

MORMON COUNTRY (WALLACE STEGNER)

December 19, 2017

Wallace Stegner, writer about the American West, is famous mostly for his novel *Angle of Repose*. This book is not famous, but it is worth reading. *Mormon Country* is a travelogue centered on the areas settled by the Mormons—basically Utah, of course, but also parts of Colorado, Nevada, Wyoming, Arizona, and New Mexico. It is not a book about Mormons, though they appear prominently; it is about the country, as it was in the 1930s. Stegner did not write this book to make a point. There is no ideological overlay, and Stegner is neither pushing nor denigrating Mormonism. He was not Mormon, but he respects them and their culture. *Mormon Country* draws a picture of the area and its history, as of the time of writing, and offers intriguing tales (many of which have modern postscripts).

The book is divided into a longer part covering Mormons and a shorter part covering non-Mormons, “Gentiles,” who lived in Mormon territory. Stegner sets the scene by describing in detail a ward house meeting in one of the innumerable small Mormon towns of the time (apparently Koosharem, Utah). His basic message is that Mormons have a unique bond of community, organized around actual participation, not passive sharing of culture from “movies or the radio.” The resulting “culture is a curious mixture of provincialism, parochialism, and cosmopolitanism.” The last comes from the requirement that Mormons engage in missionary work, as well as their successful aspirations to be a global religion (Stegner mentions that the Mormons, when he wrote, had eight temples; they now have 158, with one of the most recent opening two years ago down the road from my house). Critically, there are many young people involved, then and now, and they are fully integrated into the community’s life, largely through the vehicle of “Mutual Improvement Associations,” existing for both men and women. Stegner wrote in the past, but all these things, as far as I can tell, still apply to Mormons.

Stegner also describes other aspects of typical Mormon settlements, from widespread planting of Lombardy poplars to the use of what was originally a uniform platting system for Mormon towns, “like a medieval

village, a collection of farm houses in the midst of cultivable land.” That Mormons gravitated to medieval forms is, I suspect, no accident. Of all American mass movements with proselytizing zeal that have had success, the Mormons are the only ones whose structures (it appears to me, not being an expert on Mormons) are tied to a pre-Enlightenment, Burkean time, where community, rather than individual personal gain, is the highest good. I have no idea whether such small Mormon towns still exist, in these days of the internet and atomization, but if they do, they provide a model for what we should aspire to as a society.

The physical landscape is a major player in this book. Stegner loved the West, and it shows. (He also had an interest in Mormons—twenty years after this book, he wrote another book about Mormons, *The Gathering of Zion*.) The Mormons modified the landscape, or at least the arable parts, and those modifications are also a focus. This includes both the successful and unsuccessful modifications—the Mormons, for example, did not have much luck in the mining industry, despite the richness of ores in this area, which Stegner chalks up to inadequate technology existing within the insular Mormon world. Interspersed with discussions of the physical landscape is the history of the recent human presence. Fascinating episodes are covered, such as the Deseret Alphabet (a failed attempt to create a new system of writing) and the Sons of Dan (a shadowy vigilante group, used as the armed wing of the early Mormon leadership, to an extent still debated today). Stegner also discusses variations within Mormonism, not so much of doctrine, but of degree—such as the town of Orderville, the most prominent example of a Mormon attempt to live completely communally, which, like all such experiments, ultimately failed. Many colorful characters appear, such as J. Golden Kimball, member of the First Council of the Seventy, who swore constantly from the pulpit. “All through his life his friends warned him that the Church might cut him off if he didn’t stop seasoning his tabernacle sermons with peppery talk. His answer was invariable: ‘They can’t cut me off,’ he squeaked. ‘I repent too damn fast!’”

The shorter second part of the book covers the Gentiles, including the explorer Jedediah Smith, killed young by Indians after being the first man to explore much of Mormon Country, and Robert LeRoy Parker, better known as Butch Cassidy (though Stegner gives his given name as George, in those days before the internet superseded, and erased,

memory). The most interesting account is of Rafael Lopez, a miner at the Bingham Canyon copper mine, who in the town of Bingham (now swallowed by the mine) killed an acquaintance (named Juan Valdez—but I don't think he hawked coffee), then killed five lawmen sent to bring him in, and disappeared into the mine, never being found even after the mine was smoked. He "faded into thin air." In a fascinating footnote, after a little research, I learned that it is known today that Lopez, called "Red" Lopez, did escape, killing a total of thirty men over a life of crime, then fought in the Mexican Revolution, and was killed in a shootout with Texas Rangers in 1921. But Stegner could not have known that, since it was only decades later, in 2003, that people realized the two men called Lopez were the same man. The story of Red Lopez is not the only part of the book with a postscript. For example, Stegner refers in passing to Whizzer White, a famous football player much later better known as a Supreme Court justice. And he writes of how barren Nevada is, and mentions Las Vegas briefly as a dead-end town, long before it became a famous attraction. It is strange to think, sometimes, that the 1930s are now nearly a hundred years ago, and of all that has passed since then.

One lesson of this book is that Mormon community, which has much in common with Rod Dreher's famous Benedict Option, has costs as well as benefits. In today's world, we all want what the Mormons have, but few want to give up our independence. Most of us, tutored in self-sufficiency and autonomy, believing that "every man's house is his castle," would be loath to pay the price. The best example of that is the Mormon custom of "block teachers" (today called "home teachers"), who are responsible for regularly visiting and sitting with each family in the ward, to "give aid or counsel, discuss religious and economic problems, rebuke the ungodly." Stegner sees that, especially if the block teachers had "unbridled zeal," this could be a problem. But on balance, he sees the teachers as "angels of mercy—the kind neighbor systematized and made efficient," able to offer food, opportunities, and, most importantly, "the conviction that the Church cares about him, that he is among friends, that he is part of a great and good brotherhood." I don't want people nosing around my house any more than the next person, but an honest analysis suggests that this system, if everyone is doing it, offers more benefit than harm. And it is a clear way to regenerate the type of community that, as Robert Putnam has documented, has

disappeared nearly entirely. There is a reason that Mormons to this day have the only robust sense of community left in America, and a reason their religion is growing. I suspect that if Dreher's vision is to gain traction, it will be through an overt alliance among his Benedict Option communities, the Mormons, and probably orthodox Muslims and Jews. An odder grouping is hard to imagine, but I think that in the modern world, their common approach, and common needs for defense, will outweigh their differences.

It is important to remember, though, that despite supposed American tolerance of religious belief, and the guarantee of free exercise of religion, those who fall too far outside the mainstream of American thought will be always persecuted, with violence if necessary, to make them conform. With the Mormons, the major flash point was polygamy, and their solution was to move to largely unpopulated Mormon Country and make it flourish, and then to agree to abjure polygamy (though they did not change the theology—the dropping of polygamy was, and is, characterized as prudential, not theological). This should be a lesson for those Dreher-ite conservatives who think that they will be left alone to form communities of virtue, if they continue to oppose the new, non-Christian, religious beliefs of our ruling class. As Stegner says of Orderville, “the fact remained that Orderville existed under the laws of the United States, and in the midst of a society increasingly imitative of the world outside.” Since the Benedict Optionees believe in Christian orthodoxy, and since Christian orthodoxy is today, to the rulers of our Cthulhu State, far worse than Mormon polygamy was to the 1850s, they will not be left alone. For the Mormons, federal officers invaded their towns and homesteads to search for “cohabits”; for Dreher's communities, federal officers will reduce any members to penury, invade to seize and remove children who are being taught the thought crime of Christian orthodoxy, especially in any matter involving supposed sexual autonomy, and, ultimately, take any action necessary to destroy the communities if they seem to be getting wider traction. When, soon enough, it is a crime to think wrongly, as opposed to what it is now, merely a civil disability, the only solution will be more guns and a new Sons of Dan, not just more community and potlucks.