

Editor's Preface

Two Reviews: Mormonism and the Hermetic World View

John Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) will likely evoke strong emotions among Latter-day Saints. Brooke's genuine curiosity has presented the strongest case yet for seeing Mormonism as a radically mystical, hermetic, and alchemical movement, but the case is still not very compelling. The first two book reviews that follow find Brooke's evidence unpersuasive. The review by William Hamblin, Daniel Peterson, and George Mitton exposes factual errors and logical fallacies found in this book—the normal task of any careful reviewer. Davis Bitton's reactions should be understood as sincere responses from a dismayed reader. Hopefully, these reviews will communicate to non-Mormon readers how this book sounds to Latter-day Saints.

Many readers and scholars outside the Latter-day Saint tradition have had a markedly different response to Brooke. As we were going to press, *The Refiner's Fire* won this year's Bancroft award in history (vindicating Bitton's prediction, page 182 below). Like Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* fifty years ago, Brooke's book may well become one of the dominant external icons about Mormonism for the next few years. Juggernauts like this are not easily forgotten.

However, people who accept Brooke's particular explanation need to reflect on its shortcomings. As has recently been observed regarding a similar use of terms such as Neoplatonism, Humanism, and Hermeticism in Yatesian historiography, each of these terms has been given "an explanatory function far beyond what it can deliver. 'Hermeticism' is a notoriously slippery concept. . . . It still remains to show that Hermeticism ever functioned as an important, independent worldview" (William H. Sherman, *John Dee*:

The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995], 20, commenting on the works of Frances Yates on the Hermetic tradition and occult philosophy in the Elizabethan age). Imagine what would happen if a writer tried to argue that the U.S. Constitution is best viewed as hermetic and alchemical. Seemingly a strong case could be made, as Bitton suggests somewhat tongue in cheek (page 185 below). Presumably, historians would react as negatively to such problematical methodology should it be applied to U.S. history as they did when Fawn Brodie turned her psychological methods from Joseph Smith to Thomas Jefferson (see Louis Midgley, "The Brodie Connection: Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 20 [Fall 1979]: 59-67). The picture of the salamander (303) shows how long a largely irrelevant image can remain prevalent in the mind of the jury of history. But then, as Brooke states, "authenticity may not matter for some" (301).

In 1930, Reed Smoot confidently stated: "The cry for 'Mormon' sensation is now happily a thing of the past. The world is recognising [*sic*] that 'Mormonism,' instead of being a debasing system, has much to teach this perplexed and harassed age" (in the foreword to Susa Young Gates, *The Life Story of Brigham Young* [New York: Macmillan, 1930], vii). Unfortunately, Brooke's book shows that Smoot was overly optimistic about the world's understanding of LDS revelation, doctrine, and religious experience.

—John W. Welch