

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.

Vickie Speek is a fifth-generation Mormon whose progenitors were pioneers in

Idaho. An award-winning journalist, she received the Award of Excellence from the Illinois Historical Society in 2001 for her research on the Civil War. Demonstrating her skills again in *God Has Made Us a Kingdom*, she has written objectively in a narrative style that captivates the reader.

This book had its genesis when Speek journeyed from Illinois to Burlington, Wisconsin, in 1992 to purchase craft supplies from a store bordering on Highway 36 and Mormon Road. When she saw the sign designated "Mormon Road," she was puzzled because she knew of no Mormon settlement in the area. Her subsequent investigations changed her life as she began a twelve-year study of James J. Strang, his church, and his wives.

Although this book does not rival Milo M. Quaife's outstanding 1930 biography, *The Kingdom of Saint James: A Narrative of the Mormons* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), Speek adequately covers Strang's background, his entrance into Mormonism, his claims of leadership of the Mormon Church, his ministry, his settlements at Voree and Beaver Island, and the hostile interactions there between the Mormons and Gentiles. Moreover, she provides a wealth of new information about Strangite polygamy and presents Strang's wives so realistically that they seem to be acquaintances.

A great strength of this book is her examination of the confusion and desperation among Church members after Strang was mortally wounded by disaffected members on Beaver Island on June 16, 1856, and died at Voree less than three weeks later.

A central figure in this book is Strang's first wife, Mary Abigail Perce, whom Strang married in November 1836. Speek brings her to life. Like Emma Smith, Mary was an intelligent woman whose life was marked by hardship, tragedy, and her husband's betrayal. Her struggle with polygamy and a husband who sired children by four "new" wives is told in a manner that will cause most readers to both admire and pity her. We follow that struggle from Strang's entrance into Mormonism in 1844 until her death in 1880. It is a narrative that describes the dark side of Mormon polygamy.

The examination of Elvira Eliza Field, Strang's first plural wife, is representative of Speek's fine scholarship. Speek explains that Elvira was an extremely intelligent woman who was a tailor, schoolteacher, feminist, meteorologist, legislative secretary, and avid hunter. The eighteen-year-old Elvira first became acquainted with Strang at a conference at Voree in April 1848; and after her family moved to Beaver Island the following year, Elvira and Strang married in secret on July 13. From September 1849 through March 1850, Elvira masqueraded as Strang's nephew and scribe, using the name Charley Douglass, as they journeyed on an important mission to the eastern churches. In spite of Strang's denials, rumors abounded that "Charley" was a woman and the escapade did much to tip the Church into a downward spiral.

Speck documents that Elvira had four children by Strang: Charles James in 1851; Evaline in 1853; Clement in 1854, and James Jesse in January 1857. She situates Elvira, five months pregnant, at Voree when Strang died in July 1856, leaving her dependent on others and on her labor in the fields at Voree. She next moved to Jackson County, Wisconsin, where she joined other Strangites, then moved to be near relatives at Eaton Rapids, Michigan, around 1860. At Eaton Rapids, Elvira came so near death from typhoid fever that she gave the guardianship of her four children to non-relatives. Upon regaining her health, she recovered three of the children, but Jesse's guardians refused to return the child, considering their adoption of him final.

Elvira married widower John Baker, the father of five, in 1865 and bore an two additional children. John was a wonderful husband, and they had a good life together. Although Elvira continued to love Strang for years, she ultimately concluded that God had taken him because of his pride and secret sins.

Born in 1820, Elizabeth ("Betsy") McNutt Strang converted to Strangism with her family in 1846-47 and moved with them to Beaver Island in 1850. Betsy was not considered pretty and was referred to as an "old maid." When pestered about getting married, she made it known she would marry only the prophet. Accordingly, she and Strang were, in fact, married in early 1852, and she moved in with Strang and Elvira. She bore Strang four children: Evangeline in 1853; David James in 1854; Gabriel in 1855; and Abigail in January 1857, some six months after Strang's death. She was known for her fine cooking and for managing the family's domestic affairs effectively.

Following Strang's death, Betsy and her children shared a small home with Elvira and her children at Voree where they survived by working in the fields and by charity. The sister wives moved to Jackson County, Wisconsin, by early 1859 and joined other Strangites, surviving by working in the fields and by picking and selling blueberries. Living in numerous locations during the ensuing years, Betsy preserved many invaluable Strangite records, finally living with daughter Evangeline and her husband John Denio. The latter ultimately moved to Lamoni, Iowa, and joined the Reorganized Church, but it is unclear whether Betsy also affiliated. She died in September 1897 and was buried in the Lamoni Cemetery. Speck indicates that Betsy was the last of the polygamous wives to deny Strang.

Although Elvira is the best-known plural wife, the most remarkable may have been Sarah Wright Strang Wing. Sarah's father, Strangite Apostle Phineas Wright, told his seventeen-year-old daughter that he "would almost as soon see you buried [than] marry in to polygamy" (194). Nevertheless, Sarah married Strang in July 1855 and joined Elvira and Betsy as sister wives. In a 1920 letter to Milo M. Quaife, Sarah provided a glimpse into Strangite polygamy: "You ask if we all lived in the same house. We did but in separate rooms. All met in

prayer—ate at the same table. We had no quarrels, no jealousies that I knew of. He was a very mild-spoken kind man to his family although his word was law. We were all honest in our religion and made things as pleasant as possible" (196).

Sarah came to Voree to visit Strang prior to his death but could not stay because she accompanied her family to Jackson County where James Phineas, her only child by Strang, was born in November 1856. Within three years Sarah married non-Mormon Joseph Smith Wing, a self-taught doctor, and bore his son by 1859. In 1862 Wing joined the church under Brigham Young, and he, the pregnant Sarah, and their two children set out for Utah. Wing stopped unexpectedly at a house near Clayton, Illinois, and convinced a twelve-year-old daughter by a previous marriage to join the emigration to Utah. The incredulous Sarah then learned that, in addition to the mother of this daughter, her husband had been married to and divorced from two other women before he met Sarah. Speek summarizes: "She was in fact not his first wife as she had supposed—she was his fourth!" (289).

Pregnant and already the mother of two young children, Sarah had no choice but remain with Wing. They arrived in Utah in August 1862 and ultimately settled near Provo, where within four years Wing married six women. Thoroughly disillusioned with polygamy, Sarah separated from him by the early 1870s and went on to make a remarkable contribution to frontier Utah: "At a time when it was unusual for women to work in a profession, Sarah Wright became a respected physician in Springville, earning as much as \$2,500 a year. She officiated at the birth of hundreds of children, including her own grandchildren" (292). She died in Boise, Idaho, in 1923. In a letter to Milo M. Quaipe in 1920 she wrote: "I had faith that James was a prophet of God and would not do wrong. I don't believe today that God ever speaks to any man" (294).

Phoebe Wright, daughter of Benjamin Wright, a leading member of Strang's Church, became Strang's fourth and last plural wife in October 1855. Described as pretty, energetic, ambitious, and witty, she moved in with Strang, Elvira, Betsy, and her cousin Sarah. She was at her husband's bedside when he died at Voree and shortly thereafter moved with her family to Jackson County, Wisconsin, where Strang's posthumous daughter, Eugenia Jesse, was born in October 1856. She changed her last name to Jesse with the expectation she would again take Strang's name when the Strangites were sufficiently "gathered." This never occurred, although she apparently loved him all her life. Phoebe never remarried and lived with Eugenia and her husband until her death in 1914 at Tacoma, Washington.

"God Has Made Us a Kingdom" will appeal not only to descendants of the Strangites but also to others interested in Mormon history. Providing new in-

sight into the legacy of James J. Strang and his wives, it is well researched and deeply documented. A great strength of this book is its clear, easy-to-read style.