Brief Notices


The Plains Across became an instant standard work in western-trail literature after it first appeared in 1979. It won seven awards, including the John H. Dunning Prize from the American Historical Association and the Billington Book Award from the Organization of American Historians. Reviewers termed it "majesterial," "rich in anecdote," "sparklingly written," "best book yet written on the overland journey," and "a milestone in western historical scholarship." Unruh died at age thirty-nine, three years before the book was published. Because of popular demand, a paperback edition was produced in 1982, which, unfortunately, excluded Unruh's endnotes. The new "unabridged" paperback version restores those rich and voluminous endnotes.

Unruh deals with the overlanding experience thematically but in semichronological order. He looks at the climates of public opinion that developed regarding overlanding, first for the 1840-48 period and then for the 1849-60 era. Then, he assesses migrants' motivations. Significant chapters deal with interaction between emigrants and Indians and interaction between wagon trains. He also discusses the private enterprisers who helped service the overland travel—including Mormon ferry operations.

The book focuses mainly on travelers to the West Coast (an estimated 300,000 people), so Mormon Trail travel (with an estimated 70,000 people) is of minor concern here. Nevertheless, those of us concerned with Mormons "crossing the plains" in either direction should become familiar with this essential study of overland travel.

Unruh does give us a lengthy, thoroughly researched chapter about "the Mormon 'Halfway House'"—Great Salt Lake City. Here he explains in detail the importance of Great Salt Lake City as a place for overlanders to rest, re-outfit, and recruit livestock; the Latter-day Saint efforts to minimize contacts with overlanders; the gold seekers' "paying dearly" for goods bought in Utah; the growth of traveler-related businesses in Utah to meet demands for goods and services; the Deseret judiciary's handling of litigation and grievances for the emigrating companies; the emigrants' drawing on LDS information and guides regarding routes west; and the emigrants' experiences while wintering in Utah.

Unruh evenhandedly treats the Mountain Meadows Massacre in two paragraphs. He judges that it fits somewhere between being an
example of the "unjust and cruel treatment" of all emigrants by Saints, as some anti-Mormons claim, and being "a bizarre and inexplicable aberration," as most emigrants would have judged it. "Given the prevailing prejudices," Unruh observes, "it is surprising that so much beneficial interaction between Saints and Gentiles did occur." He notes at the chapter's end that "irrational prejudices of the time" prevented Saints and Gentiles from fully appreciating "how much they both were profiting" from the overland stopovers at the Mormon halfway house.

The Plains Across has become one of the standard works that must be consulted by anyone who seriously studies the California, Oregon, and Mormon trail experiences; U.S. nineteenth-century migration patterns; and the prerrailroad period of the American West. Its approachable style makes it useful to those who need reference material for family histories.

—William G. Hartley

Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations outside the Mainstream, edited by Catherine Wessinger (University of Illinois Press, 1993)

Catherine Wessinger has collected essays on women's leadership roles (theoretical and actual) in a handful of American groups outside the religious mainstream. The chapters, written by historians, folklorists, and theologians, take a 1980 article by Mary Farrell Bednarowski as their starting point. Bednarowski had looked at nineteenth-century religious groups for common elements contributing to expanded leadership roles for women. These elements, she found, included (1) the denial of an exclusively male anthropomorphic deity; (2) a reinterpretation or denial of the Fall; (3) the lack of a traditional, ordained clergy; and (4) a reexamination of marriage and motherhood as the only proper and fulfilling spheres for women.

For the most part, the essays in Wessinger's collection revolve around religious groups meeting Bednarowski's four criteria. The groups include Shakerism, Theosophy, African-American Spiritualism, Christian Science, New Thought, and feminist spirituality. The collection also offers some analysis of three groups that do not otherwise fit Bednarowski's model: Catholicism, Pentecostalism, and Mormonism. Seventh-Day Adventists are excluded even though their prophetess, Ellen G. White, is mentioned twice in passing.

The six-page discussion of Mormonism confines itself to some women's current attempts to reconcile gender roles and theology from within the Church. Unfortunately, no historical overview of women's roles in Mormonism is given, as is often provided in the essays examining other groups.

All essays accept insiders' theological explanations without question. No attempts are made to discredit any group's religious claims. Generally, the authors believe that marginal religious groups are more supportive of the idea of