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EDITORIAL

David M. Morris

Editor

Once again, it is with great pleasure that we publish another issue of the *International Journal of Mormon Studies (IJMS)*. This issue brings together a combination of scholars from different parts of the world and academic disciplines. Drawn from Mormon and non-Mormon perspectives, the articles found herein provide interesting insights to Mormonism globally, encouraging further attention and examination. Following on from the successful *European Mormon Studies Association (EMSA)* conference in Tilburg, The Netherlands (2010), we publish a number of the papers that were presented during that conference, as well as publishing direct submissions. These include papers from Walter E. A. van Beek, Eric R. Dursteler, Terryl L. Givens, Bryan R. Monte, Matthew L. Rasmussen and Peter Vousden. Accompanying these articles is a number of reviewed books, including those of non-English publication, which supports the expanding international dimension of Mormon Studies.

We, as always, extend our appreciation to those who took time to blind peer-review articles that have been submitted for publication. We hope as an editorial board that you will enjoy the contents of this issue.

REVIEW – IN THE WHIRLPOOL

Reviewed by Carter Charles

Reid L. Neilson, *In the Whirlpool: The Pre-manifesto Letters of President Wilford Woodruff to the William Atkin Family, 1885–1890*. Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clark, 2011. Hardback: \$29.99.

In the Whirlpool is a surprising book which provides readers with an intimate examination of a top Mormon hierarch, Wilford Woodruff, as the LDS Church battled with the rest of the United States between 1885 and 1890. The title is quoted from Wilford Woodruff's sentiment of being drawn into the conflict which channelled most of his energy (156, 165). The book is composed of a selection of forty-six letters written by Woodruff during the period,¹ and three introductory essays. The first essay is authored by Reid Neilson, the book's editor, the second and third essays are by Thomas Alexander and Jan Shipp, respectively. Although Alexander and Shipp's essays have been in print for a decade (1991) or more (1984), and some may label them as "déjà vu", but just like Neilson's they help contextualize geographically, socially and historically Wilford Woodruff's correspondence to a Mormon family, the Atkins.² The Atkins family sheltered Woodruff and other prominent leaders of the LDS Church during their exiles and "underground" lives to escape America's post-bellum "reign of Judicial

¹ The Correspondence, as published, begins on the first half of December 1885 and ends with the 1890 Manifesto. There are 2 letters for the opening year, none for 1886, 12 for 1887, 16 for 1888, and 10 for 1889 and 1890, respectively.

² Neilson mentions a total of fifty-nine letters from Woodruff to the Atkins. Woodruff writes several times about letters received from them (130, 140, 156, etc.), meaning that there was a real back and forth and durable correspondence between him and the family. Regrettably though, "neither Atkins nor Woodruff descendants have been able to locate the correspondence from the Atkins to Woodruff" (127, footnote 3).

Terror” to “civilize” the Mormons and eliminate polygamy, prior to granting Utah statehood.

Besides the letters, the contributors’ credentials make the book quite appealing. Its author and editor, Reid Neilson, is both “an Atkin descendant” and “a professional historian” (21) who works as the Managing Director of the LDS Church’s History Department (back of book flap), which certainly facilitated his access to original sources (20). Thomas Alexander, “Woodruff’s biographer” (23), and Jan Shippo are both experts on Mormonism and emeriti professors of Western American History, for the former, and of History and Religious Studies, for the latter.

The book’s format somehow reminds me of my undergraduate and graduate years when I had to read Shakespearian plays in which the introductory essays represented half or more of the book. Back then I wanted to go straight to the subject matter, the play, and be done with it. But each time I realized that it would have been a waste of time to go to the play without the keys to decipher the play, to place it in its socio-political and historical contexts. Of course, *In the Whirlpool* is far from being a Shakespearian text, but readers not familiar with the particulars of Mormon political history in Utah in the period covered in the book—and even those who are to a certain extent—will find it meaningful to refer to the various essays to make sense of some issues that Woodruff hints at in his letters.

Rather than a thesis statement, Neilson declares that the purpose of the book is “to provide fellow scholars with insightful contextualization and accurate transcriptions of the Woodruff correspondence” and “to make the letters as accessible as possible to Woodruff and Atkin offspring...” (21). He meticulously explains his editorial methods and the process leading to his choices from the transcription of Woodruff’s handwritten letters (22) to the minute, detailing aspects such as punctuation and items “silenced” (24).

Scholars will always find a way to draw something out of the book, but the second part of its target readership, Woodruffs, Atkins and kin, may make it a little “too Mormon” in its approach and form for a readership beyond Mormondom. This is particularly true in aspects in which Nielson may take direct responsibility as an author and an editor. “President Wilford Woodruff” in the subtitle is something that carries meaning only to Mormons and specialized academia. Otherwise, the average and uninformed reader who may ever come across

the book in a library may rightly wonder whether America has had a “President” named Wilford Woodruff. Or maybe was that a way of making the book “less Mormon”? If yes, the result is paradoxical indeed.

Beyond the title, those familiar with Mormonism’s teaching material may readily identify part of Neilson’s essay with a priesthood or Church Educational System (CES) textbook. For instance, Woodruff and the Atkins’ friendship is presented in a very colourful and religious prose; it is compared to “a diamond fashioned under the pressure of the earth’s geology” (36). One can likewise imagine a “Gospel Doctrine” teacher in the LDS Church drawing a parallel between Woodruff’s “life in the wilderness” and Alma’s, and see as so many Abinadis the leaders persecuted and imprisoned,³ although the teacher may carefully avoid mentioning “the Principle” as it has become a taboo and a thing of the past.

Woodruff’s experience “underground” for the sake of polygamy and his dealings with federal authorities are all mentioned in several of Woodruff’s letters. However, some readers may perceive a certain failure to translate that intensity in certain parts of the book. For instance, Neilson’s introductory paper, “Friendship forged in exile: Wilford Woodruff and the William and Rachel Atkin Family”, is shorter than Alexander’s in terms of number of pages, but some readers may find it lacking in rhythm and may ultimately sense it to be longer than Alexander’s. This is mostly because he did not remove redundancies. For example, Alexander informs his readers on one occasion that Woodruff’s “underground” activities included duck hunting and fishing (63), while Neilson hammers that information numerous times. The reader is informed that the fugitive Church leader discovers “the Atkins family’s fishing pond and hunting grounds” on page 37. By the time he is through the next page, he is told four times that Woodruff hunted and fished while at Atkinville. And there are plenty more occurrences in the essay to make sure that you understand that fishing and hunting were the Mormon Apostle’s “favourite outdoor sporting activities” to pass “the tedium of exile” (37).

As any true Mormon family would have liked to have welcome a future prophet, Neilson tells us the Atkins “were honoured to have President Woodruff as their guest, despite his fugitive status” and made

³ See Book of Mormon, Alma 17:2–5.

sure that his name and persona were safe (39, 40), and that they made him an “honorary” family member.⁴ In case the reader did not grasp this first mentioning, Neilson writes essentially the same information four times: Atkinville was “a *refuge*” (36), “an important administrative hub for the LDS Church” as Woodruff was “on the underground” (40); it “had become a *sanctuary* for the aging apostle” (43), and “Woodruff and other polygamists made [it] their *sanctuary*” (52).⁵ That final occurrence is one too much and might as well be crossed out as it seems totally out-of-place between the two segments on the number of Mormons involved in the practice of polygamy in St George.

Beside the essays, *In the Whirlpool* is full of annotations, such as genealogical inserts straight from the Mormon Church’s Ancestral File program to facilitate reading. Most of these annotations are informative, but others for example, provide little new information as much of the text is found on common geographical location markers at places like Denver, the Platte River, Laramie, Albuquerque, and even Santa Fe (194). A curious reader would certainly have preferred a note of clarification on the line “[George] Cannon had to leave [Utah] for Washington” (192)—which is explained in Alexander’s paper (90) and more particularly on “today” when Woodruff writes “I have never been in deeper water in my life in church matters than today” (165). Considering what he had already been through since 1885, one naturally wonders why “today”—September 12, 1888—is the darkest one in Woodruff’s whirlpool experience. What was happening during that time period to make the Mormon leader feel that he had touched the bottom?

Neilson offered no commentary but he could have resorted to the use of probabilities, as he has done elsewhere in the book when he is *near to being sure*,⁶ to help elucidate “today”. The reader will find in Neilson’s chronology that “Apostle Cannon begins a 175-day prison

⁴ The Atkin children often referred to Woodruff as “‘Grandpa Allen’ or ‘Uncle Lemmie’” (41); and Woodruff affectionately signs “Your Grandpa” in a letter to one of them (130). Neilson indicates in a footnote that “Lewis Allen” was Woodruff’s secret name “while hiding from U.S. marshals” (ibid.). Most of the letters are signed “L[ewis] Allen”; although, for reasons not mentioned in the book, Woodruff sometimes used his real identity.

⁵ Emphases mine.

⁶ See for instance “was *likely*”, “was *apparently*” in footnotes 57 (142), 60 (143) and 99 (158). Italics mine.

term for unlawful cohabitation” five days after (September 17th; 202); elsewhere, in Alexander’s work, he is reminded that September was right in the middle of a period of political setbacks for the Church, that “major crack in the dike that earlier Mormon leaders had built to separate themselves from Babylon came in the fall 1888 elections” since the LDS Church’s party lost control of the territorial legislature (84). Woodruff may also have referred to pre-election challenges that led to the Church’s political demise. But, he had “so many irons in the fire” (165) that his trouble for the day may also have come from possible move of US marshals to arrest him, from congressional actions or judicial decisions.

The reference to judicial decisions leads to some comments on Neilson’s remarks on the Idaho Test Oath “which barred anyone [in Idaho] who ‘engage in or belonged to an organization that advocated’ plural marriage from voting” (footnote 127; 166). Neilson observes that the “decision essentially rendered the First Amendment free-exercise clause meaningless”. It is true that federal authorities sometimes went beyond their constitutional prerogatives in a number of counts when it comes to the Mormons if history is viewed with today’s eyes. However, it is worth remembering that there was a lot of disparity regarding the applicability of the First Amendment before *Cantwell v. Connecticut* in 1940.⁷ Indeed, before that precedent, it was in the “rights” of U.S.

⁷ Jehovah’s Witness evangelists, Cantwell and his two sons had been denied their First Amendment and other rights by the courts of Connecticut for their “sheep-stealing” and proselytizing activities. The U.S. Supreme Court broke the state decision, establishing thereby the precedent of nationwide preeminence of the First Amendment: it argued that the Connecticut statutes deprived the Cantwells of their Fourteenth Amendment rights of life, liberty and due process of law, and equal protection of the laws whether the citizens are religious or not; and further declared that “The fundamental concept of liberty embodied in that Amendment embraces the liberties guaranteed by the First Amendment”; and that “The Fourteenth Amendment has rendered the legislatures of the states as incompetent as Congress to enact [...] laws [respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof]” as stated in the First Amendment. Emphases mine. See *Cantwell v. State of Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296 (1940). The decision was consistent with *Gitlow v. New York* (1925) touching the “freedom of speech” clause in the First Amendment.

States and the federal government for the Territories to have local legislations regarding the “free-exercise” clause, even if those local “rights” meant brushing aside or limiting the First Amendment altogether.⁸ Hence Van Buren’s impossibility to satisfy the Mormons call for redress for persecutions suffered in Missouri some decades earlier. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, lamented in 1843 that those *state rights* had rendered the Constitution powerless, “not broad enough to cover the whole ground” of the United States.⁹ Obviously, Smith was calling for stronger federal government, something that Mormons now overwhelmingly reject because succeeding Mormon leaders, beginning with Brigham Young, had shifted to the same *state rights* ideology that Smith decried. Several references in Woodruff’s letters show that he fully understood that only a “state government for Utah” with all “the powers and independence of a sovereign state, with the authority to make and execute *our own laws*” (174)¹⁰ could help him, and the Church, come out of “the whirlpool”. “Statehood seem[ed] to promise the readiest solution for some of the prominent questions involved in the great problem of the hour”, Woodruff further confided to William Atkin (174).

Except that, this time, the “sovereign state” Woodruff contemplated would not be a “Mormon state”, a totally independent nation within the State patterned after the city of Nauvoo, at least as Joseph Smith understood it then.¹¹ As had been done with previous territories, “Gentiles” had moved into the territory to influence the political process, packing the ballot to “steal” “our city and territory” as Woodruff put it (179–80). Those brief statements are but illustrations of what I

⁸ A good case in point is the Supreme Court’s decision in *Reynolds v. United States* (1878).

⁹ *History of the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 56–57. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ My emphasis to draw attention to the fact that even the language used by the leaders of the Mormon Church of the time shows that they made no difference between religious and political matters. Utah was both the spiritual and temporal kingdom of God entrusted to them.

¹¹ Woodruff imagined a state “independent of all earthly powers and clothed with legal as well as divine authority to assume the position in the earth God has designed or may design us to fill” “in the event of disruption of [from?] the general government” (*ibid.*), echoing Smith’s view that the city of Nauvoo was as free and independent as the State of Illinois (Brodie, 1963, p. 351).

meant by “scholars will always find a way to draw something out of the book”.

Summarily, Neilson’s work in transcribing and publishing this selection of Wilford Woodruff’s letters is admirable. For by so doing, he provides readers access not only to the LDS leaders whereabouts while hiding from federal authorities but also to his deep and personal experience of dealing with family matters (a dying plural wife whose funeral he could not attend, 128), local political matters (138), Church-federal institutions battles (161), his personal feelings regarding the possibility of imprisonment (131), and the process leading to the LDS Church’s final surrender in the form of the 1890 Manifesto. This publication will definitely provide readers with a more in-depth context to the abandonment of “the Principle” than the simplistic and public excerpts from three of Woodruff’s addresses included at the end of the LDS Church’s *Doctrine and Covenants*.

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