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Women of Nauvoo by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Jeni Broberg Holzapfel

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RICHARD NEITZEL HOLZAPFEL and JENI BROBERG HOLZAPFEL. *Women of Nauvoo*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992. iii; 225 pp. 31 illustrations, bibliography, index. $11.95.

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At last, a text on the women of Nauvoo! Finally, an opportunity to read "her-story" alongside the oft-repeated "his-story" of an era filled with growth, prophecies, and covenants. Because few historians have attempted an article on Nauvoo women, the promise of this book evoked a cheer. A well-done, scholarly text that focuses upon the sister Saint from 1839 to 1846 has been a much-sought addition to LDS Church history.

Recalling the Prophet Joseph Smith's admonition that "every man should keep a daily journal," I eagerly opened the text to see if the authors had discovered that women had followed his counsel.[1] Unfortunately—judging by this book—comparatively few women of that era (many of whom were literate) seem to have accepted the advice. The men who kept journals recorded very little about women and their lives, experiences, and feelings. To state that the text is simply a rehash of known history about women would be unfair, but to announce abundant new insights without qualification would be to misrepresent it.

The book jacket assures the reader of an extensive perusal of admittedly sparse but illuminating primary sources, such as the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes, contemporaneous diaries and letters, and later reminiscences by women of early Nauvoo. These sources, as valuable as they are, have proven a saturated field to less energetic historians, but to the more creative, eager authors, quoting the same women again and again has proved fruitful. Perhaps letters, memoirs, and other journals written by Nauvoo women may yet become available to historians as posterity channels their carefully preserved treasures into historical depositories for research and safekeeping. Until then, George A. Smith's perception may be confirmed, that "many records are nearly obliterated by time, damp, and dirt, others lost; some half worked into mouse nests."[2]

The authors' optimistic promise that "the stories contained in this book represent numerous unrecorded stories of women in our

history" (ix) seems overstated. For example, the story of Mary Ann Weston Maughan, a young widow filled with grief leaving her English homeland to join the Saints in Nauvoo, is dramatic rather than representative. Forty-six years after leaving England, she penned, "Now I had left all and was traviling [*sic*] alone to a land unknown to me, but I had cast my lot with the people of God and in him I put my trust."[3] Her remembrance is heartrending, but does it represent the typical Nauvoo woman?

The retelling of the clearly extraordinary is a thread that links all chapters. The story of Jane Elizabeth Manning, an African-American convert who walked with her extended family from New York to Nauvoo, introduces the second chapter. "We walked until our shoes were worn out, and our feet became sore and cracked open and bled until you could see the whole print of our feet with blood on the ground" (7).[4] Her extraordinary story is followed by excerpts from the lives of Sarah Pea Rich, Emma Hale Smith, and Mary Fielding Smith. Prominent, yes; representative, no.

Why were these accounts extraordinary? They were events in the lives of women at the center of Nauvoo's citizenry. Jane Elizabeth Manning James lived in the Mansion House during her Nauvoo years, in close association with Joseph, Emma, and those in the leading councils of the Church. Emma Hale Smith and Mary Fielding Smith were wives of the Presidency. Sarah Pea Rich was the wife of Elder Charles C. Rich, a member of the high council. Their experiences were poignant and revealing but do not represent the hundreds of women who lived in wooden cottages.

The wish for more views from the majority does not suggest that the women close to the leaders are not highly valued. It does, however, suggest a caution regarding how representative their views were and a challenge to seek for "the rest of the story," both about these individual women as whole people and about their full lives together. Shifting the focus to the more typical woman would require added documentary research. The inherent population bias and the paucity in the known sources by and about women, however, leaves a research historian with the impossible quest of fairly representing the era.

Historians would agree that to categorize the highly heterogeneous women under one label would be unfair. But unfortunately,

the authors continually seek to pin down and to speak generally of the divergent population: "These sister Saints [were] often alone and without companionship" (2). Later their characterization shifts: "Many sister Saints arrived in Nauvoo with family members by their sides" (73). Their difficulty in reaching a homogeneous picture of women in early Nauvoo is fascinating but leaves the reader muddled. Too often, the book's narratives are strung together with generalizations, unaided by the broader context of Church history, women's history, and American history.

Adding to the confusion is an overlay of modern rhetoric on that of Nauvoo in the 1840s. The authors write, "During the next summer, Isaac returned east to help his mother and father, Katurah Horton and Caleb Haight, gather with the Saints" (20). This statement causes the reader to wonder why Katurah retained her maiden name (modern feminist practice, but certainly not the practice of early Nauvoo). In a book about women, understandably the mother would be mentioned first, but historical sources consistently mention the father first.

Of greater concern is the occasional editing and rephrasing of original sources to highlight the authors' emphasis on women. The Holzapfels selectively quote from journals to convey their own message. For example, they write, "Another Missouri Saint, Nancy Tracy, made a 'cart out of two wheels of an old wagon'" (12). The autobiography of Nancy Tracy states: "As for my family, all my husband could do was to make a cart out of two wheels of an old wagon and one horse to draw it."[5] Nothing in her autobiography indicates that she made the cart.

Another example comes from the writings of Annie Wells Cannon. The authors quote her as stating, "In the forced exodus from Nauvoo, the [*sisters*], though separated in different companies coming west, carried the spirit [*of sisterhood*] through the journey, over prairie, plain, and mountain" (47; italics added). However, Annie Wells Cannon actually penned, "In the forced exodus from Nauvoo the *Relief Society women*, though separated in different companies coming west, carried the spirit *of the work* through the journey over prairie, plain, and mountain."[6] The authors' paraphrases not only read awkwardly, but also fail to give the proper recognition to the women's organization.

The authors' modernization of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization for readability, bolstered by the already fictional flavor resulting from the foregoing problems, further detracts from this text. Perhaps for the casual reader this modernization is beneficial, but to quote Dean Jessee: "To preserve the characteristics of someone's writing is to preserve evidence of personality, literary orientation, training, temperament, and mood."[7]

In spite of these problems, the authors have produced a book that makes interesting reading. The chapter entitled, "The City of Joseph—Sisters Mourn," is filled with well-selected quotes depicting an atmosphere of emotional despair at the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. The chapter on the history of the early Nauvoo Relief Society is well done and is effectively organized.

Other chapters are more a mosaic than an organized discourse. "Nauvoo—A City of Women" is a series of uninterpreted vignettes about letter writing, hat making, teaching, prayer meetings, berry picking, weather conditions, Christmas, Thanksgiving, samplers, pincushions, dolls, and horseback riding. Only the very alert reader will discover a clear picture emerging from these disparate elements, which the authors tie together only with broad generalizations. "New Revelations—A Time of Testing" leaves the reader puzzled by what was included and what was omitted. Choosing the writings of Charlotte Haven, a nonmember, to mock the solemnity of the revelations seems misguided.

The discussion of women crossing the Mississippi River on February 4, 1846, could have been strengthened by including a documented, stirring account penned by Eliza R. Snow: "I was informed that on the first night of the encampment nine children were born into the world, and from that time, as we journeyed onward [from Nauvoo westward in 1846], mothers gave birth to offspring under almost every variety of circumstances imaginable." She dramatically added:

> Let it be remembered that the mothers of these wilderness-born babes were not savages, accustomed to roam the forest and brave the storm and tempest—those who had never known the comforts and delicacies of civilization and refinement. They were not those who, in the wilds of nature, nursed their offspring amid reeds and rushes, or in the recesses of rocky caverns.[8]

How well did the authors fulfill expectations? The Holzapfels have produced a readable glimpse of early Nauvoo. They have dealt, with varying degrees of success, with the problems that beset any writer who attempts to recreate the Nauvoo era from multiple sources. These problems include the serious and possibly unsolvable issues of biased representation and severely limited primary documents. The struggle with shifting perspectives may reflect the rapidly changing and heterogeneous population of Nauvoo as much as it does the multiple perspectives of the authors and their not-too-hidden objectives.

Perhaps it is merely an historian's dream to hope that a book will yet be published about the women of Nauvoo resolving the problems confronted by this text. Perhaps Mary Ann Stearns Winters said it best: "We can only look for the record of it in the archives above" (1). The authors' own conclusion, "This book is a *small* effort to rediscover and recall the rich spiritual heritage found in Nauvoo, especially among the great sisterhood that transcends both time and place" (ix, italics added), aptly expresses my own opinion.

NOTES

[1] Oliver B. Huntington, Autobiography, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 26.

[2] Dean C. Jessee, "Joseph Smith and the Beginning of Mormon Record Keeping," in *The Prophet Joseph Smith: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith,* ed. Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 155.

[3] "Mary Ann Weston Maughan (1817-1901)," in *Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints,* ed. Kenneth W. Godfrey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 42.

[4] Biography of Jane Elizabeth Manning James, unpaged, Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; and "Jane Manning James: Black Saint, 1847 Pioneer," *Ensign* 9 (August 1979): 26.

[5] Nancy Tracy, Autobiography, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 17-18.

[6] Annie Wells Cannon, "Achievement," *Relief Society Magazine* 23 (March 1936): 159; italics added.

[7] Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), xxiv.

[8] Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), 307-8.