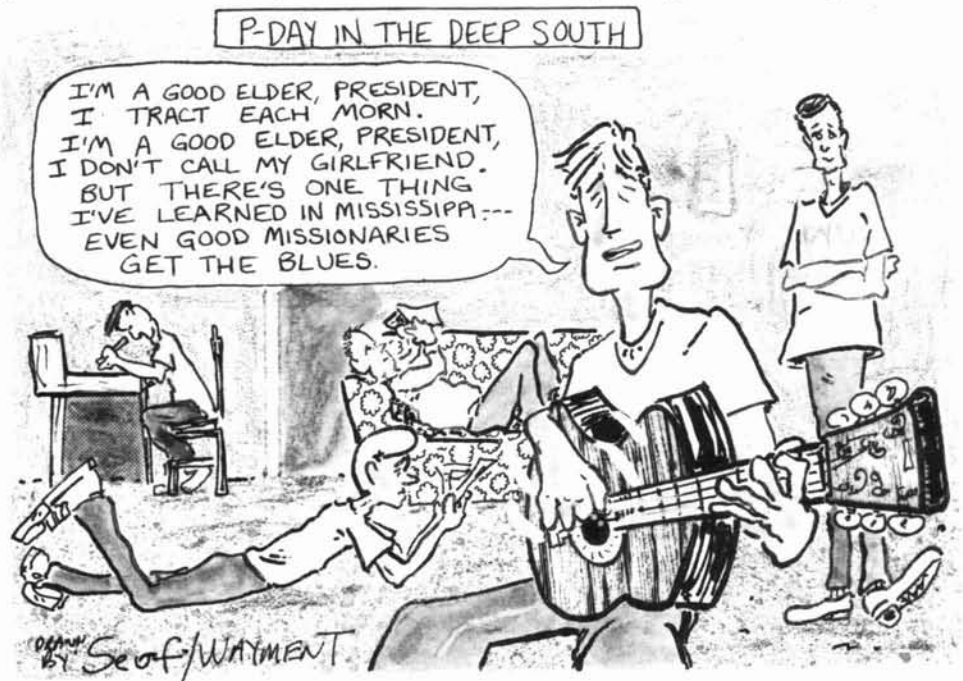
faithful would become gods. These parallels lead Brooke to argue that Mormonism should be understood as more of an hermetic restoration than a return to primitive Christianity.

Having heard presentations by Brooke before reading *The Refiner's Fire*, and knowing Lance Owens's scholarship on the Jewish kabbalah, a related set of mystical teachings, I was prepared to look favorably on the relationship of hermeticism and Mormonism.¹ The idea of placing Mormonism against a background different from standard Protestant orthodoxy appealed to me. Although Mormons believe that Joseph Smith received revelations directly from God, there is no denying that many of his ideas are not new. Other Christians taught faith and repentance, atonement through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, resurrection, the promise of a second coming, and so on. The revelations took ideas that were familiar to Christians and clarified them, or gave them new meaning, as well as offering startlingly new stories and doctrines. The gospel was both new and everlasting. Robert Matthews has suggested that retranslating the Bible prompted Joseph Smith to seek elucidation, which led to many new revelations growing out of biblical texts. The teachings of the religious world around him, questions from his

followers, and incidents of everyday life moved Joseph to seek answers which then grew in unforeseen directions, blossoming into explications of doctrine that went far beyond the original stimulus. In a sense, Joseph Smith as revelator could be said to have had a green thumb: from the smallest seed he grew mustard trees.

For the most part, however, we have thought that the scriptural and doctrinal stimuli to inquire of God came from within the bounds of Protestantism. Mormonism has been understood as one variant of the widespread Protestant impulse to restore primitive Christianity. But what if, I speculated, orthodox Protestantism was too confined to serve as a basis for the entire restoration? What if some of heaven's truths reached beyond the bounds of this single tradition, this one way of reading the Bible? How refreshing it would be to discover another religious tradition, wherein other seeds of religious truth could be found by a prophet with a green thumb. Mormon scholars who know kabbalah, hermeticism, and the associated pursuits of alchemy have felt sympathy for some of their doctrines. Why couldn't Joseph receive a spiritual stimulus from this alternate source, thus expanding the boundaries of the Restoration?

So I began the perusal of *The Refiner's Fire*



with hope that connections could be made. I was not looking for the "sources" of Joseph's ideas in the usual environmentalist sense of locating the places he mined to piece together his theology. My interest was in the sources of language used in the revelations, since we are told they are given in the language of the recipients (D&C 1:24). Were there alternate ideas or words used in the revelations that would open vistas hidden to conventional orthodoxies? Perhaps hermeticism provided an expanded vocabulary for Restoration revelations.

My hope for development of this line of inquiry faltered, however, as I worked my way through *The Refiner's Fire*. The historical evidence for a connection with Joseph simply was not there. Brooke believes that he has recovered the route of hermeticism from late Renaissance England to the northeastern United States in the nineteenth century. The path has to have been fairly broad, for, if the argument is to work, hermeticism had to have made a powerful impact on Joseph Smith and on a large proportion of the people who believed him. These exotic ideas had to have ignited Smith's religious imagination and displaced the conventional Christianity of Methodism and Presbyterianism that was all about him. How did hermeticism arrive in the northeastern United States in sufficient strength to arouse the Prophet and his followers?

Brooke points to hermetic ideas filtering into high culture through Emmanuel Swedenborg via the Transcendentalists and a few medical men who reportedly conducted alchemical experiments, but he does not claim that the Smiths were in touch with these bookish people. The other routes are equally dim. The Ephrata Cloister, which Brooke calls the highwater mark of hermeticism in the colonies, disappeared a half century before Mormonism got started, hardly evidence of hermeticism's vitality and viability. During Ephrata's brief existence, Brooke can locate only a few visitors passing

back and forth who might have carried the Cloister's ideas to New England, and there is no evidence that the ideas took hold.

Another possible source of hermeticism was Royal Arch Freemasonry, whose roots reached back to hermetic Rosicrucianism. Brooke says that Joseph Smith Sr. was too poor to join the Masons himself, but he assumes that, despite Masonic oaths of secrecy, the family was "exposed" to Masonic ideas through books and conversation. But Freemasonry, by his own description, makes virtually nothing of the fundamental hermetic ideas that he believes most influenced Mormonism: the primal unity of spirit and matter, divine marriage, and divinization. Royal Arch Masonry embraced none of the doctrines that Brooke thinks were at the heart of Mormonism's inner logic. If those hermetic elements were absent from Freemasonry, there is no visible link between fundamental hermetic principles and Mormonism. He cannot point to a single site where Joseph Smith could have learned about the ideas that supposedly influenced him most. *Refiner's Fire* is not only a history of the occult, it is itself occult in requiring secret transmission of key ideas. The operant words throughout the book are "might have" and "possibly."

A lot of the argument rests on the presumed similarities of hermeticism and Mormonism. But to a great extent, the similarities are in the eye of the beholder. Each reader will have to decide if apples are basically like oranges. With his powerfully synthetic mind, Brooke sees similarities, and he misses differences. Take spirit and matter, for instance. Hermeticism saw matter as coming from the divine spirit at creation and returning to its primal condition as pure spirit. Joseph Smith said that spirit was refined matter and that matter was not created; both spirit and matter were eternal with God and would last for all eternity. Instead of obliterating matter, Mormonism gives it eternal standing; instead of subsuming matter into

spirit, Mormonism defines spirit as matter. Brooke admits that the Mormon creation story "did not quite match the hermetic ideal of *creatio ex deo*," but "it came quite close" (202). Other supposed similarities are equally mismatched. Alchemical marriage sought to unite male and female opposites to resolve them into one; *Coniunctio* resulted in a perfected hermaphroditic Adam with no gender. Mormon celestial marriage perpetuated gender through all eternity, including procreation of children. In Mormonism, sexual differences are never to end—scarcely what the hermetics had in mind. Many Mormons will have trouble recognizing Joseph's teachings in Brooke's hermeticism.

Brooke's main argument is neither convincing nor discerning. The forcing of resemblances results, I believe, from a compulsion that afflicts many non-Mormon writers: the requirement of foreclosing any possibility of divine revelation in Joseph's life requires unbelieving writers to leave little room for any creativity at all, for fear Mormons will pounce upon any originality and declare it to be the work of God. Brooke is determined to find a precedent somewhere for every Mormon idea, even if he must reach back a century or two. He tells us that baptism for the dead was practiced at Ephrata and plural marriage was known among the German sect of Schwenkfelders in the Radical Reformation. The name of the Melchizedek priesthood appeared in one of the Masonic orders. Looking out over the vast sea of past cultural practices, Brooke's eye picks out every piece of floating debris that resembles a Mormon idea.

This heavy-duty "culturalism," as Richard Poirier has termed it, in a review of David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America* (1994), has its limits. Reynolds pursues the historical sources of Whitman's poetry with the same energy that Brooke lavishes on Joseph Smith. But in the end, Reynolds misses something. Poirier observes that Reynolds's "flat-minded understanding of the workings of literary

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The diaries are most valuable for showing how Mormon missionaries did their work in the early years. They suggest that Mormonism flourished because religious life was much more fluid in the 1830s than it is depicted in the standard denominational histories.

language” stops him from closely examining the texts, and as a result, he fails to see that “Whitman inherits nothing that he does not change.”² Brooke cannot look too carefully at Joseph’s distinctive ideas for fear he will find changes and elaborations that cannot be accounted for except to credit Joseph’s genius. Harold Bloom’s bestowal of that word on Joseph acknowledged Joseph Smith’s creativity. Brooke refuses to allow for any originality except for a kind of pallid talent in assembling old ideas.

Introducing the word “genius” is admittedly a dangerous game for secular writers, for works of genius are by their nature, inexplicable. Genius, by common admission, carries human achievement beyond the limits of simple historical explanation, just as revelation does. To say that the Book of Mormon could only be written by a genius is logically not much different from saying God revealed it. In both cases, we admit that historical analysis fails us. Genius implies that some human creations cannot be explained, and yet we have no other way to account for Mozart or Einstein. Contemporary writers happily acknowledge artistic and scientific genius but are loath to admit any form of religious inspiration. The consequence is flat-minded readings of Joseph Smith wherein only similarities are permitted to show. None of the wonder of his marvelous powers, surely a part of his magnetism, finds its way into secular accounts.

Brooke is an ingenious writer who works many themes. After connecting Mormonism to hermeticism, he goes on to explain the cycles of change throughout Mormon history. The Book of Mormon and the first revelations, he says, were not under the influence of hermeticism. The first converts were drawn by magic (seerstones and divining), miracles, and the doctrines of the Radical Reformation. But after 1831, hermetic influences began to take over, until the hermetic restoration was complete in Nauvoo in 1844 and continued into Utah through the middle 1850s. Then Brigham Young and other early hermeticists gradually retreated toward a more conventional Christianity. John Taylor’s *The Mediation and Atonement* is cited as a document of standard Protestantism. Hermetic religion sought for power and redemption through sacred knowledge and holy ritual

rather than through grace and atonement. Brooke thinks that standard Protestant doctrines gave way in Nauvoo during the height of the hermetic restoration and then reasserted themselves by the end of the nineteenth century. Taylor’s *Meditation and Atonement* marked a return to reformation Christianity.

MORMON historians will protest this gloss of the 1840s and 1850s and can easily assemble tons of evidence (including the Articles of Faith) to counter Brooke. But one part of his thesis can be tested by perusal of the edition of the William E. McLellin papers, which appeared within a few months of *The Refiner’s Fire*. McLellin’s missionary diaries from 1831 through 1836, published with full scholarly apparatus, were a subject of ongoing controversy long before they saw the light of day. They were thought to be locked away in the Church vaults or in the hands of Mark Hofmann, who had obtained them from private owners. Probably prompted by the rumors, the Church did locate the diaries in the First Presidency vault. The documents disappointed readers who believed that McLellin, after his excommunication in 1838, would have exposed the evildoings of Church leaders. The diaries turned out to be an interesting but pedestrian, day-by-day record of missionary journeys with little to satisfy a taste for gossip.

The preceding controversy, however, prompted a full-scale treatment when the diaries finally came out. In the book, they are ensconced between two introductory essays and four studies of the diary offered as “supplemental resources.” Jan Shipps, John Welch, and William Hartley set the diaries in the contexts of American religious history, scriptural narratives of missionary activity, and the history of the Church. The longest essays are a full-fledged and highly informative biography of McLellin by Larry Porter and a quantitative analysis of sermon topics, audiences, and reception by Teresa Baer. This is the kind of full-scale treatment that is reserved for significant documents, of which this is surely one.

McLellin’s diaries are usefully read with *The Refiner’s Fire* because they provide a test for Brooke’s arguments. Do we, for example,

find evidence of hermetic tastes in McLellin? The answer is no, but that in itself does not undercut Brooke’s case. In Brooke’s view, the Radical Reformation exercised the greatest influence on the Book of Mormon and the early revelations, so early converts may have signed on to an especially vigorous rendition of millenarian and restorationist Christianity and nothing more. Then, as hermeticism took hold through the 1830s, these early converts, Brooke would say, grew disillusioned and fell away. McLellin’s chronology follows that pattern. He preached Mormonism through the midwest from 1832 to 1836, began to lose confidence in 1836, and was entirely disaffected by 1838, when many other early Mormons left the Church.

Where McLellin fails to serve Brooke’s purpose is in his reasons for leaving the Church. Hermetic doctrines did not repel him. Instead, he was disappointed when he did not have visions at the dedication of the Kirtland temple as Joseph Smith had promised. McLellin himself said that he did not leave the Church because of its doctrines

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"but because *the leading men* to a great extent left their religion and run into and after speculation, pride, and popularity" (321). Like others, McLellin lost faith after the failure of the Mormon bank in Kirtland in 1836 and 1837. His was a conventional apostasy, scarcely a recoil from hermeticism.

Rather than bearing on Brooke's thesis, the diaries and the analytical articles are most valuable for showing how Mormon missionaries did their work in the early years. They played upon the widespread interest in religion that spilled over the boundaries of denominational religion and allowed any preacher with a message to gain a hearing. McLellin could walk into town, announce the time and place for meeting, and as often as not draw an audience to hear him out. His diaries suggest that Mormonism flourished because religious life was much more fluid in the 1830s than it is depicted in the standard denominational histories.

THE publication of *The Refiner's Fire* will keep Mormon scholars on the lookout for hermeticism for a long time. The topic has not yet been exhausted. Lance Owens thinks that Alexander Neibaur's collection of cabalistic texts may have filtered through to Joseph Smith. That idea calls for testing. Moreover, Mormon historians have to characterize and explain the creative turn in Joseph Smith's theology in Nauvoo, where many of Mormonism's distinctive doctrines matured. If Brooke's explanation is unsatisfactory, how are we to conceive of that era?

For all of its flaws, Brooke's book enables us to see our own religion in a new light. It is helpful to understand that early nineteenth-century religion was not a monopoly of college-trained ministers and denominational churches. Beyond the classic theological and ecclesiastical problems, beyond evangelical revivals, there was a religion of wonders, of supernatural powers, of belief in visions and divine words, of mysterious histories and awesome futures. In the interstices between the churches were believers who were not caught in the clutches of Calvinism and for whom salvation was more than a matter of divine grace. Mormonism was one of the religions that did not have to wrestle free of Calvinist theology. Faith, repentance, and the atonement were indeed fundamental in Mormon theology to the end of Joseph Smith's life, but his revelations spoke also of "great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures," of "the Almighty pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints," and of how "it is im-

possible for a man to be saved in ignorance" (D&C 89:19, 121:33, 131:6). Those words convey the uncalvinistic promise that treasures of knowledge might themselves be redemptive and that access to the secrets of God might bring mankind closer to heaven. Brooke's comparison with hermeticism highlights that side of Joseph Smith's Mormonism. ☐

NOTES

1. See "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27:3 (fall 1994), 117-196.
2. Richard Poirier, "The Escape Artist," *The New Republic*, 19 June 1995, 33-39.



PROMISED THINGS

It was when they'd closed up his skull for a time
to see if he would open his eyes and who he'd be
they said you should get out
take some time away there is nothing you can do here
until it seemed that maybe I could
maybe some fresh air and faces would after all
would do the trick so I told him I was going
told his empty face how soon I'd be back
put his hand beneath the sheets
tucked him in like this had always been his room

and went where it was a holiday by the music
and decorations coiled around each column, and people
seemingly capable of such speed
they thundered as they passed in sounds I knew to be words
but that only nudged me harmlessly like metallic balloons
and one little girl was crying into her candy
throwing her shoes at anyone who came close
while her parents patted and shushed
and promised things when she got home;

still it might've been okay
but for the cinnamon-sweet potpourri
insinuating however gently with warm places and times
that Christmas was coming here
would snow even me under egg nog and holly berry
until I could never find my way back there
to the other side of the glass
where it was only winter
but where my son lay waiting
and warming to speak.

—C. WADE BENTLEY