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Richard E. Bennett

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Raising Kane

Review of Matthew J. Grow. *“Liberty to the Downtrodden”: Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009. xx + 348 pp., with index. \$40.00.

RICHARD E. BENNETT

Every so often a book appears that promises to stand the test of time as a classic in Mormon history. This is one of those books. His 2006 dissertation at the University of Notre Dame made into a handsome monograph, Matthew Grow’s *“Liberty to the Downtrodden:” Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer*, published by Yale University Press, is yet further evidence that the effort to purchase, preserve, and disseminate primary manuscript material—in this case the recovery of the Thomas and Elizabeth Kane Papers by Brigham Young University’s Harold B. Lee Library—is worth every penny. The world of scholarship owes David Whittaker, curator of the library’s L. Tom Perry Special Collections, a debt of gratitude for having acquired the splendid Kane Collection. Without such collections, books such as this one would be impossible.

Thomas Leiper Kane (1822-1883), arguably “the most important non-Mormon in Mormon history” (p. xx), has long been revered as the great “friend

of the Mormons” during some of their most challenging times in the nineteenth century. These included the daunting trials of the Mormon exodus west from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Rocky Mountains in 1846-47; the dangerous hardships brought on by the Utah War of 1857; and the later, bitter acrimony that developed between a faith doggedly bent on practicing plural marriage and those determined to bring it down. Without Kane acting as trusted mediator, conciliator, and peacemaker, these chapters in Mormon history may well have been marred with greater misunderstanding, prejudice, and bloodshed.

“Liberty to the Downtrodden” is a very extensive, highly interpretive, and richly documented cultural biography that paints Kane within the tenor of his time—a crusading Man of La Mancha, a romantic reformer determined to change a myriad of perceived social injustices, such as capital punishment, discrimination against women, and prejudice against religious minorities. The

book may be conveniently divided into two principal parts: (1) Kane's role as defender of the downtrodden generally and his unusual sensitivity to social injustices wherever he found them, and (2) his unique role in defending and explaining one of America's most despised and misunderstood religions—Mormonism. The book is at its best when dealing with the latter subject, but Kane's interests in confronting what he saw as social ills and injustices give balance, perspective, and consistency to a most colorful life.

The book begins with Thomas L. Kane's birth and childhood into a nouveau riche Philadelphia home. His father, John Kintzing Kane, became attorney general and U.S. district judge in Philadelphia, and his much more famous brother, Elisha Kane, eventually garnered national fame for his Arctic explorations in search of the vanished British explorer Sir John Franklin. When twenty-two years of age, Thomas Kane was admitted to the Pennsylvania bar, but by disposition he was more a wanderer and a crusader than a lawyer. Born into a very religious home and later married to a British-born and deeply Christian woman, Kane was ever ambivalent in his own faith. In part this seems to have resulted from his early exposure to the positivism of Auguste Comte, who saw Christianity, and especially evangelical Protestant Christianity, as "surrogate religion," a poor substitute for altruism. Kane "disdained everything he perceived as religious fanaticism" (p. 33), and he was in and out of churches his entire life. He was offended by evangelical interpretations. He felt too that many Christian faiths "exalted form over substance and materialism over reforming society's ills" (p. 34).

Grow shows a consistency in Kane's lifelong crusading spirit, whether pursuing equal rights for women, supporting the abolition of capital

punishment, or eradicating slavery, a consistency that nevertheless changed party lines over time. For years Kane was a member of the reform wing of the Northern Democratic Party, whose "alternative vision" (p. 30) for reform was opposed to that of the better-known evangelical Whig crusaders of the time. With the Compromise of 1850 and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Kane eventually became an abolishment Republican and a supporter of Abraham Lincoln, but he never turned his back on the South and its culture of honor. Grow shows how Kane broke with his father on the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850 (his father even sentenced him to jail on one occasion).

Chapters 11 and 12 offer a study of Kane's little-known service in the Civil War and his postwar reform activities in Pennsylvania up until his death in 1883. Though nationally known as a peacemaker and a supporter of the South, Kane was the first Pennsylvanian to enlist for military service. Participating in various theaters of action, including Gettysburg, Kane suffered three battle wounds, which, combined with his ever-delicate health and sickly disposition, plagued him for the rest of his life. These two chapters, while a welcome addition to our understanding of Kane, are also the weakest in the book; they seem almost hurried and appear somewhat incomplete. There is too little explanation of why Kane, though given the honorific titles of lieutenant colonel and, later, brigadier general, was not voted to lead his regiments. Likewise there is an undeveloped hint of his excessive drinking habits (his brother Pat was an alcoholic), which may explain his postwar interest in temperance. Similarly, I would like more about Kane's business and railroad-building interests after the war.

The strength of Grow's book, and surely the primary reason why BYU purchased the Kane Papers, is its contribution to Mormon history, a contribution here devotedly and critically analyzed in three segments: (1) Kane's first meeting with the Mormons in 1846, his involvement with the call-up of the Mormon Battalion (chap. 4), and the subsequent publication of his 1850 discourse on the suffering Latter-day Saints at Nauvoo and at Winter Quarters, near present-day Omaha, Nebraska (chap. 5); (2) his vitally important participation in negotiating a peaceful conclusion to the Utah War of 1857 (chaps. 9 and 10); and (3) his efforts to defend and explain the beliefs and motives of the Mormons during the acerbic anti-polygamy "raid" campaign of the 1870s and 1880s (chap. 13).

Historians have long known of Kane's positive dual role in persuading President James K. Polk, on the one hand, to invite a Mormon battalion to serve in the Mexican-American War in June 1846, while on the other hand convincing the Mormon rank and file to accept the offer. Grow is right in arguing that rather than being an imposition on the Mormons, as the myth has long asserted, the invitation came in answer to their own clandestine efforts in Washington to secure government assistance in practically any form. Less well known, and amply covered here, is Kane's original desire to promote his own political ambitions in California and to keep the Mormons from aligning themselves with Great Britain (p. 52). Grow argues that Kane became convinced of their essential goodness and sincerity—"men more open to reason & truth plainly stated I have never seen" (p. 64)—especially after they had nursed him back to health after a terrible sickness. Their sufferings steeled his roving idealities and soaring sentiments into a deep admiration for

an entire people and a settled resolve to be their friend and assist them whenever possible. He found his life's mission among the Mormons at the Missouri in 1846 and returned to Philadelphia "a changed man" (p. 71). If a sign of fine history is to show character development and transformation, "*Liberty to the Downtrodden*" excels in following the changes in Kane's outlook, perspective, and priorities. Once back home, Kane, ever the publicist, tried hard and with considerable success to transform the negative Mormon image in the East with his famous 1850 lecture describing the suffering of the Saints at Winter Quarters and Nauvoo, which was published in pamphlet form.

Shedding even more light on Mormon history are chapters 8 and 9 on the "Utah Expedition," or Utah War of 1857. These chapters are, in many ways, the heart of the book. Convinced that President Buchanan's ill-begotten expedition to put down the supposed Mormon rebellion would culminate in unnecessary bloodshed, a restless Kane once again headed west. At his own expense and with only informal support from the president, Kane traveled by sea to Latin America, across the jungles of Panama long before there was a canal, again by ship to Los Angeles, and finally overland east on horseback to Salt Lake City. Arriving in the nick of time, he brokered a peace between General Sidney Johnston's Union Army and the Mormons, some thirty thousand of whom were then evacuating their Salt Lake City homes and preparing for guerrilla warfare. Trusted by both sides, this "Napoleon of Peace" averted a catastrophe. Grow successfully explores how Kane ingeniously played one party against the other, apologizing without clear authority on behalf of the president for conducting a campaign miserably misinformed, while portraying Brigham Young as a struggling peacemaker among Mormon zealots

(pp. 164–70). Kane’s crucial intervention resulted in the army’s abandoning a military assault, a government “pardon” of Mormon aims and defensive maneuvers in exchange for accepting Alfred Cumming as the new territorial governor in place of Brigham Young, and the creation of a permanent U.S. military camp in the Salt Lake Valley.

The third and final episode of Kane’s support of the Mormons came during the nation’s strident attacks on polygamy, or so-called raid period of the 1870s and 1880s, a defense made all the more remarkable considering his staunch opposition to plural marriage. Indeed, Kane had long viewed even monogamous marriage as a barrier to women’s equality. Yet Kane and Brigham Young’s friendship and mutual respect, although tested by the 1852 announcement sanctioning plural marriage, could not be broken. In dispelling the long-standing myth that Kane converted to Mormonism, Grow does show that Kane and his wife received Mormon patriarchal blessings and that Kane may have been baptized for the recovery of his health when once again taken sick and nursed back to health by the Mormon people.


In his final chapter, “Anti-Anti-Polygamy,” Grow discusses the fascinating 1872 tour by Thomas and Elizabeth Kane of Mormon settlements in Utah and the publication of Elizabeth’s book, *Twelve Mormon Homes*, with its candid, close-up view of Mormon polygamy that, while not complimentary, shows a certain sympathy and understanding of a people she also came to respect. This last chapter also discusses, but does not sufficiently develop, Kane’s involvement in redrawing Brigham Young’s personal will aimed at extricating his private properties from those of the church, his influence on Brigham Young with respect to eventually establishing Mormon colo-

nies in Mexico, and the development of church-sponsored schools of higher education in Utah.

Are there flaws in this biography? Perhaps. While there is much on Kane’s father, there is too little on the influence of his mother, Jane Leiper Kane. Grow’s Civil War chapter does not develop Kane’s military tactics well enough, and there is more on the culture of honor than on battle strategies. Grow’s treatment of Kane’s learning about plural marriage well after 1852 is hard to believe considering Kane’s sojourn with the Mormons at Winter Quarters in 1846 and 1847, when the practice was then coming out in the open. He was a keen observer of everyone and everything around him, and it taxes the imagination that he did not know of this peculiarity earlier. Grow’s research into published secondary sources on Mormon history, while adequate, may not compare with his expertise in primary research. One cannot resist the impression that the work trails off at the end, with insufficient consideration of Kane’s influence on Brigham Young in his declining years. And, inexplicably, why would so good a book lack a bibliography? If this is a trend among modern publishers, it does no one a favor.

Such deficiencies notwithstanding, this is a wonderful piece of scholarship, well written, handsomely crafted, and abundantly documented. The attention given to Kane’s wife, Elizabeth, and her changing attitudes amid unchanging convictions is a real strength to the work. The influence Elisha Kane had on his younger brother makes for fascinating reading and a ready piece for psychological discussion. Kane’s efforts at promoting a positive image of the Mormons from 1848 to 1852, before the public announcement encouraging plural marriage, sheds much new light and convincingly demonstrates that much of America was beginning to understand and appreciate this

peculiar people. Perhaps best of all is Grow's careful study of how Kane brokered the peace between a frustrated U.S. Army and an overly defensive people preparing for war. *"Liberty to the Downtrodden"* will stand as an excellent example of how archival research can so fully inform modern historical writing and how a detailed

and comprehensive dissertation can still be made into a very readable biography. 

Richard E. Bennett (PhD, Wayne State University) is an associate dean of Religious Education and a professor of church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.