

I guess you could say Jonathan Langford's book isn't so much about going back as it is about going forward. And that's a good thing.

Too Long Ignored

Ronald G. Watt. *The Mormon Passage of George D. Watt: First British Convert, Scribe for Zion*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009. 293 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, index. Cloth: \$39.95; ISBN: 978-0-87421-756-8

Reviewed by Polly Aird

Although George Darling Watt (1812–81) is perhaps best known in the LDS Church as the first convert in the British Isles, he also recorded Brigham Young's sermons in shorthand for more than sixteen years, preserving them as key historical and theological resources. And yet, after feeling bullied by Young, Watt left the church he had loved, associated with the Godbeites, and became a spiritualist. Ronald G. Watt, George's descendent, has made it his life's work to bring his ancestor back into the light of day. The result is a flawed but significant biography.

George Watt had a childhood and youth of almost Dickensian poverty and illiteracy. When he was fourteen, his stepfather ejected him from the family home and onto the streets of Manchester. Some months later, a woman, perhaps his mother, found him and took him to a government workhouse where he was essentially imprisoned. There a fellow inmate finally taught him to read and write. The contrast between these beginnings and his later life are dramatic, but Ronald Watt moves through these years quickly, pausing to develop a more rounded picture only with Watt's conversion to Mormonism in 1837 at age twenty-five.

From then on, though still poor, he had something to live for—not only religious belief but a significant social position, for he was quickly ordained a priest and then an elder and missionary. When assigned to the mission in Scotland, he studied shorthand in Edinburgh. In September 1842, he sailed for New Orleans with his wife, Molly (whom he had married in 1835), and

their two young sons. They arrived in Nauvoo early in 1843. After the death of Joseph Smith and while Watt was still in Nauvoo, his finances were even lower than his usual poverty. Willard Richards suggested that Watt record Church leaders' addresses and also teach shorthand classes. Brigham Young employed him, gave him a desk in his office, provided a lot, and had a house built for him and his family. Mentorship by both Richards and Young was significant but not consistent.

In spite of his unpromising beginnings, Watt became a graceful and lucid writer, and the narrative uses quotations to good advantage. For example, in 1851 aboard the *Ellen Maria* when George and Molly Watt were returning to America from a mission in Great Britain, he wrote of a storm: "Outside the wind is heard raging on like the voices of a thousand malignant spirits screaming the requiem of some distant wreck" (87). And during another storm on the same crossing, "Two water bottles that had not been tied the night before took a notion to dance a reel. A little brown one leaped from its place and danced over the deck. Its large brown neighbor seeing this decided to join in the dance, rolling and tumbling over the deck. Then a provision box introduced its four corners into the reel" (89).

Ronald G. Watt has structured the book to give an overview of George Watt's life in the introduction, which is then recapitulated in depth in the chapters that follow. This arrangement is dramatically unsatisfying as it precludes a compelling narrative of the building tensions that led to his leaving the Church. The book lacks a bibliography, making future research more difficult. Nevertheless, Ronald Watt has accomplished a remarkable archival feat in unearthing every known letter, diary, or other writing by George Watt to reveal the man's life and character.

The chapter on Watt's life in Great Britain is the weakest. I would have liked a discussion of millennialism—a belief common in Great Britain at that time—and how the Mormons understood it, which would have added context to Watt's instant attraction to Mormonism. This chapter also contains some errors of fact, including that marriage banns were related to the couple's poverty (18 note 44) (they were not; all couples were required to have banns posted to see if there was any impediment to the marriage); that Glasgow is "a seacoast city" (62) (it is on the River Clyde, not

the coast); that the census was taken in 1840 (62) (it was in 1841); that the Church of Scotland collected tithes (63) (it did not collect from the working classes, from which the Mormons drew their converts; it was the landed aristocracy that mostly supported the church); and finally, the term “whiskey” (67-68) when referring to Scotch should be spelled without an “e.” Although minor, these errors, plus others scattered throughout the book, indicate a lack of attention to detail.

Watt’s diary of the family’s first overland journey ended three days before they reached Fort Laramie, and Ronald Watt summarizes the rest of the trip in just over a page. This briskness perhaps reflects his decision to include only those events in which we hear George Watt’s voice, but it results in a false impression of the overland trek, for Fort Laramie was only the halfway point. From then on, the pioneers experienced the greatest hardships in crossing the Rocky Mountains and running short of food. A number of extant diaries by Watt’s fellow travelers chronicle the journey to Salt Lake City, including that of the eloquent Jean Rio Baker (whose diary Ronald Watt uses in describing New Orleans, St. Louis, and Kaneshville), and the John Brown Company journal and Elias Smith journal (both used several times). They could have been employed to complete and give balance to the description of the journey.

As the company approached the Sweetwater River, they met ninety Snake Indians on their way to sign the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty with government representatives, one of the landmark events of U.S. western history. Ten thousand Plains Indians gathered at Fort Laramie and agreed to keep the peace among the tribes and to allow emigrants safe passage on the overland trail in exchange for an annual annuity. Noting the importance of this treaty—which enabled Mormon pioneers to travel without Indian interference for years to come—would have brought Watt’s trail experience into the broader American emigration story. Ronald Watt’s decision not to mention the significance of this treaty strikes me as a missed opportunity. Although its omission does not affect the story of George Watt himself, it lessens the stature of the book.

The six middle chapters in the book, covering Watt’s life in Salt Lake City, are treated thematically rather than chronologi-

cally: a chapter on Mormon history in Utah between 1847 and 1867, executed with broad brush strokes and with Watt's voice appearing only in regard to his experience in the Utah War; one on Watt as a reporter for the newspaper and then for the Church; one on his part in creating the Deseret Alphabet; one on Watt's plural marriages (five) and his family life in Salt Lake City; one on his intellectual pursuits; and one that combines an account of his travels accompanying Brigham Young with a description of his last trip to England. Although this topical approach highlights different aspects of Watt's life, the resulting chronological shifts can be disorienting to the reader.

Watt experienced two critical turning points in his life in Utah, both involving arguments with leaders he perceived as overbearing and autocratic. The first was with Willard Richards, Watt's temple-sealed adopted father, editor of the *Deseret News*, and second counselor to President Brigham Young. A twelve-day epistolary conflict between Watt and Richards in September 1852 centered on Richards's failure to pay George Watt for the sermons he had transcribed for the *News*. Their arguments give a unique and fascinating glimpse into Mormon thought of the time. Watt ended the exchange with, "You can lead me but you cannot intimidate me. . . . My attachment to you is unchanging, and am ready to fulfil all your wishes that do not cut off the possibility of my providing the reasonable comforts of life for my family" (4, 125, 128–33). They finally reconciled eleven months later.

The second argument jump-started Watt's doubts about Mormonism. In 1868 when he was working for Brigham Young as a clerk and stenographer, continually recording Young's and other leaders' sermons and discourses, he felt justified in asking for a raise. Ronald Watt writes: "Feeling desperate about the financial pressures of his suffering family, Watt was asking for \$5.00 a day, a raise of \$1.50. The labor-management discussion rapidly turned heated. Young grudgingly guessed he would have to pay Watt what he demanded but thought that he did not deserve it. As far as Young was concerned, no one in the office worked hard enough for the pay he received. Watt felt that was tantamount to an accusation of stealing. He was outraged and wounded" (1, 229–30). Watt donned his hat and left Young's office for good.

Ten years later in 1878, the year after Brigham Young died,

Watt wrote to the new president, John Taylor: "I was suddenly and unexpectedly crushed, by a public charge of meanness and sly robbery, by one against whose affirmation I had no appeal. I could only see my character as an honest man gone among my friends and brethren, my future efforts to do good defeated, over thirty years of labor and struggle a blank, and branded as a scoundrel to the end of my life" (1, 260). Ronald Watt, in his vivid portrayal of this argument, does not gloss over Young's domineering, bullying character as Watt experienced it, his stinginess about Watt's salary, and his denigration of Watt and his work. The unsparring description is one of the strengths of the book.

After leaving Young's office, Watt joined with two partners to open a general store in Salt Lake City. Their efforts collided with President Young's initiation of the Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution (ZCMI). Watt and his partners demonstrated that they could sell goods more cheaply than ZCMI, but they had not anticipated Young's call for a boycott of non-ZCMI merchants. Young thus undermined Watt and his partners' business, and they quickly went bankrupt, resulting in Watt's loss of all his properties in Salt Lake City. Once again thwarted in supporting his family, Watt left the Church and retreated to his farm in Davis County.

Ronald Watt's interest is in George Watt's life as a Mormon; and as a result, he describes him in the introduction as a person who "let his faith fail," then continues, "This should have been a biography of an ancestor that his Mormon descendants would be proud of" (8). The chapters themselves, however, reveal Watt not as a simple backslider, but as a complex character changing over time as the result of his experiences. That Watt was bitter about Young's treatment of him and that he left the Church, became a spiritualist, and associated with the Godbeites need not have been treated as an embarrassment. The Godbeites were mostly British intellectuals, men of good will and integrity, who wanted to reform the Church and retain whatever they found good in Mormonism. Watt, though never fully one of them, shared their background and views and came to truly believe in spiritualism. While Ronald Watt may be distressed that George Watt's story fails as a devotional example, he has fortunately limited his disappointment to the preface and introduction, allowing a more complex reality to emerge in the course of the biography. Despite its flaws,

this book marks a major milestone in bringing to life the narrative of an amazing and honorable man.

More remains to be done to give Watt his full due: to see Watt's accomplishments in terms of his bleak beginnings in a British workhouse, to consider how he could overcome those beginnings to become something of an intellectual in early Utah, to wonder if Young's poor treatment of him stemmed from some kind of jealousy, to admire Watt's refusal to be crushed by powerful men. And perhaps there is still a larger story to be told about Watt's place in the practice of shorthand in the United States, in his desire to create a pure language, or in the economics of agriculture he developed in later years.