



Journal of the Mormon Social Science Association

Caroline Kline. 2024. Review of *Irish Mormons: Reconciling Identity in Global Mormonism* by Hazel O'Brien. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023. *Journal of the Mormon Social Science Association* 2, no. 2: 119–121. <https://doi.org/10.54587/JMSSA.0206>

Book Review

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Irish Mormons: Reconciling Identity in Global Mormonism by Hazel O'Brien. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023. 216 pages. \$110 cloth, \$26 paper, \$19.95 ebook

During the past three decades, Ireland has experienced rapid societal shifts, with Irish Catholicism declining, an increasingly powerful and globalized economy, an influx of immigration, and social liberalization. It is in this fascinating context of social change that Hazel O'Brien examines two communities of Mormons in contemporary Ireland and the ways these adherents navigate their lives on the margins of both Ireland's religious landscape and of Mormonism.

Using participant observation and interviews, O'Brien gives readers an intriguing vision of LDS congregational life on the peripheries of the tradition. Her many months of attendance at Sunday meetings and weekday events, as well as the thirty interviews she conducted, provide a window into the challenges and joys of choosing Mormonism in a land so deeply tied to Catholicism. O'Brien nicely incorporates her presence into the research, clearly explaining the context of conversations she highlights as well as her experiences as a participant observer. I appreciate how open she was about her positionality as an atheist White Irish researcher and the ways her social location affected the stories she was able to collect. (She mentions, for instance, having more rapport with the White Irish congregants than the South Asian ones in one congregation.)

The first two chapters of the book serve as useful and relevant literature reviews. Topics include Ireland's past and present relationship to religion, the rapid changes of Irish society toward secularization, and Irish cultural iden-

tity with its ties to Catholicism. She writes, “Conversion to another faith is perceived by the Irish as a rejection of Irishness itself” (42–43), a reality that many Irish Latter-day Saints must find ways to navigate. Additionally, O’Brien usefully delves into the literature on the culture of Whiteness in Mormonism, thus setting the stage for discussions in later chapters on Mormons’ navigations regarding race and culture in Ireland and in their church. A culture of Whiteness pervades Mormonism, O’Brien notes, even as Ireland’s Mormon community “shows greater levels of diversity than the majority society it resides within” (65).

The remaining four ethnographic chapters focus on the experiences, thoughts, and choices of Mormons in Ireland. The book comes alive at this point, as O’Brien’s excerpts from interviews and close descriptions of the two congregations she attended for several months—one more established, one less—leap off the page. She tackles a variety of issues and challenges Mormons in Ireland face, including family formation—it’s difficult to find an LDS partner since, as one young Irish Mormon told O’Brien, “There are not enough men” (110)—and stigmatization, since conversion to Mormonism “is viewed as a breach of Irish social norms and values” (77). She details strategies Mormons use to cope with this marginalization, most notably choosing to be quiet about their religion unless directly asked. She writes, “Mormons in Ireland engage in a complex and nuanced system of strategic revealing and concealing of their religious identities” (85). She also makes an insightful point regarding family formation—that Mormonism’s emphasis on temple marriages actually serves to weaken Irish Mormon families, as young people often have to leave the community in order to find a spouse in another country. For those that stay, some find non-Mormon spouses and then are faced with guilt, shame, and disappointment for not living up to the proclaimed Mormon ideal.

Particularly vibrant was O’Brien’s description of a St. Patrick’s Day celebration in the smaller congregation in which ethnic and racial tensions undergird congregational life. She describes how congregants—most immigrants—came together and worked to bridge distances with one another at this party through shamrock face-painting, Irish culture-themed bingo, green clothing, traditional Irish food, and singing the national anthem in Irish. O’Brien insightfully points out that “Mormons in Ireland can utilize Irishness to create a sense of belonging despite their minority status” (133).

O’Brien notes that while Irish Mormons experience a disconnect with Irish society at large due to their minority religion, they might also feel a certain amount of disconnect with the predominant church culture, which many

Irish Mormons believe “centers a White, wealthy, and North American worldview” (137). The church’s emphasis on a global gospel culture might create a sense of safety and unity for non-Irish members in Ireland, but it falls flat for some Irish, as they perceive too many Americanisms pervading it. Some Irish Mormons, for example, would prefer less emphasis on nineteenth-century pioneers in America, including commemorations of the trek to Utah on Pioneer Day, since dressing up in pioneer garb can feel like an impingement on their Irish identity.

O’Brien closes the book with final thoughts for anyone who cares about the future of the tradition, suggesting that global Mormons’ experiences within the religion could be improved—and shame due to part-member families decreased—if “Church culture was more representative of lived experience” (167). Regarding Ireland in particular, she hypothesizes that “greater privatization of Mormon faith there is likely, and efforts will be needed in the Church to acknowledge this and to support adherents about the realities of their religious experiences, which involves marginalization and stigmatization” (171). She also suggests that the “peculiar people” narrative is not helpful for Irish Mormons as it separates people from their society and isolates them from friends and families. This is particularly problematic for Irish Mormons since they don’t have access to robust LDS social activities and circles to counteract that societal disconnect. O’Brien ends with the wise suggestion that the Church ensure that missionaries receive training on the cultures and history of the countries they serve in.

O’Brien offers many insightful comments throughout the book. She smoothly interacts with relevant literature and is a master at explicating quotes from her subjects and connecting them to larger themes, theories, and issues surrounding global religion and identity. I did not detect one particular overarching argument that creates a throughline in her chapters, but this does not take away from the importance of this work, which sheds important light on the tensions, benefits, and realities of Mormon experience and identity on the peripheries of the tradition.

This book will primarily be of interest to people invested in the fields of Mormon studies and global religion. O’Brien does a fine job introducing Mormonism to her readers, so the book is accessible to those with little background in the religion. Ultimately, this book stands as a vibrant ethnographic examination of Mormonism in a global context and will serve as a productive model for future examinations of global Mormonism.