

REVIEWS

Our Progenitors as People, or Inside Nauvoo

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Nightfall at Nauvoo. By Samuel W. Taylor. New York: Macmillan Company, 1971. 403 pp. \$8.95.

When Samuel W. Taylor began toying with the idea of writing on the Nauvoo period of Mormon history, his editor undoubtedly pointed out that as fiction the subject was strictly a zero. Who would believe it? Mr. Taylor settled for what he does best: historical fiction — a fortuitous blend of the historian's facts and the raconteur's insight and wit.

The fiction in *Nightfall at Nauvoo* comes not so much from made up incidents or altered facts — although with no specific sources given one finds himself questioning the historicity of certain events and disturbed by some of the innuendos — as from the effort to get inside the minds of the principal characters and to describe what *might* have been their inner thoughts. "Each human being has two sides, appropriate to history and fiction," E.M. Forster points out. "All that is observable in a man — that is to say his actions and such of his spiritual existence as can be deduced from his actions — falls into the domain of history. But his romanceful or romantic side includes 'the pure passions, that is to say the dreams, joys, sorrows and self-communings which politeness or shame prevent him from mentioning'; and to express this side of human nature is one of the chief functions of the novel."

Thus historical figures who otherwise might be flat and uninteresting come alive in the hands of the skilled writer. Taylor readily admits that he is not writing as an historian: "The historian's viewpoint is like that of the gooney-bird, which flies backwards because it doesn't care where it's going but only where it's been. He interprets events at Nauvoo in light of what subsequently happened. As a writer I couldn't look ahead, any more than the people I met on the streets of Nauvoo could foresee the future, not a month, a day, or an hour. I couldn't judge events any more than they could by what hadn't yet happened. I wasn't looking back at Nauvoo; I was there" (p. 375).

But Taylor is not content merely to write a work of pure imagination. He has researched the contemporary newspapers, journals, and public records, as evidenced by the annotated bibliography. He offers novel answers to some of the old questions about Nauvoo. How did a small anti-Mormon minority effectively force the expulsion of the Saints from the State? Taylor points to the secret practice of polygamy, the political aspirations of Joseph Smith, and the religious persecution arising from ignorance on both sides. But he also sees in the story of Nauvoo a modern Greek tragedy, with a

tragic flaw which doomed it from the beginning. He signals October 30, 1838, as pivotal, the date when Joseph Smith started to Washington "initiating a chain of events that would eventually enmesh the Prophet and cause his death, and that would cause the largest city of Illinois to become a ghost town" (p. 32). In his attempt to secure redress from the federal government, the Prophet insisted that the Missourians had held him without charge and that they had arranged for his escape and allowed him to walk free, just on the other side of the Mississippi River. The powerful Missourians and their allies in Washington were forced to avenge the honor and integrity of their state; the Mormons had embarrassed them before the nation. Immediately, harassment of the Saints began with determined attempts to extradite Joseph Smith to Missouri. A senate investigation "established" that, far from being innocent people, the Mormons had brought many of their problems on themselves and had plundered the Missourians — conclusions published in Senate Document 189. This kind of "press" quickly changed the mood of the residents of Illinois. The kindly people who had recently befriended the Mormons became cold toward their new neighbors, distrustful of their intentions and their sincerity.

Adding to the problem, according to Taylor, were the numerous thieves and cutthroats who had operated in the area of Nauvoo long before the Saints had arrived. Many, believing the Mormons defended their own "no matter what," chose baptism as an easy, inexpensive way (tithing was only 10%) to gain protection under the power granted the Nauvoo City Charter. Thus Nauvoo had an underworld. When wrongs were committed, the presumption was "A Mormon had no faults; a Gentile could have no virtues." The misbehavior of the few thus undermined the reputation of the entire Mormon community.

Why did the Saints leave Nauvoo in the dead of winter? Taylor provides an answer in the actions of Sam Brannan, the leader of the first Mormon group to arrive in the West. Brannan had unwittingly entangled the Church with the "Bobby Baker" of that day — Amos Kendall — who wielded much power and influence and was "the man to see" in Washington. Claiming to represent a syndicate of 26 powerful, high ranking officials (including Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri and the President of the U.S., James K. Polk), Kendall presented Brannan with a deal amounting to simple extortion by power politics. In return for being allowed to migrate, the Mormons must agree to deed half of all the lands they acquired to A.G. Benson & Co., a front organization. If this were not done, when the ice broke and "the river was navigable, U.S. troops stationed at New Orleans were under orders to go upriver to Nauvoo, disarm the Saints, serve Federal indictments on Brigham and the Twelve for counterfeiting, and lodge the Twelve in Carthage jail — where they probably would meet the same fate as had Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Brannan had to sign the agreement in time for Kendall to pass the word to President Polk to countermand that order to the troops" (p. 326).

Although such historical theories are intriguing, the fascination of *Nightfall at Nauvoo* rests largely with Taylor's literary ability to make the city and its residents "come alive." What have heretofore been only names become real people with problems and thoughts. Joseph Smith, Sidney Rig-

don, John Taylor, Porter Rockwell, Dr. Bernhisel, the Law brothers, Willard Richards and others live and breathe as personalities, making Taylor's book believable as fiction, if not as history. We accompany Eliza R. Snow as she is secretly courted by the Prophet and enters plural marriage. We are in the room where Heber C. Kimball grapples with the choice of giving up his wife or risking damnation. We meet John Taylor's wife, Leonora, in the doctor's office and learn that she sliced her little finger off while in a pan-throwing rage.

We see John C. Bennett parade across the Nauvoo stage and in the course of a few months become second only to Joseph Smith in power and prestige — Mayor of the city, Commander of the Nauvoo Legion, Assistant President of the Church. His licentious nature, which had been his downfall throughout his life, was not corrected, however, when he joined the Mormons. Rather than simply calling Bennett a “dirty old man,” Taylor presents the reader with several clues, allowing him to form his own judgment. For example, after visiting with Sidney Rigdon and his daughter Nancy, Bennett felt elated: “As he drove his team of bays along the rutted street, Bennett felt he was truly born anew, his sins washed away by the waters of baptism. Nauvoo was his chance to fulfill his destiny, to be the great man he always knew he'd become. Nancy Rigdon suddenly was before his mind's eye — sparkling eyes, bewitching smile, tiny waist, and swelling bodice. How would she look without her clothes on? . . .” (p. 72). In time, Bennett was cut off from the Church, but he subsequently wrote an exposé which revealed the secrets of the spiritual wife doctrine. Despite its sensationalism, says Taylor, Bennett's book must be examined seriously. “Too much of what seemed wild assertions by an apostate in 1842 has been corroborated since that time” (p. 377). Because of its secrecy, Taylor observes, the practice of plural marriage in Nauvoo produced in the Mormon psyche “the ability to say one thing, but mean another,” and feel completely honest about it.

Of all the characters who live again in *Nightfall at Nauvoo*, Joseph Smith is by far the most difficult to draw and perhaps, for that reason, the least satisfying. We watch and cheer as he wrestles, go courting with him in his rig, hear him deliver sermons out on the flats, and dance not far from where he is seated at the Christmas party where he announces his candidacy for the presidency of the United States. It is thoroughly refreshing to see a Prophet as a human being and not the pious, ethereal saint he is sometimes made out to be. There is no question that Joseph Smith was a fun loving, good natured, athletic man. But he could also be loving and kind, sensitive and compassionate, studious and contemplative, and he did not lack depth of character or religious conviction. Taylor is aware of these features, but not enough of the Prophet's serious, spiritual side is explored to achieve a balanced picture of his personality. Where other writers have erred on the side of piety in characterizing the Prophet, Taylor has concentrated too little; minimizing either one distorts the man. But then Joseph Smith's personality is not easy to portray. There are many facets which don't seem compatible within the same man. Although it is true, for example, that he delivered some affected, bombastic orations (such as some of his Legion speeches), through him were also revealed priceless religious and literary gems. And if

he at times was frivolous, he was also given to serious reflection. Perhaps it is best to leave him an enigma. As he said himself, "You don't know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it: I shall never undertake it. I don't blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I would not have believed it myself."

There are a few minor strictures that can be raised. The "Emma Smith" letter to the editors of the *New York Sun* (Nov. 20, 1845) is reworked into a conversation between her and Dr. Bernhisel: "I never for a moment believed in what my husband called his apparitions and revelations, as I thought him laboring under a diseased mind" (cf p. 304). And we encounter the old tale that Wilford Woodruff had the floor of his home repaired after his piano crashed through it. When the home was restored by Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., there was no evidence that the floor had ever been broken. I personally would have liked to see more of Nauvoo under Brigham Young; the activities of Hosea Stout and the Nauvoo police department, for example, could have provided some entertaining scenes. But then you can't have everything. As it stands, the book is an impressive achievement.

In addition to its intriguing historical theories, *Nightfall at Nauvoo* presents a sympathetic, human view of Nauvoo, with its problems as well as its moments of grandeur, a literary rendering of its saints as well as its sinners. From the opening lines on Thomas L. Kane the reader has a feeling of being there, of actually participating in the fast moving events. There is no interest lag. The words of Dr. Bernhisel on first hearing Kane's address could be used to describe *Nightfall at Nauvoo*: "Let the historian quibble about detail, Bernhisel advised the young man; Kane wasn't writing history, he was creating literature, giving the essence of an epic saga; his work was a masterpiece that would live as long as Mormonism" (p. 15). More than historians, however, will be bothered by *Nightfall at Nauvoo*, and it won't be just quibbling over detail. Some books have a tone of innuendo which says more than its facts can justify. Nevertheless, Samuel W. Taylor has written an epic saga, which if not strictly historical, is certainly memorable and worth reading.

Apostle of the Outposts

Erastus Snow: The Life of a Missionary and Pioneer for the Early Mormon Church. By Andrew Karl Larson, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1971. 814 pp. \$14.95.

Andrew Karl Larson's *Erastus Snow: The Life of a Missionary and Pioneer for the Early Mormon Church* is a biography written, as the author candidly points out in his preface, "at the behest of Erastus Snow's descendants." Larson's treatment is almost purely one of chronological narrative. He takes up Erastus Snow's life story at his birthplace, St. Johnsbury, Vermont, and with measured pace follows it day by day to his death at Salt Lake City on May 21, 1888. Partial exceptions to this chronological mold are eleven chapters dealing with Snow's pioneering role in Utah's Dixie. Here Larson draws on his immense knowledge of life on the Mormon fron-