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Bernard DeVoto's ‘Utah’

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"I had gone to a reception at the home of a Harvard professor. I was vouched for by a youth ancestrally near to the Cabots and Lowells. Later in the evening our hostess, on her rounds among the freshmen, casually asked me where I came from—and three centuries of Boston Kultur kept her face expressionless at my answer.

'Thereafter she was at pains to be kind to me, visibly shielding me from the severities of Brattle street, Cambridge. But as I left, amazement triumphed. 'So people really live in Utah!' she exclaimed.

I could see pity in her eyes—and, also, apprehension. And no wonder, for she heard a noise at the gates of Harvard, yes, at the Johnstone gate itself—the bridles and scabbards of the Goths.

'But how?' she asked.'

For those of us who have lived outside the state of Utah, this exchange may seem familiar. For those who haven't, it may sound like Mark Twain poking fun at Utahns again. But reading on, you'd soon recognize that Twain was more urbane and playful in his parodies, and that the unfolding explanation of how Utahns "really live" is as subtle as a skinning knife. Further into this narrative about life in Utah you'd discern that the writer could only be a Utahn, then probably an Ogdenite, and feel comforted in the knowledge (like Salt Lakers always have) that this fact of birth explains all. And in a way it does. The writer is Bernard DeVoto, and the essay is titled simply "Utah."

Bernard Augustine DeVoto (1897-1955) was born an apostate, son of a lapsed Catholic father and backsliding Mormon mother, in Ogden. Shunned and ridiculed as a child for his appearance, intelligence, and religious indifference, DeVoto grew a caustic outer shell to protect a fragile psyche. Entering the University of Utah in 1914, he witnessed a series of faculty firings and subsequent resignations protesting the Mormon Church's manipulation of the university. Too bright for his peers, DeVoto left to study English at Harvard, graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1920.

After teaching stints at Northwestern and Harvard, DeVoto pursued a distinguished career as essayist, novelist, historian, lecturer, editor, and cultural commentator. During his life he published ten novels, four books of literary criticism, four works of collected essays, and a trilogy of prize-winning histories on the American West. *Across the Wide Missouri* earned him a Pulitzer and Bancroft prize in 1948, and *The Course of Empire* won the National Book Award for history in 1953. DeVoto edited two dozen works including the journals of Lewis and Clark and Mark Twain's papers. He published more than eight hundred essays, some while editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature* (1936-38) and many more under his monthly "Easy Chair" column as the very powerful editor of *Harper's* magazine (1935-56). The National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and
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Bernard DeVoto is arguably one of Utah's greatest writers, still acclaimed nationally by both historians and literary critics. Yet he is virtually unrecognized in the state—and especially in the city—of his birth. Why? Because of his writing, three pieces in particular—youthful parting shots at a society that already scorned him.

The first shot, DeVoto's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Crooked Mile* (1924), tells the story of a bright Harvard graduate buried in a provincial western town that had lost its frontier romance, degenerated, and become sadly commonplace. The next year, DeVoto's "Ogden: The Underwriters of Salvation" appeared in Duncan Aikman's *The Taming of the Frontier*. Stripped of the pretext of fiction, this essay was an attack on Ogden's provincialism, intended to enlighten historically and wound contemporarily. It succeeded at both, and horrified Ogdenites howled at the public ridicule. The sting might have faded had DeVoto's writing not captured the attention of H. L. Mencken, America's most punishing social and literary critic. The essay lived up to Mencken's standards of startling invective and irreverence, particularly toward the self-righteous. Encouraged by Mencken, DeVoto lifted his sights from Ogden to Utah as a whole and distilled the essence of his commentaries into a powerful new essay.

"Utah," published in Mencken's *American Mercury* magazine in March 1926, was DeVoto's answer to his fictitious hostess's question about life in Utah. They lived well, he said, in a rude frontier sort of way until 1906 when the U.S. Senate voted to seat Mormon Apostle Reed Smoot, ending "one of history's most hilarious wars, the sixty years' strife between the Mormon and the Gentile." Mormons were rehabilitated and vindicated, monotony descended, and "since then the State has never enjoyed itself."

DeVoto takes the reader on a whirlwind tour of Utah history: from Dominguez and Escalante ("One wishes that the Spaniards had lingered somewhere in that vast expanse of mountain and desert"), to the courageous and skilled fur trapper ("a nervous system only a little
more sensitive than that of a goat”), to the Mormons (“Pious cowherds who believed themselves capable of summoning angels to converse with them”) who killed whatever frontier poetry the previous groups bestowed on the landscape. Seeking isolation, the Mormons plunked themselves in the overland path of progress and fought it out with Forty-niners, the railroad, miners, and anything resembling culture until a “first-rate religious war” arose amid “crescendos of bitterness and farce.” On the one hand were Mormons, “staid peasants whose only distinguishing characteristics were their servility to their leaders and their belief in a low-comedy God.” On the other were Gentiles, “less fanatical than the Mormons and less ignorant,” but also “less robust,” the “unfit of the frontier” who had “given out at the first oasis—and then stayed there.”

“For sixty years,” DeVoto continued, “their warfare made the State a matrix of living color,” catching the attention of Christians and Congressmen (“prurient fools, the worst injustice the Mormon heresy has had to bear,” as DeVoto memorably described them) who titillated their audiences with tales of Mormon murders and polygamy. In came the army and federal officials to ride herd on the Mormon rabble, but in opposing Brigham Young “they were child-like and innocent.” Young’s words rained down on them like artillery from the Tabernacle. “The curses of God, most dreadful, and the wit of a giant joker, most obscene, took off their hide in patches. The Gentiles fumed and threatened, but Brigham ruled and ridiculed.”

“All this,” wrote DeVoto, “Brigham died. Pygmies succeeded him, and the Gentiles entered a bull market.” Congress investigated and reformers wailed as they “stared with horror at these monsters of bigotry and licentiousness.” Gentile fought Mormon until the church outlawed polygamy, the nation granted Utah statehood, and the Senate rewrote history and seated Smoot. As the “old generation of inflexible haters and rigid doctrinaires, who had seen Joseph [Smith] in the flesh, began to die off,” Mormons began “to set profit above principle,” and joined the Gentiles in an “era of Good Feeling for the Sake of Business.”

You might think DeVoto had already said enough to get himself lynched in Utah, but the state’s history was only the prolegomena to the real point of his essay. He continued, from a state peopled by “ruddy, illiterate, herd-minded folk,” a state where “the very process of survival demanded a rigorous suppression of individuality, impracticability, skepticism, and all other qualities of intelligence,” Utah became something worse—BORING.

“How am I to suggest the utter mediocrity of life in the new Utah?” asked DeVoto. “How can I suggest its poverty in everything that makes for civilization?” No art, sculpture, or architecture, no novelist, poet, or educator noteworthy enough to be recognized outside Utah. Those with any real potential were driven out or left as soon as they could.

“But the people?” They, wrote DeVoto, are “normal”: a “commonwealth of greengrocers who have lifted themselves from the peasantry”; a society of farmers no different from those in Indiana, Iowa, or Nebraska, except “a little absurd in their belief that Jesus was inferior to Joseph Smith”; a gentry “newly developed in the Babylons of Ogden and Salt Lake City” that “lead the most swinish life now discernible in the United States.” Utahns, unfortunately, became “civilized.” They talk only of “the Prophet, hogs, and Fords.”
Ancient stone tools, ritual objects and shapes from nature provide the inspiration for Larry Halvorsen's rattles, vases and bowls.

While they continue to profess their "peculiarity," they are sadly, boringly, predictably NORMAL.

"How do people live in Utah?"
DeVoto concluded. "They join the businessmen's calisthenics class at the gymnasium. Or they buy Fords on the five-dollar-a-week basis. Or they yawn. Or they die."

As a freshman at the University of Utah in 1926, Wallace Stegner recalled walking past a history professor's door as a copy of the American Mercury came flying out and down the hall. Stegner recognized the exaggeration of DeVoto's rhetoric, but was swept up in its "happy vehemence." "If he got a few innocent bystanders," wrote Stegner, "I was willing to sacrifice them for the pleasure of looking at the more deserving corpses." DeVoto's "Utah," in Stegner's words, "marked DeVoto as Utah Enemy Number One, the contemporary avatar of all the Missouri Pukes and Illinois mobbers who had attained immortality in the Mormon memory for their persecution of the Saints."

Bernard DeVoto publicly roasted Utah as only a native could, skewering his victims between fact and overstatement with a sense of humor they so utterly lacked. DeVoto himself never thought much of this essay. Years later he offered an apology of sorts, surprised that anyone still cared. But they did. Even though few ever read the offending works. It was not what he said that got him into trouble, it was how and where he said it.

Indignant as only those with a well-developed persecution complex can be, Utahns missed, and have since missed, the point of his critique. DeVoto's lament—that Utah had joined the rest of the nation in its conspicuous consumption and cultural conservatism, its praise of Republicans and Big Business, its small town mediocrity, and unabashed boosterism—was part of a larger critique of American society voiced by one of our greatest generations of writers. Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos,
Malcolm Cowley, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Ezra Pound, and Mencken himself were among the literary vanguard of this cultural rebellion. DeVoto joined the rebels, but in later years turned his critical eye and opinionated wrath on them as well. Certainly, DeVoto leveled his sights on Utah specifically and his confrontational language made the commentary personal, but the context of his critique was national—the boring "normalcy" of a nation being pulled, kicking and screaming, into the modern world.

In 1926, Utahns decided they didn't want to hear what Bernard DeVoto had to say so they stopped listening, proving him right. Their insecurity and desire to be like the rest of the nation after standing in opposition to it for generations robbed them of perspective and humor, marking their immaturity. In the long run Utahns let some "adolescent yawp" (as Stegner called the essay) deprive them of their connection with one of the keener minds of that generation. Granted, DeVoto was not easy to love. He was always on the attack, serving a healthy dose of criticism to those flaunting the most obvious faults. But he became the major interpreter of Utah for the larger American public during his lifetime, and in later years he wrote some very balanced, even poignant accounts of the Mormon experience.

Like him or not, there is a power and clarity in DeVoto's lifetime of writing, even in his take on Utah, that historians find compelling and that Utahns should acknowledge. Although individuals who reinforce our sense of self-satisfaction are easier to embrace, they are historically less significant than those who challenge us, who raise the level of discourse, forcing us to confront our very human past and present, even to laugh at ourselves. This is Bernard DeVoto, and this is his legacy to Utah and the nation.