

R.A. Christmas, "The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt: Some Literary, Historical, and Critical Reflections." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1966): 33–43.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF PARLEY P. PRATT: SOME LITERARY, HISTORICAL, AND CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

by R. A. Christmas

This essay contributes to "An Assessment of Mormon culture" with a challenging evaluation of Mormon literature. Robert Christmas, a graduate student in English Literature at the University of Southern California, has published his poetry in a number of literary journals.

I suppose by this time the reader has either forgotten the circumstances in which he took leave of myself, or else is somewhat weary with the winding of the narrative and impatient for it to come to a close. The only apology I have to offer for the many digressions and wanderings through which he has been led is, that I consider it impolite and disrespectful to get myself out of a bad place until I have first seen my friends all safely out. True, I did not strictly observe this rule of good breeding in the escape itself; therefore it becomes me to take the more care to observe it now, when there is no danger, excepting that of being deserted by some of my readers before I am safely out. However, if you still wish to accompany me in all the windings of my wearisome and dangerous adventure we will now turn to the happy valley, where you recollect leaving me on the morning of the fifth of July in the act of breakfasting on a small biscuit, while, to all appearances, I was lost to myself and to all mankind.¹

THE *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* HAS BETTER THINGS TO offer than this paragraph, but nothing that so clearly indicates the source of the style. The voice is not Fielding's, nor is it Dr. John-

son's (although "happy valley" may be an ironic echo of *Rasselas*); but it rather skillfully follows the convention of authorial intrusion that they, along with many others in the eighteenth century, brought to perfection: the combination of familiarity and formality; the sophisticated irony that comes from "glossing" a deadly serious situation (Pratt has just broke jail at Colombia, Missouri) in highly rhetorical terms; and the leisurely sense of the value of style for its own sake — all of which recalls, say, Fielding's prefaces in *Tom Jones*. Here, then, is a stepchild of the eighteenth century.

Between his birth in 1807 and his murder in 1857, Parley P. Pratt crossed the country at least twenty times as a Mormon preacher; he travelled to Canada, England, and Chile as a missionary; he composed his *Autobiography*, more than fifty hymns and songs, and enough tracts and discourses to fill another volume; he edited several Church periodicals; he spent upwards of a year in prison; he suffered just about every disease and physical hardship that the frontier had to offer; he baptized and administered to thousands; and in the midst of a life that collapses any mere summary he married twelve women and fathered thirty children.

From the beginning of his book we see that he was a very earnest, studious, and spiritual young man. Pratt tells us of his "excellent . . . common school education" and his fanatical reading:

But I always loved a book. If I worked hard, a book was in my hand in the morning while others were sitting down to breakfast; the same at noon; if I had a few moments, a book! a BOOK! A book at evening, while others slept or sported; a book on Sundays; a book at every leisure moment of my life. (20)

His early and absolutely constant religious zeal shows well in his description of his feelings at twelve years — afraid that he might miss the Millennium:

I felt a longing desire and an inexpressible anxiety to secure to myself a part in a resurrection so glorious. I felt a weight of worlds, of *eternal* worlds resting upon me; for fear I might still remain in uncertainty, and at last fall short and still sleep on in the cold embrace of death; while the great, the good, the blessed and the holy of this world would awake from the gloom of the grave and be renovated, filled with life and joy, and enter upon life with all its joys; while for a thousand years their busy, happy tribes should trample on my sleeping dust, and still my spirit wait in dread suspense, impatient of its doom. (21)

¹ The *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, ed. by his son Parley P. Pratt (Salt Lake City, 1874), p. 263. Page references are to the paperback fifth edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1961) and will be hereafter noted in parentheses. Quotations are made with permission of the publisher.

These opening passages are, in a minor way, impressive and promising — in their rhythms and in phrases like “trample on my sleeping dust” which show an imaginative stylist at work. Others like “gloom of the grave” or “in dread suspense, impatient of its doom” exhibit familiar alliterative patterns that have always been one of the marks of the best English prose.

In 1826, Pratt was seeking a homestead in the Ohio wilderness when the weather caught up with him “about thirty miles west of Cleveland”:

The rainy season of November had now set in; the country was covered with a dense forest, with here and there a small opening made by the settlers, and the surface of the earth one vast scene of mud and mire; so that travelling was now very difficult, if not impracticable.

Alone in a land of strangers, without home or money, and not twenty years of age, I became discouraged, and concluded to stop for the winter; I procured a gun from one of the neighbors; worked and earned an axe, some breadstuff and other little extras, and retired two miles into a dense forest and prepared a small hut, or cabin, for the winter. Some leaves and straw in my cabin served for my lodging, and a good fire kept me warm. A stream near by door quenched my thirst; and fat venison, with a little bread from the settlements, sustained me for food. The storms of winter raged around me; the wind shook the forest, the wolf howled in the distance, and the owl chimed in harshly to complete the doleful music which seemed to soothe me, or bid me welcome to this holy retreat. But in my little cabin the fire blazed pleasantly, and the Holy Scriptures and a few other books occupied my hours of solitude. Among the few books in my cabin, were McKenzie's travels in the Northwest, and Lewis and Clark's tour up the Missouri and down the Columbia rivers. (28)

This was toward the end of the early period of westward expansion, which we usually associate, in literary terms, with Cooper; but Pratt's obvious delight in the natural economy of the situation — “the stream near my door quenched my thirst” — his “few books,” and his somewhat romantic response to winter — “music which seemed to soothe me” — recall, in a distant and primitive way, Thoreau's experiment some twenty years later. In view of this less-selfconscious (but more cliché-ridden) “Walden,” and his many similar adventures in the thirties and forties, we should not be surprised to find that he spends only two short chapters on the epical crossing of the plains and the settlement of the Salt Lake Valley, and that he never mentions the much belabored miracle of the sea-gulls and crickets. To a man who had seen and suffered so much in the twenty years before the Church went west, and who continued in equally active and dangerous travels thereafter, the trip

from Winter Quarters to the Salt Lake Valley could not possibly seem as unique as it does to many Mormons today; nor would a swarm of crickets be likely to overly impress a mind that had been through several versions of the following:

Next morning resuming our journey, we crossed the Okah river on a bridge, but the bottoms for two or three miles were overflowed to various depths, from six inches to three or four feet, and frozen over, except in the main channels, with a coat of ice, which we had to break by lifting our feet to the surface at every step. This occupied some hours and called into requisition our utmost strength, and sometimes we were entirely covered with water. At length we got through in safety and came to a house where we warmed and dried our clothes and took some whiskey. Our legs and feet had lost all feeling, became benumbed, and were dreadfully bruised and cut with the ice.

On the next day we had to cross a plain fifteen miles in length, without a house, a tree, or any kind of shelter; a cold northwest wind was blowing, and the ground covered with snow and ice. We had made two or three miles into the plain when I was attacked with a severe return of my old complaint, which had confined me so many months in Jackson County, and from which I had recovered by a miracle at the outset of this journey — I mean the fever and ague.

I travelled and shook, and shook and travelled, till I could stand it no longer; I vomited severely several times, and finally fell down on the snow, overwhelmed with fever, and became helpless and nearly insensible. This was about seven or eight miles from the nearest house.

Brother John Murdock laid his hands on me and prayed in the name of Jesus; and taking me by the hand, he commanded me with a loud voice, saying: 'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth arise and walk!' I attempted to arise, I staggered a few paces, and was about falling again when I found my fever suddenly depart and my strength come. I walked at the rate of about four miles per hour, arrived at a house, and was sick no more. (75-76)

Since both of these last two passages rather obviously have more historical than literary significance, we should stop to mention some of the ways in which they show Pratt's stylistic weaknesses. In the first, phrases like "doleful music," "holy retreat," and "hours of solitude" are certainly formulaic and worn out; "a dense forest" is repeated twice; and as we might expect after all this, the "winter raged," "the wolf howled," and "the owl chimed in" — all of which tends to dissipate a magnificent experience. In the second, "became benumbed," "to various depths," "or any kind of shelter," "my old complaint," and "became helpless and nearly insensible" are redundant and awkward; and "shook and travelled" and "I walked at the rate of about four miles per hour" are belabored. Prolixity, repetition, and triteness, then, are Pratt's general faults.

But just as important, what these passages — and the whole book for that matter — offer is a different perspective on Mormon history: a revealing and often moving picture of the early eastern and midwestern mission of the Church, at the end of which the exodus to the Rockies seems more like a tragedy than an epic, in view of the great failures of community relations and democratic process during the Missouri and Illinois periods. Although primarily published to provide Church-members with “interesting sketches of Church history” and to “promote faith,” Pratt’s *Autobiography* has additional value as a general reflection of frontier manners. Aside from its didacticism, it provides an informative mirror of the times: the strange juxtaposition of free and easy hospitality and savage religious and economic warfare; the bitter competition between the popular roving preachers; the poverty and physical sufferings of the settlers as opposed to the incredible richness of the land; and the agonizing slowness of travel contrasting with an amazing rate of change. Two years after his winter in the Ohio wilderness, Pratt returned with his first wife to homestead the same ground: “Other houses and farms were also in view, and some twenty children were returning from the school actually kept by my wife, upon the very spot where two years before I had lived for months without seeing a human being” (31).

Pratt’s longing for religious certainty, his interest in preaching, and his desire to convert the Indians soon took him out of Ohio, into the Mormon Church, and on to Missouri, where most of the best scenes in the book are set. For example, his account of the eager Mormon missionaries meeting with the chief of the Delawares:

He was seated on a sofa of furs, skins and blankets, before a fire in the center of his lodge; which was a comfortable cabin, consisting of two large rooms.

His wives were neatly dressed, partly in calicoes and partly in skins; and wore a vast amount of silver ornaments. As we entered his cabin he took us by the hand with a hearty welcome, and then motioned us to be seated on a pleasant seat of blankets, or robes. His wives, at his bidding, set before us a tin pan full of beans and corn boiled up together, which proved to be good eating; although three of us made use alternately of the same wooden spoon. (53)

In the last sentence, the humorous contrast between “good eating” and “the same wooden spoon” is delivered neatly by the periodic subordinate clause, and a corresponding sense of light anti-climax develops in the rhythm after the semi-colon. Note the agreement of sound and sense — and again the effective use of

periodic structure — in this description of the place where Pratt lay sick for a winter in Colesville, Missouri:

The winter was cold, and for some time about ten families lived in one log cabin, which was open and unfurnished, while the frozen ground served for a floor. Our food consisted of beef and a little bread made of corn, which had been grated into coarse meal by rubbing the ears on a tin grater. (72)

and this fine paragraph on the hardships of winter travel:

In the beginning of 1831 we renewed our journey; and, passing through St Louis and St. Charles, we travelled on foot for three hundred miles through vast prairies and through trackless wilds of snow — no beaten road; houses few and far between; and the bleak north-west wind always blowing in our faces with a keenness which would almost take the skin off the face. We travelled for whole days, from morning till night, without a house or fire, wading in snow to the knees at every step, and the cold so intense that the snow did not melt on the south side of the houses, even in the mid-day sun, for nearly six-weeks. We carried on our backs our changes of clothing, several books, and corn bread and raw pork. We often ate our frozen bread and pork by the way, when the bread would be so frozen that we could not bite or penetrate any part of it but the outside crust. (52)

The rhythm and diction show Pratt at his best; the only obvious improvements I can think of would be to cut “trackless,” find a better adjective than “vast,” and end the first sentence with “skin off.”

Pratt’s account of his capture by the Missouri militia and his imprisonment at Richmond and Colombia from November, 1838, to July, 1839 (chapters XXII-XXXIV) is probably the best stretch of narrative in the *Autobiography*. It begins with the disarming of the Mormons at Far West and the humiliating exhibition of the Mormon leaders through the state; and it ends with Pratt’s escape from the jail at Colombia on the evening of July 4, 1839, and his foot-journey into Illinois, from which we quoted at the beginning of this paper. In this sequence the style is improved by some skillful dialogue and characterization and the author’s rare and fortunate sense of humor, as in this description of his fellow inmates Luman and Phila Gibbs:

He was a hard faced, ill formed man, of about fifty years of age; full of jealousy, extremely selfish, very weak minded, and withal, a little love cracked; and, I may say, that he seemed not to possess one redeeming quality.

His wife was about the same age, and withal, a coarse, tall, masculine looking woman, and one of whom he had no reason to com-

plain or be jealous. True, she did not love him — for no female could possibly do that; but then no one else would love her, nor was she disposed to court their affections. However, he was jealous of her, and therefore, abused her; and this kept a constant and noisy strife and wrangling between them whenever she was present. . . .

On one occasion they had quarreled and kept us awake all night, and just at break of day we heard a noise like a scuffle and a slamming against the wall; next followed a woman's voice, half in a laugh and half in exultation: "Te-he-he-he, Luman, what's the matter? What's the matter, Luman?" Then a pause, and afterwards a man's voice in a grum, sorry, and rather a whining tone was heard at a distance from the bed, exclaiming: "Now, I swan, Phila, that's tu [*sic*] bad."

The truth of the matter was this: She had braced her back against the wall, and with both her feet placed against his body, had kicked him out of bed, and landed him upon the opposite side of the room. (235-36)

Pratt handles his escape similarly well. He has the rhetorical skill to interrupt his own story in order to get his "friends all safely out"; and these interpolated vignettes and the account of his own journey through "a hundred miles of wild country" contain some interesting attempts to imitate frontier dialects as well as several memorable moments — among them his disguises and politic lies to hostile settlers, bedding down with a rattlesnake, the boy who strands him on an island in the midst of the Mississippi, and, as always, the continuous struggle with a weary body:

I now pursued my course the remainder of the night with renewed courage and strength, although so very lame, foot sore, and so much exhausted that, in lying down to refresh myself, I could not again rise and put myself in motion short of extraordinary and repeated exertion, sometimes having to crawl on my hands and knees till I could get sufficiently limbered to arise and walk, and frequently staggering and falling in the attempt. . . . As I was walking along the road I could scarcely open my eyes for a moment to look my way for a few rods ahead, and they would then close in sleep in spite of all my powers. I would then proceed a few paces in my sleep till I stumbled. (271)

It would be a mistake, of course, to imply that the writing is as generally good in the rest of the book as it is in the Missouri section. Even in the passage above a little editing is needed to avoid prolixity and redundancy, and in other places the style breaks down entirely:

Even the fierce and ravenous beast of the desert (which in his native solitude, announces with doleful and prolonged howls the mid-night hour, or wakes the weary traveller at early dawn, and gives the signal for another day of thirst, and toil, and suffering) is lacking here. (389)

The overgeneralization is obvious, but Cooper and other nineteenth century stylists have the same problem. It seems to result from the desire to dramatize, describe, and universalize, all at the same time. Old poetic formulas (probably from the large eighteenth-century storehouse) are plugged in, and the result is extreme subjectivity and imprecision. Pratt's "beast of the desert" is so buried in clichés and bandied by the syntax that we can hardly figure out what sort of critter it is.

Another problem is the tendency for the style to succumb too readily to the hyperbolic nature of the events described. This is partly due to the fact that many of the events were, as far as I can tell, beyond the abilities of a good minor stylist, but this is no excuse:

This was the most trying scene of all. I went to my house, being guarded by two or three soldiers; the cold rain was pouring down without, and on entering my little cottage, there lay my wife sick of a fever, with which she had been for some time confined. At her breast was our son Nathan, an infant of three months, and by her side a little girl of five years. On the foot of the same bed lay a woman in travail, who had been driven from her house in the night, and had taken momentary shelter in my hut of ten feet square — my larger house having been torn down. I stepped to the bed; my wife burst into tears; I spoke a few words of comfort, telling her to try to live for my sake and the children's; and expressing a hope that we should meet again though years might separate us. She promised to try to live. I then embraced and kissed the little babes and departed.

Till now I had refrained from weeping; but, to be forced from so helpless a family, who were destitute of provisions and fuel, and deprived almost of shelter in a bleak prairie, with none to assist them, exposed to a lawless banditti who were utter strangers to humanity, and this at the approach of winter, was more than nature could well endure. (189–90)

The scene has some power, but the hyperbolic "most trying scene of all" and "more than nature could well endure" at the beginning and end signal Pratt's failure to realize the event in its own terms. The situation requires some precise understatement, a technique which Pratt only partially mastered; the high level of generality in the diction produces the maudlin "woman in travail" and the phantom "lawless banditti who were utter strangers to humanity."

Another kind of ineffective overstatement is caused by Pratt's view of history. This is to say that he tends, like many another fundamentalist before and since, to see history only in terms of God's dealings with men, or to put it perhaps more clearly, only as a record of God's chosen people and their conflicts with the "gen-

tiles." The results in a kind of leveling in which people are estimated only according to their spiritual standing or, shall we say, only in terms of how they live the gospel or, if gentiles, how they treat the Mormons. Thus Pratt very aptly calls Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs "a living stink," but cannot resist comparing him, in the same paragraph, to Cain and to Herod, who "died of a loathsome disease, and transmitted to posterity his fame as a tyrant and murderer" (213). At another point, Pratt feels obliged to cite several instances of "holy" lying in the Scriptures in order to justify his lying to protect himself while escaping from Missouri, in the course of which we find that Parley P. Pratt's lying is even more justified than King David's because Pratt has "a greater work to accomplish than he ever had" (267). Finally, toward the end of the narrative the style rises to a kind of tasteless exaltation, as Pratt in an aside hammers home the familiar "fates of the persecutors" myth, which he undoubtedly helped to create in passages like this:

A colonel of the Missouri mob, who helped to drive, plunder and murder the Mormons, died in the hospital at Sacramento, 1849. Beckwith had the care of him; he was eaten with worms — a large black headed kind of maggot — which passed through him by myriads, seemingly a half pint at a time! Before he died these maggots were crawling out of his mouth and nose! He literally rotted alive! Even the flesh on his legs burst open and fell from his bones! They gathered up the rotten mass in a blanket and buried him, without awaiting a coffin! (425)

This does not fail of a certain gothic excellence, but Pratt dwells too lovingly and irrationally on the details. The five exclamation points are forced and phony; the same could as well have happened to a man who shot it out with the Daltons.

* * *

Pratt never lived to finish the *Autobiography* or to revise the later notes which now appear in the printed version. The last eight chapters or so are journal entries apparently added by his son. But uneven as it is, Pratt's book is perhaps the outstanding literary achievement of Mormonism to date; it points to a literary tradition in the early Church that may well have produced other minor masterpieces: journals, letters, sermons, and memoirs stylistically and thematically related to a great and established tradition in English prose. Pratt's success calls for similar examinations of the *Journal of Discourses*, Wilford Woodruff's *Journal*, John D. Lee's *Diary*, B. H. Roberts's and Orson F. Whitney's histories, and all of our known and unknown writers up to and including James E.

Talmage, where, as nearly as I can judge, the literary quality of our religious prose falls off rather badly. These men were well trained in the humanities. Their rather wide reading and their apparent concern to imitate the masters of English prose in their own writing has lapsed today into a kind of pragmatic banality, a businesslike rat-tat-tat that usually begins with something like "I sat next to a man on the airplane the other day."

This is not the place to make any eternal judgments, but Pratt's *Autobiography* does seem superior to most of the other works of literature connected with Mormonism that I have seen. Even as excellent a piece of closely historical fiction as Samuel W. Taylor's *Family Kingdom* seems rather paltry beside it, because Taylor, for all his skill, cannot achieve the same degree of immediacy. By the time we reach the remove of pure fiction, as in something like Richard Scowcroft's *Children of the Covenant* (though by no means the worst example), the Mormon experience seems bankrupt and watery; the truth still seems to be stronger than any fiction, and deeply pious experience in any of its forms has tended, historically, to find its best expression in the genres that deliver that experience most directly — the sermon, the journal, and the biography or autobiography.

If I may, I would like to add a short postscript on Mormon literature — as I know it — to our discussion of Parley P. Pratt. The *Autobiography*, at least, is a sign that Mormon letters in the nineteenth century may not be as dead as we sometimes think; and this thought leads to the possibility that something like Pratt's pious tradition may be renewed in the future. Missionaries or General Authorities might find time to compose beautiful journals or correspondence, and those who have not succumbed to the prevalent "utilitarian" short-hand of Church periodicals and popular doctrinal books might yet deliver sermons that aspire to Wulfstan or Donne. We might even get our great novel; Wallace Stegner said awhile back in the *Atlantic* that it might be lurking somewhere in Idaho Falls. I see no reason to gainsay him, but I often get the feeling that we are going to have to wait until "the next persecution."

To change the subject again, perhaps some other form, like the lyric, is better suited to Mormon writers today. We have had a few fair poets in the Church, Pratt himself among them, although the quality is quite below that of our prose. Orson F. Whitney is probably the best, in his hymns; but his banal and impossibly mannered epic *Elias* or his *Love and the Light* (written in the *Hiawatha* meter) show how far our verse has been from anything tradition-

ally respectable. But even Eliza R. Snow wrote one poem, "Mental Gas," in which she avoided the fawning romanticism and melodrama of most of her verse; and there may be others — although one look at the poems now appearing in Church periodicals is enough to make the critical task seem hopeless, so far has sentimental indulgence corrupted style. Of course, it is also possible that we will have no "Mormon" literature, in the stricter sense, in the future, because of the attraction of secular forms and themes. I mention these things not as conclusions, but rather in the hope that other writers and scholars will begin a dialogue on this neglected subject.

In the meantime, we have the *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, and a reasonably distinguished tradition of Mormon literature which includes some works of real power. We ought to find them, study them, and criticize them honestly, in the hope that readers — in cases like the *Autobiography* — will begin paying a little more attention. Looking back, we may find a few more things like this — from a letter written by Pratt on the ship *Henry Kelsey*, in the Pacific (Lat. 24 N., Lon. 115 W.), September 15, 1851:

Just imagine sundown, twilight, the shades of evening, the curtains of the solitary night gathering in silent gloom and lone melancholy around a father who loves his home and its inmates; his fireside and the family altar! Behold him standing leaning over the vessel's side as it slides over the waters of the lone and boundless Pacific, gazing for hours in succession into the bosom of its dark abyss, or watching its white foam and sparkling spray! What are his thoughts? Can you divine them? Behold, he prays! For what does he pray? For every wife, for every child, for every near and dear friend he has on earth, he prays most earnestly! most fervently! He calls each by name over and over again, before the altar of remembrance. And when this is done for all on earth, he remembers those in Heaven; calls their names; communes with them in spirit; wonders how they are doing; whether they think of him. He calls to mind their acts and suffering in life, their death, and the grave where sleeps their precious dust. (389)

This is not Melville's "Symphony"; but it invites humble comparison; and I sometimes catch myself thinking that it is about as close as we are likely to get.