

Missionary Roots of Change

What E'er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part: The Missionary Diaries of David O. McKay, edited by Stan Larson and Patricia Larson (Salt Lake City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1999), 353 pp., \$24.95

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IN THE CENTURY since twenty-five-year-old David Oman McKay made his last formal entry in his missionary diary in Glasgow, Scotland, Mormonism has metamorphosed from a small religious group centered in Utah's Wasatch Front to a church with truly international dimensions. Indeed, while the main challenge of the nineteenth century might have been keeping diversity out of the church, the challenge today might well be learning how to cope with invited diversity. Ironic though it might be, Salt Lake City's Olympic motto—"The World is Welcome Here"—is a reflection of Mormonism's shift from an exclusive to an inclusive institution. These missionary diaries of the man who was at the helm as the church began to shed its Utah patina in the 1950s give insight into the ideals, principles, and practical experiences which shaped him and which, in turn, played a significant role in shaping the church he led for almost twenty years.

As an apostle and as president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, McKay bestowed upon the Mormon people a rich legacy of religious faith, commitment, sensitivity, tolerance, and idealism. His diaries as a missionary, president of the Scottish Conference, and church emigration agent clearly demonstrate the begin-

nings of these traits. They also reveal the extent to which his service in the industrial environs of Glasgow was probably a crucial proving ground for his future leadership of the church. The ease with which he related to non-Mormons, his use of Scottish dialect, his references to Scottish history, and his enjoyment of the theater (albeit with some guilt) reveal the young McKay to have been a person of considerable cultural breadth and tolerance—traits indispensable for the international expansion of the Mormon church which began under his leadership.

These insightful and eloquently written diaries show how, as president of the Scottish Conference, he dealt with infighting and jealousy between local leaders and strident opposition from anti-Mormons with patience, firmness, and tact. Frequently frustrated by the small-mindedness of local leaders, he never resorted to excommunication as a means of disciplining wayward members unless personal moral issues were involved. In his words, he was determined to "continue in a course of kindness, yet using a firm hand" (193). By disposition and training, McKay was inclusive rather than exclusive; he was, after all, a consummate teacher, a profession that demands inclusivity. On a number of occasions when the actions of recalcitrant and troublesome members had been questioned, McKay concluded his accounts of meetings to consider their cases by reporting that it was decided to give them a second chance. Such episodes surely must have tried his patience severely, but no bitterness nor animosity show through. His maturity of spirit and willingness to overlook persistent pettiness served him and the church a

half-century later. During his administration many came to see the gospel as the gospel of the second chance.

Central Scotland with its coal-mines and blast furnaces was, of course, light years away from the idyllic Ogden Valley of his youth. However, young McKay learned important lessons in the workshop of the British Empire when he came face to face with some of the perplexing problems of industrialism: poverty, drunkenness, disease, family disintegration, and spousal abuse. This is not to say that every entry is an insightful commentary on gospel principles or a remark of historical relevance—even McKay's diaries have their share of the generic "got up—did tracting—went to bed" entries. However, when he set about making an observation, he did so with precision and eloquence. His exposure to literature and history is readily apparent, and one comes away from these diaries wishing that today's missionaries had such a rich background for playing their role as emissaries of the Kingdom. It is no accident that McKay took to heart the words carved in Stirling sandstone: "What e'er thou art, act well thy part." He perceived himself as playing a serious role in life's drama, and his diaries display the sense of earnestness with which he took his assignment. It is also quite clear that he relished opportunities to debate and to engage others in serious discussion of gospel principles. He undoubtedly would have had a difficult time teaching the gospel using a predetermined set of questions and responses. But then he had a rich background and a mature perspective to draw upon. Absent this, the systematized "Elder Smith, meet Mr. Brown" approach used by less prepared missionaries since the 1950's has perhaps been necessary.

Of course, McKay recorded gloomy

feelings of discouragement and even depression on occasion, but the gloom is frequently dispelled by a glint of the famous McKay wit, which shines through even the murkiest Scottish mist or the impenetrable stubbornness which he found in many local leaders. His attempts to sing at street meetings with his companions gave rise to gentle, self-deprecating humor. McKay was also very honest in expressing vehement dislike of tracting (did any missionary ever enjoy it?). He was particularly depressed by the task of distributing tracts just as word came that the United States had gone to war with Spain. On April 6, 1898, he noted in his diary, "McKinley's message will mean war [with Spain]," and added, "I believe I would as lief fight as distribute tracts!" (85).

He was not immune from thinking critically about some aspects of church history. When informed that an early convert had abandoned her husband in order to gather with the Saints in Utah, he observed, "Many queer circumstances happened in the early part of this church" (180). Given his commitment to family unity, it is doubtful that he would have condoned the breaking up of families even to fulfill the call of the gathering.

The manner in which these diaries are presented is a template for the publication of future journals. The footnotes are a rich gold mine of biographical information about the missionaries and members with whom he worked. Collateral diaries are used to tease out some of McKay's meanings and to give additional depth to events he records. In addition, the book contains perceptive interpretive essays by Marion D. Hanks, Leonard J. Arrington, and Eugene England, which help to place McKay into historical context. Not only a window into Mormon missionary history, these diaries also contribute in-

sights into the social and religious history of Scotland as viewed by an American Mormon. Appropriately, McKay titled the bound volume of the diaries covering the period January 1, 1898, to July 1899, "A Few Happenings of My Daily Life in Scotland, 1898-1899."

In a day in which it is too easy to centralize and correlate Mormon history (my own mission to the Sheffield and Scottish districts of the British Mission in 1951-53 is now listed in membership records as the "England Mission"), it is gratifying that McKay's reflections have preserved a slice of Mormon history with a rich layer of local color. The text of the diaries—with their frequent literary allusions and use of Scottish dialect—holds the reader's attention throughout. In addition, the editors have included a rich variety of superb black-and-white photographs of Scottish scenes at the turn of the century. Also included is a guide to Scottish words and an excellent index.

While the editing of these diaries is generally admirable, in a few instances some words of explanation about the different offices in the LDS priesthood would have been helpful to the non-Mormon reader. Likewise, when the diaries record that McKay "went through the Temple," a brief explanation would have been appropriate (4). But these are slight oversights and do not detract from the diaries' importance.

The McKay family is to be commended for their willingness to permit these diaries to be published almost verbatim. I say "almost" because the editors note that, in response to family suggestions, two short statements were omitted because "they did not seem relevant" and were replaced with the traditional ellipsis (xlii). My historical interest piqued, I examined the original diaries in the Manuscript Division of the University of Utah Marriott Library. The

first deletion was found under August 7, 1897 (the date McKay left Ogden on his mission). At that time he recorded that because the train was so crowded, he and three other missionaries gave up their seats to ladies and went into the "smoker," adding: "*Full of Negroes and Dagoes! Couldn't stand such company, so hired a berth in a sleeper*" (4; deleted text in italics). The diary does not indicate why he was offended, but it may have been crude language, boisterous behavior, or even the smoke from cigars, pipes, or cigarettes. Perhaps it is simply the response of a young man coming into contact for the first time with the world outside of Ogden Valley.

The second ellipsis was found under March 30, 1898, at Glasgow. McKay wrote:

At night went to a concert given by Loudin's Original Fisk Jubilee Singers. We crossed the Atlantic together last August. The audience was small, but the singing was nonetheless excellent. At the close I stepped to the front and shook hands with them. They seemed pleased to see me, and I am sure I was glad to see them. *Although, I do not care much for a negro, still* I have a warm spot in my heart for these beautiful singers (82; deleted text in italics).

Given his enjoyment of the concert, this comment is certainly puzzling, but I am not at all sure that these short statements of a young, relatively provincial elder should have been deleted as irrelevant (was that the criterion applied to other parts of the diaries?). In retrospect, these statements suggest how much real growth occurred in McKay following 1898. Consider, for example, the significant role he played in making the church more inclusive of people other than north-

ern Europeans and in preparing for the removal of the priesthood ban on black men. Ironically, when he wrote about the Jubilee Singers' performance at the religious service on the *S. S. Belgenland* in mid-Atlantic seven months earlier (August 22, 1897), he copied into his journal the chorus of one of their songs, apparently with approval:

If you want to know a Christian,
Just watch his acts and walks;
If you want to know a Christian
Just listen how he talks (8).

Over twenty-five years later, when McKay was president of the British Mission, the Jubilee Singers were still on his mind when he wrote the essay "Persons and Principles."¹ Here he expanded considerably on his diary entry, describing how some passengers on the ship had made disparaging comments about the "colored" singers and how the singers were deeply hurt by these taunts. However, he added, they showed great self-control in not responding. A few days later one of their soloists sang the song quoted above at the worship service. McKay praised his performance as "a sufficient answer as well as a gentle rebuke to those who in rudeness had given offense." His experience with the Jubilee Singers prompted him to ask, "Of what value are the lofty principles of Christianity if they are not introduced into our daily lives? . . . It is not easy I know, but the true Christian is he who exemplifies in his 'acts' his 'walks' and his 'talks' that which his tongue says he believes."

In the context of his larger life, the off-hand comments in his missionary diary in no way reduce McKay's stature as one of Mormonism's most socially conscientious leaders. They

show him to be capable of change and growth. Indeed, McKay may have been thinking of his own earlier responses in 1924 when he asked what good it does to preach brotherhood "and then step from the pulpit to the street and rail against and denounce any who should be included in this Brotherhood." The essay "Principles and Persons" strongly suggests that his experience with the Jubilee Singers on the ship and in Glasgow was an important catalyst in shaping his fundamental conviction that "the potency and power of a church or a religion are largely determined by the way its adherents introduce into practice the tenets and principles advocated." He ended the essay by paraphrasing the song he had heard in 1897:

If you want to know a "Mormon,"
Just watch his acts and walks;
If you want to know a "Mormon,"
Just listen how he talks.

Far from being irrelevant, the words deleted from the diaries are highly relevant indices of McKay's growth and character. A brief explanation in a footnote, putting his negative comments into perspective would have added to, rather than diminished, the value of these inspiring missionary diaries.

These straightforward, uplifting, thoughtful, and highly literate reflections of a young Mormon missionary at the turn of the twentieth century are a tribute to David O. McKay as a person. They are also a tribute to the missionary system which gave him and thousands of other young Latter-day Saints (then and since) the opportunity, in spite of adversity and human weakness, to act well their roles on life's stage and to grow thereby.

1. *Millennial Star* 86 (January 31, 1924), 72-74. All quotations from the essay are from p. 72 except the last, "If you want to know a 'Mormon,'" which is from p. 74.