

erts's subsequent victory made international headlines because he persisted in living a polygamous life after the Church had renounced public support for new plural marriages (1890) and Utah had joined the Union (1896). Wells found herself negotiating her distaste for Roberts's politics and her defense of Mormon women who were further marginalized at national meetings because of the polygamy question.

Madsen's book contains scant information about Wells's tenure as Relief Society general president. Indeed, her work with the Relief Society is mentioned almost exclusively as it relates to Wells's suffrage work: providing funds for her numerous travels, linking her to membership in various women's organizations, and giving her a platform from which to educate and organize Mormon women in the fight for the vote. Indeed, when President Lorenzo Snow and Relief Society President Zina D. H. Young died within months of each other, Wells felt some concern that Church leaders would neglect this work. She confided to Susa Young Gates, "I doubt very much if Prest. [Joseph F.] Smith has as much confidence in what women can do, as Prest. Snow. . . . There are so many things that want righting" (438).

Even as a generation of national suffrage leaders was passing on, the aging Wells found herself likewise missing the company of LDS women who had worked with her to shape what it meant to be a Mormon woman—"such women as Aunt Zina—Aunt Eliza [R. Snow], Mother [Elizabeth Ann] Whitney" (438–39). I assume Madsen deemed much of Wells's work with Relief Society to fall in the "private" sphere and will therefore address this topic more fully in her next installment. Madsen's work is a gift to Mormon women's history, and I wish her Godspeed on the second volume.

Colonizing the Frontier between Faith and Doubt

Levi S. Peterson. *A Rascal by Nature, A Christian by Yearning: A Mormon Autobiography*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006. 465 pp., \$29.95.

Reviewed by Michael Austin, who teaches English and serves as the dean of Graduate Studies at Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, West Virginia

It would be difficult for me to overstate the influence that Levi Peterson has had on both my spiritual and my intellectual development. "The Confessions of St. Augustine," which I found by accident a few months after returning from my mission, was the first Mormon story that I ever read that did not come from the pages of the *New Era*. A year later, "A Christian by Yearning" became my first exposure to the liberal Mormon community at the same time that it reassured me that I was

not alone in my doubts. Later still, when I was struggling in a Ph.D. program in English, *The Backslider* helped to convince me that my own culture had themes of beauty and importance to explore in a literature of its own. And just three years ago, when I had come to the decision that I simply did not have room in my career to continue pursuing Mormon studies, Levi Peterson (whom I had never met in person) “reactivated” me—as any good bishop would—by issuing me a calling to serve on *Dialogue’s* editorial team.

Readers who have had similar experiences with Peterson’s work—and I know there to be many—will find few surprises in his autobiography, *A Rascal by Nature, A Christian by Yearning*, but they will find their old friend in top form. Those who encounter Peterson for the first time in his autobiography will have no reason to feel excluded. Peterson does not even begin discussing his literary career until page 243. Much more important, as the book’s subtitle tells us, are the contexts in which Peterson became a writer: his lifelong relationship to Mormonism and his compulsive attraction “to conflicts between belief and disbelief and between sexual impulse and conscience” (270).

It is the latter of these “compulsive attractions” that organizes the first half of the book. In the process of giving the customary details about his ancestors and early family life, Peterson vividly recounts both his youthful peccadilloes—masturbation, petting, and one marginally successful attempt at full-fledged intercourse—and the considerable guilt that they caused him. Like many of his fictional characters, the young Levi Peterson was plagued by a quintessentially Christian problem: a keen awareness of sin without a corresponding understanding of redemption. Even after memories of his early indiscretions had faded, he tells us, he continued to suffer the pangs of an overactive superego, albeit one informed by a more politically liberal sense of conscience: “Guilt has been one of my gifts,” he writes. “I feel guilt for all the ills of our time: for the extinction of species, the exhaustion of natural resources, the abuse of women and children, the suppression of minorities, and the general malice of human nature” (89). Enduring characters such as *The Backslider’s* Frank Windham demonstrate, to my satisfaction at least, how correct Peterson is in labeling his guilt as a “gift.”

While the problems posed by a rascal’s nature and a Christian’s conscience are important to Peterson’s autobiography, as they are to his fiction, they are ultimately absorbed into what Peterson presents as the defining conflict of his life: his unbreakable, visceral ties to a religion whose doctrines he does not believe. In a passage from the chapter “Nebo by Moonlight,” Peterson articulates this core conflict with his characteristic candor and eloquence: “The next morning, a Sunday, we attended a testimony meeting in the Sacred Grove, where Joseph Smith said God the Father and God the Son had first appeared to him. The trees were tall with bare trunks and leafy tops. Shafts of sunlight came

through the shade. A hushed reverence rested upon those around me. I could not help sharing it, and I saw a glimmering of why I, a disbeliever, could not abandon Mormonism" (188).

In much the same way that the conflict between sin and guilt dominates Peterson's fiction, this tension between devotion and disbelief dominates much of his nonfiction, including his biography of Juanita Brooks, his essays in *Sunstone* and *Dialogue*, and, ultimately, the story that he tells in his autobiography. The most common theme in all of these works—as evidenced by titles such as "The Art of Dissent Among the Mormons," "Lavina Fielding Anderson and the Power of a Church in Exile," "The Civilizing of Mormondom: The Indispensable Role of the Intellectual"—is that a religion claiming to represent a loving and tolerant God must have some space for those who believe differently, or believe not at all. Soon after the publication of *The Canyons of Grace*, Peterson reports, he made a conscious decision to create this space: "I had long recognized that I was no anti-Mormon, having no wish to see Mormonism dwindle and die away. But I did wish to see it liberalize itself, becoming more humane, more adaptable to change, and less at odds with science and learning, and I saw therein an active role for people like me. My mood now, for various reasons, was such that I wished to take up that role. . . . Almost everything I have written or said within a Mormon context ever since has been done with an eye towards realizing it further" (279).

A Rascal by Nature, A Christian by Yearning is simply the most recent work in the grand project that Peterson articulates in this passage. It is a pioneer autobiography from someone who has spent a lifetime exploring, and colonizing, the precariously narrow frontier between faith and doubt. Throughout the book, Peterson is almost compulsively truthful. He does not obscure his failures, but neither does he exaggerate them. The result is a fitting addition to an already important body of work and a remarkable memoir that created a complex portrait of a man who has spent his life making sure that the expanding world of Mormonism would contain enough room for a person like me.

An Inside View of Polygamy in the Midwest

Vickie Cleverley Speek. *"God Has Made Us a Kingdom": James Strang and the Midwest Mormons*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006. xii + 396 pp.

Reviewed by Bill Shepard, a historian of Strangite heritage and a personal friend of Vickie Speek.

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