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- Title** *Review of Administrative Records, Volume 1: The Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*, edited by Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Jeffrey D. Mahas.
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including *Heaven's Bride: The Unprintable Life of Ida C. Craddock, American Mystic, Scholar, Sexologist, Martyr, and Madwoman* (2010) and *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (2016).

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Reviewed by Kathleen Flake

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A LONG-AWAITED PUBLICATION, *The Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846* does not disappoint. It comprises contemporaneous notes, most of them verbatim, of deliberations by a religious council charged with devising a millennial government for the Mormon faithful and the non-Mormon righteous. *Minutes* gives a uniquely intimate view of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' efforts to account for religious diversity in its idealized kingdom of God to be organized in preparation for Christ's return. Council members became demoralized by the death of founder Joseph Smith, and the record quickly turns into an account of the Council's efforts to respond to, survive, and escape the dangers and betrayals within and without the church between 1844 and 1846. As documentation of Mormonism's practical and principled abandonment of the United States, it is unparalleled.

First convened by Smith three months before his death, the Council of Fifty was a governing body composed of many Mormon leaders and very few nonmembers. It was given the formal title of "The Kingdom

of God and His Laws with the Keys and Power thereof, and Judgment in the Hands of His Servants, Ahman Christ” (p. 48). For obvious reasons, the more informal reference to its number as a “Council of Fifty” became its common appellation. Notwithstanding the grandiosity of its official title, the Council was given a very practical charge. It was, explained Smith, “designed to be got up for the safety and salvation of the saints by protecting them in their religious rights and worship” (p. 128). These political intentions arose from the Saints’ conviction that the United States government had failed to show any interest in protecting them from vicious, even state-sponsored, persecution. Initially, the Council’s focus was on Smith’s spring 1844 campaign for the national presidency. With his assassination that summer and increasing hostility toward the Mormon settlements in and around Nauvoo, Illinois, where the church was headquartered, the Council’s attention turned to ensuring safe evacuation from the United States. Like the Puritans’ “city on a hill,” the Mormon “Kingdom of God” was to stand in contrast to and as a rebuke of tyranny, religious and political. Only, for the Mormons, the holiness did not require religious conformity, but liberty. “We act upon the broad and liberal principal [*sic*] that all men have equal rights, and ought to be respected, and that every man has a privilege in this organization of choosing for himself voluntarily his God” (p. 97).

Governed by oaths of secrecy when recorded, and withheld from public view ever since, the Council of Fifty minutes has long been deemed mute evidence of early Mormon treachery and desire for theocratic dominion. Likewise, the Council demanded secrecy “in consequence of treachery and plots of designing men” (p. 49). Thus, as typical of Mormon history, the minutes are a record of conflict about which there are conflicting historiographies. Those who expect to find skeletons in this closet, however, will be disappointed. Though they contain many rants about America’s sins and hurrahs for millennial rule, more often these pages evidence the fear and fractiousness that reigned during Nauvoo’s last two years, giving an otherwise purely administrative record considerable pathos and some comedy. The record reveals Mormon leaders in extremis, detailing their many audacious efforts to

adapt church government to the assassination of Smith, to defend Nauvoo after Illinois's revocation of its right to self-defense, and to safely lead thousands of believers into a wilderness.

Under these circumstances and its own frustration at the attempt, the Council soon abandoned its efforts to draft a constitution for “the Kingdom of God.” But the attempt makes the minutes probably the best articulation of ideals that underlay Brigham Young’s “theo-democratic” government in the Utah Territory. This could be said of a number of topics. Either because of the length of the deliberations or the freedom that expectation of secrecy gave them, the minutes convey with remarkable clarity, detail, and immediacy the plans and character of men whose names are well known but whose personalities and intentions are typically flattened by institutional histories. As preserved here by clerk William Clayton, the individuality of their opinions and cadence and even the pitch of their voices are perceptible, including the more bellicose among them.

The ferocity of Council members’ speech is more bombastic than strategic and belies the fear underneath that sometimes worked its way to the surface in their frankest conversations. The record shows them alternately fearful that Illinois would do what Missouri had already done to them, frustrated that not all the Latter-day Saints lived up to their name but were fractious and petty, and impatient with their own differences of opinion about what to do. The questions before the Council were big ones and the individual assignments onerous: How to order the church after Smith’s death? How to respond to the revocation of the Nauvoo Charter that left them without legal authority to record deeds, perform marriages, and maintain a police force or militia against increasingly hostile neighbors? What to do about powerful schismatics whose accusations were aggravating these hostilities and destabilizing the church? Should they abandon Nauvoo, and if so, do all need to go? And if so, how to finance the removal? Where should they go—among the Indians, to the deserts beyond the Rockies, to Oregon, to the San Francisco Bay? When should they leave? How could they outfit everyone, especially the poorest among them? What about the British membership and those scattered in the East and South? And, in the face of

all these demands, should resources—time and money—be committed to finishing the much-desired temple, Nauvoo’s *raison d’être*?

Ultimately, the majority of the Council voted to answer all these questions according to what its members understood of Smith’s intentions, though there was no little debate. Two among them argued for immediate removal from Nauvoo without finishing the temple. Some went so far as to dismiss the authority of the others and said the endeavor to complete the temple was so foolhardy that God would reject it, if ever finished. Eventually, the naysayers departed, taking some believers with them. The majority continued to build the temple and research alternative settlements and political alliances while resisting vigilantes. By March 1845, all had agreed to go it alone in isolated western country. This, too, was based on a shared sense of what Smith had prophesied. Brigham Young summarized by saying, “My feelings are, if we cannot have the privilege of carrying out Joseph’s measures I would rather lie down and have my head cut off at once” (p. 257). The minutes, which consistently evidence the Council’s and especially Brigham Young’s attentiveness to “Joseph’s measures,” may constitute the missing link between eastern and western Mormonism, often treated by historians as two movements.

In January 1846, the Council held its final meetings in the now-completed temple, where Young told them, “When we leave here [my] mind is to go just beyond the Rocky mountains, somewhere on the Mexican claim and the United States will have no business to come there and if they do we will treat them as enemies” (p. 513). Three weeks later the wagons began rolling out of Nauvoo. Having morphed into heads of wagon companies, Council members would not reconvene for another ten months; and when they did, it was in the “Omaha Nation, on the west bank of the Missouri River,” where the entire church was bivouacked as “the Camp of Israel in their journeyings to the West.” Whatever millennial expectations Smith had for his “Kingdom of God and His Laws” or Council of Fifty, this record shows it to have been the practical means by which Mormonism’s complex ecclesiastical structure—its layers of councils and quorums, its functional committees and offices—was compressed and stripped down to administer the

orderly evacuation, transit, and resettlement of thousands of believers. Not included in this volume is an account of the Council's subsequent mobilization in later years. But what is here suggests the Council was brought to order whenever the church was under particular threat or in need of flight from hostile forces, literal or legal. Or, as Smith put it, the Council was the chief instrument for ensuring "the safety and salvation of the saints by protecting them in their religious rights and worship" (p. 128).

Minutes is a must read for any serious historian of Mormonism's origins and evolution. Notwithstanding its focus on a single administrative body over a two-year period, when combined with the expert notation provided by its editors, it provides a remarkably expansive view of Mormon history. In addition, one finds in its pages the classic themes of early republic history, not the least of which are religious liberty and the religious dimension of state building. Equally important themes, which have been muted by the academic turn to social history and its focus on individual religious practices, are illumined by this volume of primary sources. These themes include but are not limited to the significance of territory (and frontiers) to religious diversity and ethos, denominational structures and their politically adaptive capacity, and even the contest between models of "free church" and "visible church." Produced with the high level of editorial professionalism and historiographic detail one has come to expect from the Joseph Smith Papers, *Minutes* contributes much to the study of nineteenth-century Mormon and American history. And, notwithstanding its being an administrative record, *Minutes* is a surprisingly good read.

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