Nightfall at Nauvoo

Samuel W. Taylor

Neal E. Lambert

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol12/iss3/19

(Reviewed by Neal E. Lambert, associate professor of English at Brigham Young University. Dr. Lambert has published articles on Mormons and Western literature in BYU Studies, Utah Historical Quarterly, South Dakota Review, Western American Literature, and American West.)

In this latest of several books based on the Mormon experience, Samuel Taylor has perhaps aspired higher than in any of his previous efforts. His purpose is to tell the unique
story of Nauvoo, Illinois—how it "started from scratch, quickly became the largest city in Illinois—about four times the size of Chicago—and then was abandoned as the population moved out and headed across the plains toward the Salt Lake Valley." It is a story the outline of which most of us know. But Mr. Taylor brings a special purpose to his effort. His intent is to transcend the limits of what he calls "nit-picking detail" to get at and render the significant human experiences of those involved in this epoch of American history:

The historian is concerned with fact—\textit{who}, \textit{what}, \textit{where}, \textit{when}, \textit{how}. A writer has to know \textit{why}. A profound difference of method is in perspective. The historian's viewpoint is like that of the gooneybird, 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, not 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. . . My research was not for proof or for fact, but for essential truth . . . and this is what I prize above all.

That is high literary purpose, for certainly the "truth" of that episode would be a moving tale of endurance, sacrifice, pity, comedy, and tragedy, a tale which "facts" only imply. Regardless of one's religious persuasion or belief, the story of Nauvoo is in every respect a subject worthy of the high serious. This is high literary purpose, for certainly the "truth" of ness of the greatest art.

But, however high and serious Mr. Taylor's intent, the book is a disappointment. If one opens \textit{Nightfall at Nauvoo} expecting "the essence of an epic saga" he finds instead melodramatic situations, stereotyped characters, and the worn style more characteristic of slick magazines than significant writing. Consider for instance an episode at one of the council meetings following the death of Joseph Smith:

Brigham called upon his chief of police to make a report. Hosea Stout, raw-boned, cadaverous, with burning eyes, said that he had organized a spy ring to go into all parts of the surrounding country to watch the movements of the mob and report their acts. Anti-Mormon sentiment was rising to fever pitch, and violence could be expected any time. . .
Lowering his voice, Hosea Stout announced an appalling

fact: Tower had discovered that the enemy had its own

spies in Nauvoo—and some of them had infiltrated into

Hosea's own guard.

At this intelligence, the men in the room felt for their
guns, and each man turned to look at his neighbors. It was
entirely possible, Hosea said, that in this very room was a
double agent, a spy for the Gentiles. As he said this, Bern-
hisel fancied that Hosea's burning eyes rested on Bishop
George Miller. There was bad blood between the two.

This is not the stuff of serious, significant writing but the
clichéd mannerisms of melodrama. The reader of pulp
Westerns would find the scene familiar.

But, we remind ourselves, Stout and Brigham and the
others are historical people. This really happened. These
should not be cardboard figures but real human beings, sig-
nificant men involved in significant human situations. And
so we read with regret that such significance could not have
been a part of the writing itself, part of the book. In real
life, Hosea Stout's eyes may well have been impressive, es-
pecially when we think about what those eyes must have
looked upon. But "burning" is too worn to help us as readers
sense what impressions those eyes made, and, if it is too worn
for one to use, it is even more so when it is used twice in the
same scene. I don't mean to quibble over one choice in a book
of 120,000 words. But again and again the author seems satis-
fied to be stylistically ordinary if not hackneyed. When we
are told that Noah Rogers's hair is "shot with gray" and then
turn two pages and read that John C. Bennett's black hair
was "shot with gray" we must wonder how much artistic ef-
fort has been devoted to rendering the appearances of these
people, to say nothing of the significance of the events in
their lives.

And this, finally, is the biggest disappointment. The
figures themselves, whom even their severest critics call men
of significance, seldom come alive on the pages of the book,
and when they do it is only to demonstrate a pettiness that
explains nothing of their significance. Sidney Rigdon, for
instance, is reduced to a scheming manipulator, clipping news-
papers and hiding evidence against Mormonism "as protection
and insurance for himself" should he ever be cast out. The
complex, perhaps tragic, John C. Bennett is a village dandy,
"slight and debonair, at once the admiration and scandal of Nauvoo, enormously popular, intensely hated by some, whispered about by everyone, and repugnant to the Twelve." Willard Richards is a figure devoid of dignity, a "very fat man . . . subject to many ills of the flesh." As he accompanies Joseph Smith to Carthage, his thoughts are more given to the discomfort of his indigestion and his longing for his forbidden pipe than they are to the fate of his Prophet. And Joseph Smith himself, a unique figure in American history and the center of the whole story, is less a wonder or even an enigma than he is a conglomeration of stereotypes:

Joseph's habit of mixing humor with spirituality, of combining physical contests with divine revelation, endeared him to his people but was at times unsettling to strangers and unbelievers. A big and vital man, full of the juice of life, he was a far cry from the popular concept of an ascetic and bloodless prophet. Joseph loved physical activity, wrestling, running, jumping, pulling stakes; he had overcompensated for the lame leg. He had a hearty appetite, and an eye for a pretty girl.

None of this brings us very far in understanding the deep currents of human feeling that were the ebb and flow in Joseph Smith or in the history of Nauvoo.

Indeed, there is little, if anything, in the book which explains the vitality of the people of Nauvoo. One looks in vain for the viable faith which sustains any institution. The Nauvoo Temple, for instance, is described as a rather poorly executed make-work project whose floor and font are rotten. However provable such facts may be, they do not reflect what the temple must have been to the people of Nauvoo, who fought to finish it while abandoning their own homes.

In Nightfall at Nauvoo polygamy is an institution sustained not by devotion and sacrifice, but by lechery and adultery:

A notable case was that of Porter Rockwell, who at gunpoint abducted the wife of Amos Davis, a tavern owner and captain of the Legion. The gun was for the husband's benefit, not the wife's, for Mrs. Davis was entirely willing. Rumor had it that this attractive cupcake was given to Port by Brigham Young as a reward for Rockwell's having avenged the blood of the prophet by killing Frank Worrell, who'd been chief guard at Carthage jail.
Although this particular situation is not technically polygamous, the episode is used in the book to describe the "current attitude."

We are introduced to but one man of absolute devotion, Milo White, who "somehow epitomized the indestructability of Mormonism." But the faith of Milo White is patently ridiculous. He encounters John C. Bennett as that dandy is leaving the local house of prostitution. Bennett explains his presence by saying he had been preaching to the "soiled doves," and White believes him! "Milo’s broad face was alight with devotion. He declared that it was men like Bennett who sustained his faith in the gospel, and gave him strength to meet trials and tribulations." So much for the faith of the people of Nauvoo.

The book may well be in fact historically accurate. The extensive bibliography at the end is evidently supplied to suggest as much. I leave it to others more qualified to comment on the history. It is the significance of the facts as they function in the book itself that is of concern here. For facts, real or imagined, have only one purpose in any work of literature, to define and illuminate something important about a man. If they do this, then they have a rightful place in the story. But having facts function this way is not a quality of the facts themselves. It depends on the insight and the skill of the writer. As a good critic once said, "Some writers cannot make falling off a thousand foot cliff important; Henry James could make taking off a glove important." So our concern is no more with the "secret history" of Nauvoo than it is with the "official history" of Nauvoo. Our concern is the motive forces that built that city and then moved it, wholesale into the American desert. Pettiness, ineptness, delusion, and lust couldn’t do that.

Without question, Mr. Taylor is capable of good writing. He has done so before. But if one looks in Nightfall at Nauvoo for the endurance and dignity and faith that is rendered so beautifully in Family Kingdom, one looks in vain.