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A Good Time Coming: Mormon Letters to Scotland Frederick
Stewart Buchanan

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FREDERICK STEWART BUCHANAN, ed. *A Good Time Coming: Mormon Letters to Scotland*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988. xxii; 319 pp. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Malcolm Thorp, professor of history at Brigham Young University.

This book appears as volume 4 in the University of Utah Press Utah Centennial Series. The letters printed in the present volume, edited by Professor Fred S. Buchanan of the University of Utah, are a substantial portion (140 out of 180) of a collection discovered in the home of James MacNeil in Ayr, Scotland, in 1964, and are now available at the University of St. Andrews. They represent letters written to the MacNeil family from friends and relatives in England, Scotland, the United States, Australia, Canada, and Burma. Professor Buchanan has carefully edited those letters that were written by Mormon emigrants in America from 1853 to 1904.

As we learn from Buchanan's helpful introduction, the MacNeil family that appear in these letters resulted from the marriage in 1847 of David MacNeil, a young miner, to Ann Beaton Boggie Thompson, a widow eighteen years his senior. Shortly after their marriage, the couple joined the LDS church at Airdrie, Lanarkshire. In addition to five step-children (John Thompson, the eldest, is the most important here, as he was to emigrate to America in 1856), the family soon expanded with the births of five children (John, born in 1847, and James, born 1855, were to become Utah settlers in the early 1870s). David MacNeil had started life in prosperous circumstances, only to see his prospects disappear following the deaths of his parents. Forced by pecuniary want into the iron mines, David and his large family appear to have led a marginal existence. Thus, the sons followed their father into the mines at early ages (John Thompson was at least fourteen).

Buchanan lays no claim that these letters are representative of the thousands of letters that must have been written in the nineteenth century. Yet few such letters have survived. For example, a search of the extensive archival files of the National Registry of Archives in London reveals the existence of only a few comparable Mormon letter collections, and these collections are far less extensive and less insightful than the MacNeil correspondence. The letters are especially valuable for the personal reflections on conditions in Utah by both faithful Saints and those who became disenchanted.

According to Buchanan, "these particular communications tend to defy common stereotypes that have portrayed all Mormons as alike in their responses to their church, their environment, or

even to their kith and kin” (xiv). These are not “faith promoting” (xv) letters of unwavering devotion to the Church. They also reflect a perception of Mormonsim as “al a humbug” (70). John MacNeil complained that “[a]ll they preach about hear is water ditches, field fences, canyon roads, cooperative Stores & Such like things” (105–6). Both John and his brother James witnessed much lying, deceit, drinking, swearing, and ill-education in Mormon society, although they also remarked that fornication was less prevalent in Zion than in the Old Country. Polygamy also appears as an issue, being passionately defended by John Marshall, a family friend, who nevertheless admitted that the practice “has Been grossly taken advantage of By Damned mean Curses” (120). However, John MacNeil appears to have been disillusioned by this practice (see 182), and he wrote that there were more people in Utah who did not believe in polygamy than who did. Whereas John became disaffected (“there is a great deal of hokeypokey About it” [179]) and eventually completely rejected Mormonism, James was able to see goodness beyond human frailties and remained a faithful Saint to the end of his life.

The letters to the MacNeils represent the experience of common people who did not prosper yet who were always anticipating “a good time coming” in the future. Death and tragedy are major themes. Of the five MacNeil family members and friends who wrote back to Scotland, four met untimely deaths—three of these in the prime of life. Only John Marshall lived to see “a good time coming” in Utah. Marshall, an ironworker, was involved in a smelting furnace in Salt Lake City that brought him considerable success. On the other hand, James Brady, a young Irishman who knew the MacNeils in the Airdrie LDS branch and went to Utah in 1853, was killed in a rock slide at a quarry in Red Butte Canyon in August 1854. John Thompson left for Zion as a zealous convert in 1856, but never made it to Utah. After serving in the American Civil War, Thompson eventually settled in Illinois, plying the precarious trade of a coal miner and joining the Reorganized LDS movement. Thompson wrote in January 1874, “as Regards to our Prosperety in worldey things we have not Increased Much” (169). In 1875, he was killed from a fall in a coal mine. John MacNeil followed the call to Zion in 1870. The most frequent writer in this volume, he often saw prosperity on the horizon but never attained it. He too ended life a victim of accident, dying in 1903 in a cave-in at a Park City, Utah, mine. James MacNeil followed his elder brother to Utah in 1873. After suffering various ups and more frequent downs as a miner, James ventured into the Arizona Territory in 1881, where he prospered briefly as a teamster and farmer. But in 1884 he drowned

while trying to cross the swollen Gila River. One can only conclude that there is an element of pathos in these experiences, and this is reinforced when we learn that five out of the ten children of John MacNeil preceded their father to early graves.

Although the promise of material prosperity in Zion proved illusory, the letters reflect freedom from what the emigrants construed to be economic oppression in Britain. James Brady believed Scotland to be a “land of tyriny” (61). John MacNeil wrote, “Laying Mormonism aside, this is a better country for A poor man than the Old Country ten times over” (92). The impression here is that conditions in the mining industry were far superior to those they had encountered in Scotland, with higher wages and less arduous work demands. According to John MacNeil, “I have Got Some Life And Energy in Me here, which Seemed to be Dead in Me there [Scotland] After A days work” (142). Utah, however, had its drawbacks: “It is a hard life a miner [has] in this country. You may get pretty constant work for a few months, but you pay six or seven dollars for board here then lay idle for a few months. No, not idle but travelling about sometimes with a roll of blankets on your back. sometimes without, and all the time paying away money for railroad” (163). Competition with lower-paid Chinese laborers, strike-breaking initiatives by bosses, and economic recessions made mining a precarious trade. Coping with these reverses as well as the grinding physical demands eventually wore heavily on John MacNeil. He came to conclude, “This Mining in this Country is to rough a Life for A Man to Stand Long No Matter how Stout he is. It is beginning to wear Me Old” (218).

Buchanan has fulfilled his editorial task in an admirable fashion. His frequent footnotes reveal extensive reading of primary and secondary sources that allows him to illuminate the context of the letters. He also adroitly leads his readers through the labyrinth of colloquialisms and paleographical mazes, making these letters enjoyable to read. But some niggling points need mentioning. Buchanan states that John MacNeil became an agnostic, although there is no evidence for this. It would be more plausible to argue that MacNeil had drifted into infidelity, a pattern of rejection of organized Christianity that he was no doubt familiar with from his Scottish experience. The book is generally free from typographical errors and other such stylistic gremlins (one exception being the improper spelling of *Thorpe* on pages 12–13). But these minor points should not distract the reader from the significance of the letters or detract from Buchanan’s achievement as editor.