

photos—forgotten gems of memory and markers of kinship. In the mess, we uncovered truths that Miller teaches: that religion “practices not only prayer but family history” (152) and that things, like people, live in communities of relation. Grace can break out in local squalls in any place, whether a manger or a garage, and even God himself depends on it. We owe gratitude to Adam Miller for making such matters so graciously present.

### Note

1. Blair Hodges, ed., “Ask the Scholar: Adam S. Miller on Grace, Faith, Theology, Boredom, and Other Matters,” May 20, 2013, *Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Blog*, accessed July 16, 2013, [www.maxwellinstituteblog.org/ask-the-scholar-adam-s-miller-on-grace-faith-theology-boredom-and-other-matters](http://www.maxwellinstituteblog.org/ask-the-scholar-adam-s-miller-on-grace-faith-theology-boredom-and-other-matters).

## The ISPP Way and the Navajo Way

Robert S. McPherson, Jim Dandy, and Sarah E. Burak. *Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life: The Autobiography and Teachings of Jim Dandy*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012. 292 pp. Paper: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-1-60781-194-7.

*Reviewed by Patricia Karamesines*

Months after we moved to Blanding, Utah, an LDS Navajo neighbor asked if my ten-year-old daughter would like to play a role in the Voices of San Juan Pageant, a local, outdoor LDS production then staged every year. I'd never seen the pageant but said I thought that she'd like taking part. Then my neighbor told me my girl would be playing a Navajo toiling among other Navajos in a scene portraying the Long Walk. The suggestion that my very white child assume the role of a Navajo in this reenactment of one of the most tragic events in Navajo history startled me so deeply that I laughed out loud. My neighbor laughed, too. But she still wanted my daughter in the role.

My daughter happily accepted the chance to play Indian and performed for three nights. I attended on the final night to see exactly how she fit into the pageant, becoming even more unset-

tled when she suddenly appeared next to me in costume wearing a faux-buckskin dress. I wondered, *What in the world is going on here?*

After a smorgasbord of cultural performances, the pageant began. I've attended many kinds of LDS-themed productions, including the Hill Cumorah Pageant, but, more than once, Voices of San Juan blew my mind.

At one point, there emerged a theme very strange to me. Mormons and Navajos share a common narrative: white authority drove both groups from sacred homelands. As spotlights shone stage right, a shuffling crowd of Navajo men, women, and children trudged into view, dogged by a soldier escort: the Long Walk. I found my daughter among the Navajos, walking head bent down, her stride slow and labored. She wore a cradleboard containing a "baby." Her demeanor was that of the exhausted and forlorn.

The spotlight swung to the next scripted storyline: Mormons making their own Long Walk. Portrayed were two founding settlers of the Bluff Utah Mission, Jens and Elsie Nielson, handcarting it across the plains. A voiceover narrator told us that Jens's feet froze on the trek. Elsie ordered him into the cart and pulled him to the next camp. As Elsie towed Jens, the beleaguered pioneers crossed metaphorical paths with the Navajos, who reentered the scene continuing the Long Walk. The Nielsons fell into step behind them, and the two narratives flowed together into a single, symbolically shared storyline.

Confused as I felt, I was struck by the generosity with which area Navajo converts to Mormonism share their cultural history with the white establishment surrounding them. Yet this commingling in a Mormon performance of what, to my thinking, were two distinctly different storylines caught me completely off guard. Since seeing the pageant, I've thought about it often but felt I lacked a key that would unlock its secrets and give me a glimpse into the underlying insight that everybody else seemed to treat as a given.

Robert S. McPherson, Jim Dandy and Sarah E. Burak's book, *Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life: The Autobiography and Teachings of Jim Dandy*, is such a key. Besides unlocking for me some of the mysteries of the pageant, it also provides a unique view into the LDS Church's controversial Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP). While not positioning itself polemically as a defender of the ISPP, *Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life* clearly seeks to show that,

at least for some Navajos who entered the program, the future changed for the better because the program opened opportunities not available in their communities. Furthermore, the Church and Navajo Nation's investment in the elementary and high school educations that ISPP Navajos received—specifically, Jim Dandy, but other ISPP Navajos also have their say—paid off both for the participants and for their Navajo communities when they returned to them. The book also argues that, whereas other Christian religions required Indians entering their folds to renounce their native cultures, the LDS Church adopted a freer stance, in part because LDS teachings and the Navajo Way contain enough similarities to make it possible for practitioners of the Navajo Way to preserve key traditions when they were baptized into the Church. As McPherson and Dandy sketch it out, Dandy's life is a bridge between the Navajo past and present and between Navajo tradition and LDS practice; he's the showpiece for all three objectives mentioned.

To set the stage for understanding Dandy's and other Navajos' experiences of the placement program, McPherson provides some historical context. In the 1940s an economic crisis on the reservation prepared the ground for the placement program to "[take] root" (9). At that time, Spencer W. Kimball headed the Church's Committee on Indian Relationships. He enthusiastically embraced any chance for improving the Church's bond with the group of people he thought to be Lamanites, descendants of a prophet that the Book of Mormon describes as having fled to the American continent from Jerusalem prior to its destruction. McPherson quotes Kimball as declaring, "The difference between them and us is opportunity" (9), and it was Kimball who, in 1947, facilitated the first informal foster placement of a young Navajo woman who wanted to continue her schooling off the reservation. By the 1953–54 school year, more Navajo parents, seeking better educations for their children, requested that their children be fostered into the program. From this start thousands of Navajo children entered the ISPP and were educated in public schools in the communities where their foster families lived.

McPherson argues that this was far from a case of mass kidnapping from a vulnerable population. In most cases, Navajo parents

requested their children's placement. While baptism was a requirement for entering the program, McPherson suggests that continued commitment to Church practice—or, in the majority of cases, lack of commitment—did not at the time affect the Church's overall program goal of helping Navajos gain improved educational opportunities. In fact, as an instrument of integrating Navajos into Mormon culture, the program could be seen as a failure.<sup>1</sup> One reason for this shortfall may be that Navajo culture provides no context for baptism. Children baptized into the Church at their entry into the ISPP probably found little meaning in the ordinance and certainly had no reason to consider it the opening step in a continuing commitment to Church practice.<sup>2</sup> While McPherson doesn't go so far as to speak of baptism as being a mere formality, his evidence suggests that, like the delousing step also implemented, baptism was in effect little more than a procedural practicality.

While McPherson acknowledges that “the ISPP received mixed reviews from participants and outsiders” and that various groups' claims that it was “a vehicle of cultural genocide” (12) contain some truth, he cites studies of former students to show that the fruits the ISPP bore for the Navajo population have mostly been good ones. His counterarguments to charges of racism and cultural raiding leveled against the Church are balanced in tone and seem, for the purposes of this book, well-researched. I would have liked to read more from Navajos who felt the program did them or their communities disservices or harm, but exploring such cases is not among this book's aims.

On a personal note, I've talked with former ISPP Navajos who view the opportunities the program gave them as profoundly improving their chances for success and well-being, especially by way of education. My colleagues at Utah State University-Eastern Blanding include some ISPP participants, and I am acquainted with other Navajos named in the book. Some are more traditional than others. Jim Dandy swings toward the far end of traditional Navajo practice and belief. Furthermore, USU-Eastern Blanding hosts a large Native American student population. The cultural spectrum—from “traditional” to “non-traditional”—that former ISPP participants display is reflected in the current student body, few members of which took part in the ISPP. Whatever the reasons may be for this range in traditional practice, many Navajo students sig-

nal in their writing, conversations, and other pursuits a strong cultural faith in the power of education to provide them with better prospects, just as their ISPP instructors and counselors do. This faith is commonly voiced in the song, "Go My Son,"<sup>3</sup> performed in this area at many social functions where Navajos take part.

Indeed, many Navajo parents, elders, and Navajo leaders urge each generation of school children to seek education as a means for improving their opportunities for success and for raising the condition of their people. For example, at the 2013 graduation ceremonies for USU-Eastern Blanding, Navajo Shirlee Silver-smith, the first woman appointed Director of the Division of Indian Affairs to Utah Tribes, herself a graduate of the ISPP and a first-generation graduate of the public school system, told students, "Learning is for life; education creates opportunities beyond your dreams. Find the path that connects your head to your heart and allow passion to guide you on your journey to success." She then urged students to give back to the *Diné*, the Navajo Nation. McPherson, Dandy, and Burak's book describes and explains this cultural drive for education and argues in compelling manner that the ISPP aided in its acceleration, all misidentifications of Navajos as Lamanites aside.

*Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life* contains interviews with other Navajos whose involvement in the ISPP eventually led them to choose careers in education. However, the book highlights the program's striking effects upon the Utah Strip of the Navajo Nation's educational infrastructure through the story of Jim Dandy's placement program experience, spotlighting his consequent life-long career as a sports coach, an educator, and a tenacious champion of increased educational opportunities for Navajo children. In fact, Dandy's story is deeply braided into the history of changes in the reservation's educational environment.

*Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life* shows that Dandy didn't start off as a fan of education. When he was a child, the choices for schooling lay between the Indian<sup>4</sup> boarding schools and the Church's ISPP program. Boarding schools were often notorious for their severe treatment of Indian children. Many of them engaged in wholesale cultural stripping, forcing Native American children to cut their hair, to abandon traditional clothing, to stop

speaking their native languages, and to use only English. In a chapter titled “Boarding School and Placement,” McPherson provides historical background and interviews to highlight the contrasts between boarding school practices and the generally more culture-friendly nature of the ISPP. Jim himself was first sent to the boarding school at Shalako, Oklahoma, and found it a hostile environment. He relates how children from other tribes behaved aggressively toward him and describes the trouble this caused him. Most telling, however, are his memories of how boarding school officials described his prospects:

Instead of helping, they treated me as if I was ignorant, saying, “Jim Dandy you’re just no good. You’ll never learn. This is not the place for you. We’re just going to have to do something, send you somewhere.” There was no warmth in anything they said or did. After they told me that I would never succeed in school, my behavior changed and I was in trouble constantly. It really bothered me to think that I was no good and that I did not belong there. I still have in the back of my mind that I can’t learn. I had completed two years at Shalako, but the third year I started a different program. (101)

The boarding school ushered him into a vocational school, and from there his life took a plunge. The story of how he became involved in the LDS Church is, in some ways, typical. The story of his becoming enrolled in the placement program is wholly unique. He entered the program at age eighteen or nineteen, well past the age for eligibility. That he got into the ISPP at all was, as he says, “a miracle” (104). He was relocated to Plymouth, Utah, where he lived with a family who he says, “taught me a lot and treated me like one of their own, which helped me to get an education” (105). Eventually, his older age drew the Church’s attention, and Jim reports that “they determined to send me back to the reservation” (105). The story he tells of his foster family’s resolve to keep him with them, despite Church expectations, may seem understated. Yet the family’s dedication to Jim, who had been led to believe he wasn’t worth the trouble, comes through in the tale. This kind of “family” intervention in behalf of a member is common in strong Navajo families, and it wasn’t lost on Jim. Of his foster parents, he says, “They were just like my own parents” (105).

Was Dandy and other Navajo kids’ tenure in the program a misfortune that befell their respective communities, or did the

education that Jim Dandy received advantage those communities? In the chapter titled “Education as a Life’s Work,” Dandy answers these questions in his own words. His lifelong involvement in helping improve education for Navajos living in Utah’s San Juan County led to the building of two high schools and an elementary school on the reservation, as well as to the instituting of bilingual/bicultural programs at each school. In this chapter, Dandy describes his involvement in the *Sinajini v. Board of Education* lawsuit, a lengthy legal action that led to those schools’ constructions. His role in facilitating change for school-aged Navajo children required him to negotiate on both sides of the cultural divide, on the one hand maintaining pressure on the San Juan School District to provide school facilities and funding, and on the other hand, working with Navajo community members to secure land and rights of way for building the schools and to gain trust and support for his bilingual/bicultural programs. Throughout this chapter, Dandy speaks in what Arthur Henry King called “plain style”—unembellished yet authentically tuned, straightforward language that numbers his accomplishments not as crowing triumphs but as testaments to the benefits the ISPP gave to him, and, through him, to the Navajo Nation.

While the entire book positions itself as a work whose *raison d’être* is to bring balance to ongoing discussions of the ISPP, perhaps the most eye-opening part of *Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life* is its final section, titled “Jim Dandy’s Teachings.” Its sketches of similarities between the Navajo Way and LDS teachings provided “aha!” moments that made it possible for me to put to rest much of my uneasiness over aspects of the Voices of San Juan Pageant as well as other local cultural phenomena. As Dandy lays it out, the dovetailing between the two belief systems is a real phenomenon, not just an instance of one culture’s coloring over another culture’s narrative as the next act in a long series of acts of subjugation. These similarities have helped Dandy carve a niche for himself as a priesthood holder and faithful member of the LDS Church while at the same time serving in a position of cultural importance to the Navajos and local Euro-Americans as a cultural mediator. Through what seems the most unlikely of social and religious pairings, Dandy demonstrates, at times with stunning clar-

ity, how, despite his deep commitment to the LDS Church, much of the Navajo Way is still his way.

Without being strident or resorting to apologetics, *Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life* gives its readers a chance to hear Navajo voices speak up about the ISPP successes in empowering the *Diné* to “lift their people up.” There is a side of the story often ignored or dismissed in the public discourse about the ISPP and its effects on tribal cultures. For instance, in her book *Trespass: Living at the Edge of the Promised Land*, writer Amy Irvine,<sup>5</sup> who lived for a while in Monticello, twenty-two miles north of Blanding, says of the program,

As late as 1990, the Church also operated the LDS Placement Program, which relocated Indian children into Mormon foster families under pretense of offering them accessibility to a better education—for the best schools and social services were in white communities, not on reservations. Though the program was touted as being strictly voluntary, there was a catch: in exchange for participation, the children were to become members of the LDS faith. (90–92)

Irvine’s complaint is against what is commonly called the LDS Church’s (and other Christian cultures’) colonizing practices. The Church, Irvine says, pretended (“under pretense,” “touted,” “there was a catch”) altruism in its practice of helping Native American children get better educations. The real purpose, she asserts, was to absorb Indians into the body of the Church. The best answer to Irvine’s and others’ criticisms comes perhaps from Jim Dandy himself:

When the LDS Church ended the placement program I was upset. There were a lot of things said about it that were false. People accused the program of doing away with Navajo culture by removing young people from it. That is not true. A lot of the people I know who were on placement are now principals, school superintendents, and in other leadership positions. They have sought out their culture, understand it, are good Navajo speakers, and continue to learn. . . . [A] lot of the placement students who went through the program have done well in both worlds. It is sad to see this program gone, because a lot of children now do not have a place to go, especially if they come from broken homes. If they had the program, it could help them along as it did me. (108)

In the competition for control of the narrative about the nature and effects of the placement program, *Navajo Tradition*,

*Mormon Life* opens a space for Navajo voices. To dismiss this book's authentic and authoritative stories as cases of the enslaved embracing their enslavement or of LDS brainwashing is to risk that very imposition of a worldview upon Native Americans and their cultures that critics accuse the Church of committing against the Indians. Beyond speaking to balance the discussion of the ISPP, McPherson, Dandy, and Burak's book provides an important historical account of the development of the educational infrastructure in the Utah Strip of the Navajo Nation, a history whose effects continue to open the future for generations of Navajos. It's also a unique work that catalogues similarities between the LDS and Navajo religious cosmos. It's a delightful, surprising, and revelatory cultural, historical, and autobiographical work that anyone interested in the Church's placement program or in Navajo tradition should include in their scholarship library. As a bonus, it also illuminates the Voices of San Juan Pageant, perhaps the most unique of the Church's many public, testimonial spectacles.

### Notes

1. McPherson: "Statistics are not available to determine how many [other Indians] [experienced LDS teachings as a wider opening of Navajo teachings]', but a large number certainly did not remain faithful after placement ended. Many returned to traditional practices, joined another Christian denomination or the Native American Church, or, like Ella Bedonie [an ISPP student], had no strong religious beliefs. My personal observation suggests that well over fifty percent fall into this latter category. Today wards and branches on the Navajo reservation have far more names on the rolls than ever attend a meeting or participate in any type of activity" (19).

2. McPherson, quoting from Kendall A. Blanchard's study, *The Economics of Sainthood: Religious Change among the Rimrock Navajos*: "Most Rimrock Mormons contend that the Navajos who are baptized rarely, if ever, understand the significance of this most vital of sacraments, and therefore they do not expect radical change. In light of this, the majority of the Rimrock Navajos have never felt the traditional lifestyles threatened by the tenets of Mormonism" (19).

### "Go My Son" lyrics

Spoken introduction:

Long ago an Indian War Chief counseled his people in the way they

should walk. He wisely told them that education is the ladder to success and happiness. "Go my son, and climb that ladder. . . ."

Go, my son, go and climb the ladder.  
Go, my son, go and earn your feather.  
Go, my son, make your people proud of you.  
Work, my son, get an education.  
Work, my son, learn a good vocation and  
Climb, my son. Go and take a lofty view.  
From on the ladder of an education,  
You can see to help your Indian Nation,  
And reach, my son, and lift your people up with you.  
Go, my son, go and climb the ladder.  
Go, my son, go and earn your feather.  
Go, my son, make your people proud of you.  
Work, my son, get an education.  
Work, my son, learn a good vocation and  
Climb, my son. Go and take a lofty view.  
From on the ladder of an education,  
You can see to help your Indian Nation,  
And reach, my son. Lift your people up with you.

3. Hozho Nahasdlii', *Language of the Holy People*, 2006, accessed May 26, 2013, <http://www.gomyson.com/gmssong.html>.

4. *Navajo Tradition, Mormon Life* uses the word "Indian" predominantly to indicate all Native Americans. The authors' choice of using "Indian" reflects the trend here in the Four Corners region, including among Navajos, and, increasingly, in scholarly venues. For instance, my Navajo supervisors say "Indian," "Native," or refer to a specific nation when referring to the students or to their own families.

5. Amy Irvine, *Trespass: Living at the Edge of the Promised Land* (New York: North Point Press, 2008).

## **Eternal Families: Persecution Days or Rapture?**

Jenn Ashworth. *The Friday Gospels*. London: Sceptre, 2013. 336 pp. Paper: £8.99. ISBN: 978-1444707748.

*Reviewed by Julie J. Nichols*