

A Review of Marjorie Newton, *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia*, foreword by Lawrence Foster (xiii-xv). (Laie, HI: Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1991). xxvi+283 pp., with a glossary of Latter-day Saint Terms (257–59), Bibliography (261–71), Index (273–83). Softcover (out of print, but copies are still available).

Abstract: *This is a survey of Marjorie Newton’s account of Latter-day Saints in Australia which identifies the roots of her agenda — that is, what she was striving to accomplish in her first book in 1991 (and the other related essays) which she published before turning her attention to a criticism of the faith of M?ori Latter-day Saints, first in 1998 and then in 2014. Midgley locates in her early publications on the Saints in Australia early signs of her controlling cultural Mormon agenda and hence how and why she insists that there has been a trampling of the M?ori culture by what she considers a Mormon version of American cultural imperialism.*

Until the fall of 1996 I was only barely aware that Marjorie Aileen Burnett Newton¹ had published a book on “The Mormons in Australia.” I was also not aware she was working on a PhD thesis at the University of Sydney on “Mormonism in New Zealand.”² Then I noticed an essay in the *Journal of Mormon History* in which she opined on [Page 144]how Latter-day Saint mission presidents dealt with M?ori customary modes of marriage (and divorce).³ A note on the first page of this essay indicates that “she is currently completing her doctoral dissertation on Mormonism in New Zealand at the University of Sydney.” She finished her thesis in February 1998. In 2014, the substance of her thesis, augmented by some troubling assertions about the Book of Mormon, was published,⁴ two years after her excellent, faith-affirming *Tiki and Temple*⁵ appeared in print.

Keith Thompson, who knows well the Latter-day Saints in both New Zealand and Australia, contrasted Newton’s faith-affirming *Tiki and Temple* with her *Southern Cross Saints*. Her book on “the Mormons in Australia,” he noted, has been “the subject of criticism because some felt that it did not adequately address the faith of the members or the spirit of revelation that guided the work” in Australia.⁶ *Southern Cross Saints* was radically unlike her faith-affirming *Tiki and Temple*.⁷ His observation led me to look into Marjorie Newton’s first book and her other essays on Australian Latter-day Saints.

Publishing and Academic Milestones

Marjorie Newton, born in 1933, began her studies at the University of Sydney in 1967 as “a mature-age student (a very mature-aged student),” she explains.⁸ The most important milestones in her academic career are the following:

- [Page 145]After completing her high school degree by correspondence in 1967, she was awarded, at age 34, what she describes as “a mature-age scholarship” to the University of Sydney, where she began her bachelor’s degree, which was awarded in 1976 when she was 44.
- She then began work on her master’s degree in the history department at the University of Sydney. In 1987, at age 54, she completed this degree.
- *Southern Cross Saints*, which is a revision of her MA honors thesis on Mormons in Australia, was published in 1991 when she was 58.
- In 1988 she began work on a doctorate in the School of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, where she worked on “Mormonism in New Zealand,” which is the title of her PhD thesis.
- In February 1998, she was awarded her PhD at age 65.
- Major revisions of two portions of her PhD thesis were eventually published as two books, the first of which was *Tiki and Temple* in 2012.
- In 2014, at age 81, 16 years after she had completed her PhD, *Mormon and Maori* was published. It is the capstone of her scholarly career.
- Her remarkable publishing career, which began in 1986, includes the following: two theses, three books, one monograph,⁹ and 17 reviews and essays.¹⁰

[Page 146]Newton began writing about the Saints in Australia, then shifted to New Zealand, where her primary focus was on the faith of M?ori Latter-day Saints. However, she soon published six essays setting out her opinions on the Saints in Australia. My commentary will also draw on the contents of these other essays. Instead of merely

setting out my own assessment of *Southern Cross Saints*, I will begin with a summary of two fine reviews of this book. I do this to avoid being seen as reading into *Southern Cross Saints* something that is not there.

Two Expert Opinions

The first review was written by Professor Peter Lineham,¹¹ a gifted New Zealand Church historian.¹² He points out that “in nineteenth century Australia Mormon missionaries struggled desperately, and the Australian side of the Australasian mission was abandoned for a mission to the Maori of New Zealand.”¹³ The reason was that the scant LDS missionary resources were sent where there was an opportunity for the Kingdom of God to prosper. This increasingly was New Zealand, not Australia. Why?

Newton explains that the Australasian Mission, the official name of Latter-day Saint missionary endeavors in Australia, began in 1851 with a limited presence in Australia. There were only a few Saints in this large and diverse land until after World War II. Beginning in 1854, LDS missionary activities also included a periodic presence of a few missionaries in New Zealand. In 1897, the Brethren made these two British dominions separate missions, each with its own Mission president and headquarters. In addition, beginning in 1878 and before this division, the Australasian Mission headquarters were in New Zealand. For instance, William M. Bromley, the Australasian Mission president in 1881-1883 — under whom missionary work among the M?ori began at the very end of 1882, which soon led to a large and an essentially M?ori community of Saints in New Zealand — never visited Australia. The reason for this shift from Australia to New Zealand seems to be that Australia was far more “godless” than New Zealand. In addition, though travel was difficult in New Zealand, this difficulty was minimal when compared with what has been called “tyranny of distance” in Australia.

[Page 147]Lineham also indicates that *Southern Cross Saints* makes a valuable contribution not only to “Mormon historiography but also to Australian religious history.”¹⁴ The key reason is that “she sees the Church in the general context of the *religious tone of her country*” and hence she also interprets the Latter-day Saint “experience in Australia as compatible to that of other churches and its struggles as a by-product of *Australian godlessness*.”¹⁵ Lineham’s astute observation seems to me to be a fine summary of Newton’s stance. But the problem, also according to Lineham, is that her tentative explanation “does not really explain the contemporary growth” of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Australia after World War II,¹⁶ since Australia seems to have become even more and not less godless.

Again, according to Lineham, “Newton prefers to emphasize the *American character of the church* as what made it different, and her section on Australian Mormons’ frustrations with this must be read for sheer enjoyment.”¹⁷ Lineham senses that Newton is annoyed by the American features she detects and deeply resents in her own community of faith. She is not fond of America (or Americans). She may like individual Americans, but she resents American influence in Australia. Put more bluntly, Lineham identifies Newton’s hostility to what she sees as an LDS version of a variety of American cultural imperialism.

Rapid growth in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Australia has taken place during Newton’s adult lifetime. Lineham insists that she fails to explain why American Latter-day Saint missionary endeavors in Australia soon after World War II led to many among the presumably worldly, skeptical, often unchurched Australians becoming faithful Latter-day Saints. The reason seems to be that in *Southern Cross Saints*, there is little about the actual faith and memory of Australian Saints. Instead, Newton has much to say about “cultural conflict.” In addition, from my perspective, she overlooks the impact of the message on those willing to listen and accept a message taught only incidentally by American Latter-day Saint missionaries. In my own experience, the Good News about the victory over both spiritual and mortal death has a *transcultural* power and appeal. She does not ask how this happens, very often despite vast cultural differences between peoples.

[Page 148]In his review of *Southern Cross Saints*, Geoffrey F. Spencer¹⁸ indicates that he believes that Newton sets out some sound reasons why there had been so few Australians becoming Latter-day Saints until “the early 1950s,” when in the next 40 years the LDS membership in Australia grew from 2,000 to 76,000.¹⁹ (The number of Latter-day Saints in Australia may now have even doubled.)

The reasons Newton sets out for the earlier, very slow growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Australia during its first hundred years, according to Spencer, include the fact that “Church authorities in Utah simply failed to understand the formidable barriers to proselyting, supervision, and communication in a land mass approximately the size of mainland U.S.A.,” whose urban areas are scattered mostly along or near the rim of this vast, mostly empty continent. Even if they had understood these sorts of things, the Brethren were under restraints that would have rendered such a comprehension null, given the resources available and also the situation in Australia.

Also, again according to Spencer, Newton identifies several special “cultural factors”²⁰ that hampered Church growth in Australia until, of course, the very rapid growth beginning shortly after World War II. These include “not so much domestic influences as to policies and attitudes emanating from Utah” but also events in the United States as well as large events in the world. In addition, “New Zealand was more generously equipped than its sister dominion” by the Brethren in Salt Lake City.²¹ The reason, of course, was the remarkable openness of the M?ori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, who after 1882 soon made the Church primarily a M?ori community of Saints.

Spencer also draws from Newton’s book the claim that American Latter-day Saints were indifferent to “Australia’s peculiar culture and [Page 149]history.” For instance, they insisted on “standardized materials and programs,” which they imposed in Australia.²² Both Lineham and Spencer call attention to Newton’s concern over this sort of essentially true but trivial thing, which clearly irritates Newton. For Newton, the story of the Church in Australia is of an American lack of interest in or indifference to what she sees as important elements of Australian “national culture.”

Seeking to Understand Newton’s Agenda

Although I have tried to figure out what might have generated Marjorie Newton’s concern about “cultural conflict,” I have found no evidence that those who lectured in the history department at the University of Sydney, including Professor J. K. (John Kenneth) Cable (1929-2003), who supervised her master’s thesis, generated her concerns that became the key element in her publishing agenda. Professor Cable, though not familiar with the history of Latter-day Saints, was a faithful Anglican and also an expert on the Anglican history in Australia. He was also the only one in the history department with any interest in sectarian church history or even “religion.” In addition, no one in the history department at the University of Sydney was interested in the faith of Latter-day Saints or familiar with the unique and interesting history of Latter-day Saints in Australia. Professor Cable could, and I assume did, provide Newton with assistance on archival and other research. *Southern Cross Saints* is clearly the work of someone who has learned well this part of the historian’s craft.

In Australian as well as American universities, students research and then write on topics about which no one in a department is interested or at all knowledgeable. And students can also get caught in partisan ideological struggles between faculty members. For quality control, Australian universities require an “expert” from outside of Australia to approve to disapprove a master’s thesis.²³ With no one in that history department with “any experience in Mormon history,” the burden for approving Newton’s thesis was shifted to Lawrence (Larry) Foster, an American historian and well-known critic of the faith of Latter-day Saints, to assess and approve Newton’s “Southern Cross Saints.” He later provided the “Forward” to her *Southern Cross Saints*. (For the same reason, a PhD thesis in Australia is routinely examined by three scholars from outside of Australia who are, it is hoped, experts on the topic. The author of a thesis may even have a say in the selection of these outside examiners.)

[Page 150]After *Southern Cross Saints* appeared in print, Newton indicates that Professor Cable encouraged her “to proceed to a doctorate but not in Mormon history. This was because,” she explains, “no one in the history department at Sydney University at that time had any expertise in Mormon history.”²⁴ Professor Cable was unwilling to supervise a PhD thesis by Newton on a Mormon topic. Perhaps this was because Cable was not willing to rely on three outside “experts” picked by her to assess the quality of her work. Be that as it may, she grants that at this point she had “virtually given up the idea of a doctorate.”²⁵

Then something happened: Professor Eric J. Sharpe (1933-2000) agreed to supervise Newton’s PhD thesis (on the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New Zealand) if she shifted from the history department to religious studies. Professor Sharpe was the inaugural professor of religious studies in the School of Religious Studies, which he founded in 1977.²⁶

It seems that at some point, Professor Sharpe,²⁷ having read Newton’s master’s thesis, “offered to supervise” her PhD thesis, even though he was not familiar with Mormon history or the history of New Zealand. She claims that Sharpe saved her academic career; without his “interest and encouragement, not only would my thesis not have been completed, [Page 151]it would not have been begun.” There is, however, very little or no indication that Professor Sharpe contributed substantively to Newton’s thesis.²⁸ And her secular agenda was in place prior to having him direct her PhD thesis. Instead, it seems that her own dogged determination over three decades of studies, driven by a passion to publish her opinions about the faith of M?ori Saints, led to the publication of the capstone of her academic career, *Mormon and Maori*.

In addition, she has the disposition and training necessary to do original archival research. *Southern Cross Saints* is thus packed with an impressive assortment of details flowing from extensive and careful research. It is not, however, a chronological, narrative account, nor is it merely the story of Latter-day Saint missionary work in Australia. Rather it is a complex, thematic, topical treatment of “The Mormon Church in Australia.” She does not focus on the contents of the faith of the very few Australians who became Latter-day Saints in Australia beginning in the 1850s, when the first tiny missionary endeavors began, nor on the grounds or contents, after World War II, of the faith of new converts, when the Australian community of Saints began to grow rapidly.

In her *Southern Cross Saints*, Newton seeks to explain the very rapid growth of an American religion after World War II in a land where, as she puts it, “working class people” are largely indifferent to faith in God. Why the indifference? In his justly famous *Democracy in America*,²⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville showed the importance for the future mores of America of an initial “Puritan founding” (which preceded the later “Republican founding”), which set in place an *ethos* that in subtle ways is still present among Americans. Australia had a far different founding, including prison ships from England³⁰ then gold seekers and others not linked to churches. Australia was mostly initially colonized by those who were often unchurched, whose descendants are now often apathetic about, if not hostile to, faith in God.³¹

[Page 152]In contrast, New Zealand was largely colonized by devout religious communities, whose impact is still present despite the growing secularization taking place. Where the Latter-day Saint missionaries, who first began visiting New Zealand in 1854, faced considerable sectarian religious bigotry (and hence also closely related legal restrictions), Church missionaries for a hundred years in Australia faced mostly apathy and indifference. Then, shortly after World War II, what Newton tends to picture as an alien American faith became attractive to some Australians.

Missing the Mark

Marjorie Newton’s lack of interest in the reasons for the faith of the Latter day Saints in Australia seems to me to be intentional. Why? She indicates that non-Latter-day Saint scholars are busy trying to figure out the nature of the strange Mormon movement and its strained relationship with its many host cultures. Even though she is Latter-day Saint, she has chosen to follow those who claim they are not interested in the question of the truth (or untruth) of that faith.³² Marjorie Newton’s own understanding of the faith of the Saints manifests indifference to truth questions. An indifference to truth-claims prevents or hampers understanding what believers find soul-satisfying. It is a mistake to follow non-Latter-day Saint scholars who claim they merely examine what they consider cultural influences or challenges generated by shifts in public opinion among those who are not Latter-day Saints.

After the publication of *Southern Cross Saints*, Newton found several venues in which she opined about the Church in Australia, which for a century had been tiny communities of Saints scattered around a vast continent. Then, soon after World War II, this changed, and the Australian community of Latter-day Saints grew rapidly. It seems this happened despite its being, from Newton’s perspective, an alien American cultural imposition on Australian

“national culture.”³³ [_](#)

I am confident the faith of the Latter-day Saint, when taken seriously, does not challenge the noble but the base elements found in every human culture. This began as part of the history of Christian faith from the moment the first disciples of Jesus sought to take the Good News to the world.³⁴ Does Newton believe, I wonder, that we are merely witnessing [Page 153]American cultural imperialism as the Church gains a foothold and then becomes a faithful community of Latter-day Saints in a host of locations not limited to Latin America, the Philippines, islands in the South Pacific, sub-Saharan Africa, and even in the United States of America?

Perhaps this is what she believes. Why? In the “preface” to *Southern Cross Saints* she claims that “since World War II, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the Mormon Church) has expanded enormously, not only numerically but also, if many acute observers are to be believed, in wealth, power, political influence, and social prestige.”³⁵ [_](#)

The LDS Church exerts political power in both the United States and in Central and South America far out of proportion to its numerical strength. Moreover, the Mormon Church has once again come under the intense public scrutiny as its increasing visibility has brought criticism and even legal challenges to some of its practices and doctrines for the first time since the anti-polygamy campaign of the nineteenth century.³⁶ [_](#)

Again, according to Newton, having previously survived certain challenges,

the Church is facing pressure from another source, because women are not eligible for ordination to the priesthood. Thus, at present, Mormonism is receiving a considerable degree of attention from not only investigative journalists, but also from sociologists, cultural anthropologists, political scientists and historians.³⁷ [_](#)

Given this new critical “attention,” she asks: “Why has an American church experienced such growth in Australia?”³⁸ [_](#)

Without really addressing the grounds and contents of the faith of Australian Latter-day Saints, though describing, for example, how some lesson materials were not well-suited for Australia, which Professor Lineham found amusing, coupled with her annoyance that direction comes from Salt Lake City, she struggles and fails to explain how — what she pictures as a strange, marginal, controversial American religious movement, which struggled and even languished for a century — soon after World War II managed to become, especially in worldly Australia, a [Page 154]thriving community of faithful Latter-day Saints. Professor Thompson was right about Newton’s *Southern Cross Saints*. Unfortunately, her *Mormon and Maori* has far more serious flaws, as I will demonstrate elsewhere.

[1.](#) This is the name under which the Church History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah, catalogues her publications.

[2.](#) Newton, “Mormonism in New Zealand: A Historical Appraisal,” PhD thesis, History Department, University of Sydney, 1998.

[3.](#) Newton, “From Tolerance to ‘House Cleaning’: LDS Leadership Response to Maori Marriage Customs,

1890-1990,” *Journal of Mormon History* 22/2 (Fall 1996): 72–91.

4. Newton, *Mormon and Maori* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).

5. Newton, *Tiki and Temple: The Mormon Mission in New Zealand, 1854 1958* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012).

6. A. Keith Thompson, review of Newton’s *Tiki and Temple*, *BYU Studies* 52/2 (Fall 2013): 186–90. Professor Thompson is currently associate professor and associate dean at the University of Notre Dame Australia School of Law, Sydney, Australia. For his vitae, see <http://www.nd.edu.au/sydney/schools/law/staff/kthompson>. See also <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/author/keitht/>.

7. For my own affirmative assessment of Newton’s *Tiki and Temple*, see *Journal of Mormon History* 40/1 (2014): 253–56; and also my essay “M?ori Latter day Saint Faith: Some Preliminary Remarks,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 45–65.

8. See “Q&A with Marjorie Newton, author of *Mormon and Maori*” (Greg Kofford Books, May 12, 2014), available without pagination at <http://gregkofford.com/blogs/news/14114933-q-a-with-marjorie-newton-author-of-em-mormon-and-maori-em>, accessed on 25 November 2016. This interview consists of eight brief questions to which she has provided answers. (I have numbered the questions to facilitate location of the language cited; hereafter cited as “Q&A with Marjorie Newton”). Some information useful in establishing a timeline for Newton’s studies can be found in “Australian Author Receives Award for ‘Mormon and Maori,’” available at <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org.nz/article/australian-author-receives-award-for-mormon-and-maori>.

9. *Hero or Traitor: A Biographical Study of Charles Wesley Wandell* (Independence, MO: Independence Press, 1992). This 104-page monograph is a biography of Wandell (1819-1875), who was born in Courtland, NY, and became a Latter-day Saint on 5 January 1837. He completed a Latter-day Saint mission to Australia, where his missionary companion was John Murdock. Wandell ceased being a Latter-day Saint in 1864 and later joined the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, for whom he was a missionary in Australia.

10. See Newton’s “‘Almost Like Us’: The American Socialization of Australian Converts,” *Dialogue* 24/3 (1991): 9–20; “An Australian Viewpoint,” *Dialogue* 24/4 (1991): 74–78; and “Towards 2000: Mormonism in Australia,” *Dialogue* 29/1 (1996): 193–206.

11. Peter Lineham, review of Marjorie Newton’s *Southern Cross Saints*, in *Pacific Studies* 16/1 (March 1993): 125–26. Hereafter cited as Lineham.

12. For Professor Lineham’s “Research Outputs,” see <http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/expertise/profile.cfm?stref=641100>, for evidence of Professor Lineham’s impressive publishing career.

13. Lineham, 125.

14. Ibid.

[15.](#) Ibid., emphasis added.

[16.](#) Ibid.

[17.](#) Ibid., 126.

[18.](#) Geoffrey F. Spencer (1927-2005) was born and raised in Australia and was educated at the University of Sydney. He first taught high school in 1949-1953, then was employed in 1954 as a pastor by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Australia; then, beginning in 1966, also a pastor in Independence, Missouri. He was an Apostle for the RLDS (1984-1994), and then the president of the quorum of their Twelve Apostles (1990-1994). For details, see the obituary for Geoffrey F. Spencer at <http://www.speakschapel.com/book-of-memories/102057/Spencer-Geoffrey-F/obituary.php>.

[19.](#) See Geoffrey F. Spencer, review of Newton’s *Southern Cross Saints*, *Journal of Mormon History*, 19/1 (1993): 190–94 at 191. Hereafter cited as Spencer with page number(s).

[20.](#) Ibid., 191.

[21.](#) Ibid., 192.

[22.](#) Ibid.

[23.](#) For the PhD, three “experts” from outside Australia are paid to evaluate a thesis.

[24.](#) This is a quote from Newton’s second answer to “Q&A with Marjorie Newton,” author of *Mormon and Maori* May 12, 2014.” This can be accessed online at <http://gregkofford.com/blogs/news/14114933-q-a-with-marjorinewton-author-of-em-mormon-and-maori-em>. This interview consists of eight brief, unnumbered questions to which she has provided answers. I cite this as “Q&A with Marjorie Newton.”

[25.](#) “Q&A with Marjorie Newton,” question #2.

[26.](#) Newton quotes Professor Sharpe from an address titled “Manning Clark Revisited,” read on 22 August 1993 on the Australian Broadcasting Commission Radio in her *Mormon and Maori*, 112; and see also what is cited under Professor Sharpe’s name in her “Bibliography” to *Mormon and Maori*, 208. (This talk is on a controversial Australian historian.) She also cites the notes she made on a conversation she had in May 1996 with Professor Sharpe. He seems to have merely urged her to follow her agenda.

[27.](#) Newton has described Professor Sharpe as a “missiologist.” See “Q&A with Marjorie Newton,” question #2. However, this label does not capture the contents of his many books and essays. Instead, *religious studies*, as Sharpe conceived it, included “world religions,” such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, understood with presumably neutral explanations and through the lens of secular categories, with only incidental attention to Christian missionary endeavors. For details about Sharpe’s academic career, see the Wikipedia entry on “Eric J. Sharpe,” at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_J._Sharpe.

[28.](#) “Q&A with Marjorie Newton,” question #2.

[29.](#) For a truly remarkable translation of *Democracy in America*, and also a fine introduction to this book, see the translation by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2000.

[30.](#) See Robert Hughes’s best-selling *The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia’s Founding* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). (This remarkable book is available in paperback from Vintage Book, 1988.) The second wave of colonists were often gold diggers eager for instant wealth and often indifferent to things divine.

[31.](#) See Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 69-76, for her interesting treatment of “Religious Apathy” among Australians.”

[32.](#) Ibid., preface, xvii-xxii at xix.

[33.](#) See the three essays Newton published in *Dialogue*, cited in note 10, above.

[34.](#) What could be the greatest mass conversion to Christianity began to take place in China when Mao began terrible persecution. For a brief review of some of the literature on this remarkable change that has taken place despite or because of terrible persecution of Christians, see Midgley, “Christian Faith in Contemporary China,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 35–39.

[35.](#) *Southern Cross Saints*, xvii.

[36.](#) Ibid.

[37.](#) Ibid., preface, xvii.

[38.](#) Ibid.