
Although this book is primarily a history of the claims of Mormonism to existence by divine right and of the manifestation of its divinity, it succeeds at the same time in throwing into relief a fairly clear picture of the origin and history of Mormonism itself. It does not profess to touch on Mormon doctrine; nevertheless enough of the theory of the religion and the content of the revelation are included to make the history understandable and the revelation intelligible.

The story of Mormon revelation is divided into three time-units: “The Beginning of Mormon Revelation,” “Revelation under the Latter-Day Prophet,” and “Revelation after Joseph Smith.” Part I contains material that is of peculiar interest to western Pennsylvanians, inasmuch as the early life of Sidney Rigdon, founder of the new church, was spent in and around Pittsburgh. The author accepts the theory of the derivation of the Book of Mormon from the “Manuscript Found” of Solomon Spaulding, purloined by Rigdon from a Pittsburgh printing office. His chief source for data relating to this subject is Charles A. Shook’s True Origin of the Book of Mormon, published in 1914. It is interesting to note that the part of Joseph Smith’s “translation” that was afterwards stolen was dictated to Martin Harris at Harmony, Pennsylvania, in 1828.

An important contribution of the volume is the discussion in the third part, “Revelation after Joseph Smith,” of the later developments of the Mormon church under various leaders. Western Pennsylvania was the scene of action of many of the “Inspired Factions” described in chapter 13. William Bickerton, a former member of Rigdon’s church, organized a new church at Greensock, Pennsylvania, which was incorporated at Pittsburgh in 1865. This was the Church of Jesus Christ, reorganized at West Elizabeth in 1904, and for which “a building for general church work was recently erected at Monongahela.” An outgrowth of Bickerton’s church was the Re-Organized Church of Jesus Christ, incorporated in 1908, a branch of which is established at Armbrust, Pennsylvania, and another at Greensburg.

The tone of the book is reasonably unbiased—the author creates no prejudices in the mind of the reader and he appears to have succeeded in his endeavor, stated in the preface, to “let facts interpret themselves.” The style is clear and forthright. An interesting treatment of the personality of Joseph
Smith appears in an appendix, and a “Chronology of Smith’s Revelations” and an extensive bibliography add to the usefulness of the volume. The index, however, is incomplete.


The historian can portray political and economic conditions admirably, placing before our eyes a well-ordered museum replete with terra cotta figurines nicely painted, each with its little white-on-black explanatory card. But when it comes to breathing life into the clay images created by the historian, commend me to the teller of tales. Under his magic touch they live again—sweating, laughing, cursing, recreating the color and pageantry, the heartbreak and aspiration, the gallantry and villainy of other days.

The authors of Mike Fink, well aware of the limitations of their theme as well as of its opportunities, label the book “not only fiction but also biography, history, legend and, at rare intervals, poetry” (p. 269). They have drawn freely upon their imaginations for details, but this does not conceal the scholarly character of their work. They have recreated the atmosphere and revived the traditions of a bygone age and they have done it on a foundation of research. The analysis of the growth of these traditions in the epilogue is no mean contribution to American literary history, and the extensive and well-selected bibliography furnishes additional clues to the printed sources of the incidents in the text. But why bother about scholarship anyway? The book is a portrait, ranging from life-size to gigantic in extent, in natural colors, and authentic in spirit, if not in detail.

Mike Fink was a real character, a graduate cum laude from Captain Sam Brady’s school of western Pennsylvania Indian fighters about the time of Wayne’s victory at Fallen Timbers, who for thirty years lived a life of such colorful adventure on the western waters that it was bound to become the stuff from which legends are spun, and then died a violent death on the far-away banks of the Yellowstone River. The western Pennsylvania frontier, the scene of Mike’s early exploits as a marksman, hunter, and Indian fighter, lives again. The broad humor, the rough-and-ready law, the hot loves and hates, the vaunting boasts, the bloody street fights, and the reconciliations over the whiskey