

Dave Hall. *A Faded Legacy: Amy Brown Lyman and Mormon Women's Activism, 1872–1959*.

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Reviewed by Lisa Olsen Tait

Dave Hall has made a landmark contribution to Mormon history generally, and to Mormon women's history specifically, with *A Faded Legacy: Amy Brown Lyman and Mormon Women's Activism, 1872–1959*. Hall has worked on this project over the course of three decades, and his long and deep familiarity with his subject shows through impressively.¹ I have long called Lyman “the most important Mormon woman you've never heard of.” This book, I hope, will help change that.

Hall chronicles Lyman's life: her birth in 1872 in Pleasant Grove, Utah, to a polygamous family; her education at Brigham Young Academy, where she studied under Karl G. Maeser and met her husband, future Apostle Richard R. Lyman; her further training in Chicago and New York, where her interest in the new field of social work was kindled; her service on the Relief Society general board, where she worked with indomitable Mormon women's leaders of several generations and rose to become virtually the managing director of the organization; her vigorous, visionary leadership of social service efforts in the Relief Society, the Church, and the state of Utah; her leadership of women's efforts in the European Mission just before World War II; and, finally, her service as general president of the Relief Society from 1940 to 1945—which should have been the culmination of her life's work but was undermined by institutional dynamics and personal tragedy.

Alongside Lyman's personal story, Hall's most valuable contribution is his insightful narrative of Mormon women's history in the first half

1. In the interest of full disclosure, Dave and I have long been friends and colleagues in the work of Mormon women's history, exchanging sources and ideas. However, I did not read drafts of the biography or otherwise offer substantive assistance in its writing.

of the twentieth century. Hall argues that Lyman and her generation inherited a legacy of activism from their nineteenth-century mothers through which Mormon women claimed a vigorous role in the political and social arenas, legitimized under the umbrella of progressive-era maternalist feminism. Lyman and her colleagues saw their work in the Relief Society and the broader community as necessarily interconnected. The high point for this vision was realized in the 1920s during the presidency of Clarissa Smith Williams, with Lyman as general secretary managing the day-to-day operations of the organization. During these years, the Relief Society Social Service Department (forerunner of several Church welfare programs) was established, and the Relief Society partnered with state and federal agencies in an ambitious, effective effort to improve maternal and child health.

In the 1930s and 1940s, changes in leadership, both in the Relief Society and in the priesthood hierarchy of the Church, along with the expansion of federal programs during the Depression, the development of the Church's Welfare Plan, and shifting gender ideology—compounded by the scandal of Richard R. Lyman's adultery and excommunication in 1943—meant that the activist model under which Lyman and the Relief Society operated during their heyday could not be sustained. The shift away from that vision constitutes the “faded legacy” of the book's title.

One of the things I most appreciated in this book was Hall's ability to summarize large swaths of historical and theoretical analysis to provide concise but rich context. This is a true skill, one that not every historian handles as impressively as Hall does in this book. He sets up the narrative effectively with a brief introductory chapter, “Mormon Women in an American Context,” placing Lyman's story in its appropriate historical and historiographical contexts. He then weaves those contexts effectively into the narrative as it unfolds.

This extensive contextualization of Lyman's life, while vital in its own right, may also have been necessary given the apparent lack of first-person sources. Hall mentions that “comparatively few” of Lyman's personal papers survive (xii). The result is that Lyman's voice is notably absent, her inner life largely unrevealed. Still, we have to wonder how helpful the lost materials would have been, had they been preserved. Though it is clear that Lyman felt things deeply, she does not seem to have engaged in a lot of introspection, at least not in recorded form. Perhaps in this respect the biography does capture a genuine aspect of her life: She was busy living and *doing*, always impressive to those around her but perhaps just slightly out of reach. After all, she did come

of age as a late Victorian, a generation not known for its propensity for emotional disclosure.

Speaking of generations, Hall characterizes Lyman as a member of Mormonism's "second generation," which he defines as Latter-day Saints "born after the Mormon move west in 1847 and before the end of the 1870s." He asserts that her experiences and activities were "representative of an entire generation of Latter-day Saint women," and he writes perceptively of these women's relation to their pioneer forebears (1). Generational analysis is complicated, and Hall does not give any rationale for the generational parameters he proposes.² In biological terms, if we count from Lyman's father (but not her mother), she would, indeed, be part of a second generation of Mormons. However, in terms of distance from the formative experience of settling frontier Utah, I would argue that Amy's birth after the coming of the railroad places her in a distinctive generational cohort that would more properly be characterized as a third generation.³

I raise this point because I think it would help make sense of the conflict between Lyman and Susa Young Gates, her colleague on the Relief Society General Board from 1911 to 1922, and her chief opponent as she began to implement modern social work methods under the auspices of the Relief Society in the early 1920s. Gates feared, as Hall says, that "the spiritual side of the work would be lost in a quest for 'scientific' expertise" (82). As Gates put it in her own journal, she felt that Lyman was "willing to make the Church a tail to the Gentile kite."⁴ She also feared that she and other older women would be marginalized.

In biological terms, Gates could also be characterized as either a second or third generation Mormon (depending on whether we count

2. See the discussion of generational theory in William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1991), 433–53.

3. Elsewhere I have referred to Lyman's generation as the "Railroad generation," following the "Pioneer" and "Frontier" generations. See Lisa Olsen Tait, "The *Young Woman's Journal* and Its Stories: Gender and Generations in 1890s Mormondom" (PhD diss., University of Houston, 2010). In their comprehensive classification of generations in American history, Strauss and Howe call Lyman's generation (born 1860–82) the "Missionary Generation." Strauss and Howe, *Generations*, 233–46.

4. Susa Young Gates, journal, undated entry describing events of "the last week in May, 1922," Susa Young Gates Papers, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

from her father or her mother), and Hall treats her as a member of the same generation as Lyman. But Gates's birth in 1856 meant that she grew up in a more insular community and perhaps identified more strongly with its founding ideals than younger people like Lyman, who came of age under very different circumstances. Furthermore, Gates was just enough older than Lyman to be her mother. Gates did, in fact, marry (at the admittedly young age of sixteen) the same year Lyman was born, and her daughter Leah was only two years younger than Lyman. This means that Gates likely saw Lyman more as a daughter than as a peer, and this perspective could have fueled her opposition to Lyman's approach.

I would have liked to see Hall speak to the generational dynamics on the Relief Society board later in Lyman's life. By the time she became Relief Society general president in 1940, Lyman was sixty-eight years old. Hall points to shifts in the Church, in society, and in government and professional social work that served to push Lyman and her agenda to the side, and he represents this essentially as a lost opportunity due to forces beyond Lyman's control. I could not help wondering if there were ways, by the 1940s, in which Lyman herself, for all her vigor and vision, belonged to a generation whose time had passed—perhaps like Susa Young Gates in the 1920s. And was that vision, no matter how vigorous within Lyman, seen as out of step, especially by other women in Relief Society leadership? Hall notes that Lyman reorganized the general board, releasing older members to allow for recruitment of women from younger generations, and suggests that “not all her board members were fans of Lyman” (149). I wish he had elaborated on this point and perhaps considered Lyman's own ideas a bit more critically in context at the end of her career.

Of course, any author has to make tough decisions about what to include in a book, and the analysis Hall does offer is valuable. His treatment of the dynamics between Lyman and the powerful J. Reuben Clark is particularly insightful. There is no question that Clark acted to curtail the agenda and the prerogatives of Lyman and the Relief Society. Clark “seems to have valued the organization's earlier accomplishments to a lesser degree than many other church leaders,” Hall observes (152). Nevertheless, he resists the temptation to paint Clark as a villain. Hall attributes Clark's actions to a number of factors: his absence from Utah for most of his adult life and his possible unawareness of the scope and benefits of the Relief Society's activities; his traditional view of gender roles, rooted at least partly in the family arrangements required by his demanding career; his top-down managerial style and decisive manner, combined with the gatekeeping role he assumed in the First

Presidency due to the declining health of President Heber J. Grant; and his deep-seated political and cultural conservatism (151–56). While he is even-handed in trying to understand Clark’s motivations and in acknowledging the complex cultural circumstances in which Lyman operated, Hall leaves no doubt that he sees the curtailment of the Relief Society’s agenda as a net loss.

Hall also had to make careful choices about how to handle the two major tragedies in Lyman’s life: the death of her son, Wendell, in 1933, and the adultery and excommunication of her Apostle husband, Richard, in 1943. In the case of Wendell, Hall does not use the term *suicide*, which is how the death has been described in other published sources.⁵ One study cites Wendell’s daughter, Amy Kathryn Lyman Engar, as having considered this characterization of her father’s death “libelous.”⁶ Hall does not wade into the controversy but simply relates the details of Wendell’s death as reported at the time and leaves readers to draw their own conclusions (118–19). His emphasis is primarily on how Amy and Richard Lyman responded to this terrible tragedy.

In setting forth an account of the shocking tragedy of Richard Lyman’s adultery and excommunication, Hall faced an unenviable task: how to keep the focus on Amy, his primary subject, without being dragged into the details of a case that could easily overtake the narrative? On the whole, Hall handles it well. He deftly lays out the facts of the case and provides insightful and empathetic analysis, noting Amy’s decision to discontinue sexual relations and Richard’s desire to practice polygamy as likely factors in Richard’s behavior (163). However, he mentions only in passing “rumors” about Richard’s “unusually affectionate” manner and the discomfort some women leaders felt in his presence (162). Hall probably could have elaborated on these details. I also found it puzzling that he did not mention Richard’s apparent continuation of his relationship with his “prospective plural wife” for some time after his excommunication.⁷

In keeping with the purpose of his book, Hall focuses primarily on Amy’s reaction and the implications of the scandal for her continued

5. Loretta L. Hefner, “Amy B. Lyman,” in *Sister Saints*, ed. Vicky Burgess-Olson (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 108.

6. Gary James Bergera, “Transgression in the Latter-day Saint Community: The Cases of Albert Carrington, Richard R. Lyman, and Joseph F. Smith. Part 2: Richard R. Lyman,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37 (Fall 2011): 182 n. 22.

7. Bergera cites several sources on this matter. Bergera, “Transgression in the Latter-day Saint Community,” 199–203.

service as Relief Society general president. At first, nearly overwhelmed by the news of this unexpected calamity, Lyman told one of her counselors, “Just pray that I won’t go bitter” (164). Resisting the advice of those who told her to get a divorce and move to California, Hall writes, she “summoned every fiber of her iron will to look ahead” (165). President David O. McKay, of the First Presidency, publicly offered support at key moments, and Lyman soldiered on in her leadership position. But in the summer of 1944, likely due in large part to continued fallout from the scandal, President J. Reuben Clark asked Lyman for her resignation; in 1945, she was released.

Lyman lived another fourteen years, long enough to see the fading of her own legacy. Hall concludes the book with several pages of helpful analysis. He posits that Lyman and her colleagues “stood at the intersection of trends affecting both Mormon society and the larger culture” (179) and then proceeds to examine some of those trends (180). While praising Lyman’s “vision of societal involvement” and the Relief Society’s function as a “pathway to accomplishment” and personal fulfillment, Hall also recognizes that we cannot idealize the past, and that today’s society at large offers women “a more liberal environment” and better professional opportunities than those available to earlier generations (180). Nonetheless, he concludes, “for the present, much of the organization’s potential lies unused, even forgotten” (181). The potential remains for Relief Society to “reveal anew a powerful manifestation of organized womanhood,” in which the example of Lyman and her generation may yet serve as an inspiration (181). For this and many other reasons, Hall’s book deserves a wide readership.

Lisa Olsen Tait is a historian and writer specializing in women’s history at the Church History Department. Her work focuses on Mormon women’s history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and she serves on the executive board of the Mormon Women’s History Initiative Team (MWHIT). She has published articles in several venues, including her award-winning “The 1890s Mormon Culture of Letters and the Post-Manifesto Marriage Crisis: A New Approach to Home Literature,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2013): 99–124.