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Prisoner for Conscience' Sake: The Life of George Reynolds by
Bruce A. Van Orden

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BRUCE A. VAN ORDEN. *Prisoner for Conscience' Sake: The Life of George Reynolds*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992. ix; 261 pp. 12 illustrations, 2 appendixes, bibliography, index. \$22.00.

Reviewed by Brian Q. Cannon, Assistant Professor of History at Brigham Young University.

In this work, Bruce Van Orden, associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University, surveys and analyzes the life of George Reynolds. The author assigns Reynolds to a “second-echelon” of Latter-day Saint leaders “whose influence was considerable during their lives but whose names are not easily recognized by most Church members today” (viii).

Although Reynolds (the husband of three wives and the father of thirty-two children) is best remembered today for his role in testing the constitutionality of the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act in the United States Supreme Court, he fulfilled a variety of ecclesiastical and civic responsibilities. Reynolds’s activities included service as a secretary to the First Presidency from 1865 to 1909, membership in the First Council of the Seventy, service as a missionary and Church emigration agent in Britain, and zealous labor as a Sunday School administrator. As proof of Reynolds’s contribution to gospel scholarship, Van Orden lists in an appendix eight books, including the monumental *Complete Concordance of the Book of Mormon*, and 463 articles. Reynolds was, Van Orden maintains, “one of the most influential people in the Church” from 1870 until his death in 1909 (vii).

Van Orden draws upon an impressive array of primary sources as he surveys Reynolds’s life. Information from court records, quorum and ward minutes, newspapers, correspondence, Reynolds’s five journals covering the years 1861 to 1906, and his published writings enliven and enrich this biography. Students of Mormon, Utah, and legal history will find this work useful.

As Van Orden observes, Reynolds’s life casts fresh light upon important aspects of LDS Church history. As a secretary to the First Presidency, for instance, Reynolds recorded revelations as they were dictated by John Taylor and wrote brief but illuminating accounts of the revelatory process in his own journals. He also

attended and kept minutes of crucial deliberations of the Council of the Twelve regarding succession in the Presidency following the death of John Taylor and helped to revise and edit the 1890 Manifesto in preparation for its release to the press.

Given the intriguing excerpts from diaries and letters that Van Orden quotes in this book, one can only wish that Reynolds had written more in his journal about his involvement with the Council of the Twelve and the First Presidency. Reynolds may have been as patient and forbearing as Van Orden suggests, but he recorded pithy, incisive assessments of the character of his associates and of the nature of administrative challenges. When federal appointees made life difficult for the Mormons in the 1870s, for instance, Reynolds complained in a letter to his father-in-law that the Mormons had become “‘pissing posts for every hell hound that is sent here as governor, judge, marshall &c.’” (39). In his missionary diary, Reynolds described the youthful Francis M. Lyman as “‘a severe commanding spirit, full of the go-ahead Yankee with uncompromising resolutions to overcome evil, a Mormon every inch’” (13).

Unfortunately, Reynolds emerges in many places in this book as a perceptive individual whose journals add fewer new insights to Mormon history than one might expect, given the fact that he worked so intimately with four prophets. The reader will come away from this book with only a partial understanding of Reynolds’s views and experiences because it is based upon a fragmentary record: Van Orden labored under a disadvantage in writing about Reynolds, lacking access to the full corpus of Reynolds’s writings, including Reynolds’s minutes of key Church councils.

Van Orden deserves commendation for his focus upon an individual whose primary accomplishments lay in the realm of ideas as a theologian and scriptorian. He seriously probes those ideas and convincingly contends that Reynolds’s work strongly influenced scriptorians and leaders from B. H. Roberts to Gordon B. Hinckley. Furthermore, he shows that even Reynolds’s somewhat amateurish studies of Book of Mormon geography and Egyptology established a precedent for serious scholarly study of the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price.

One of the strengths of this book is the manner in which Van Orden places Reynolds’s ideas within the context of the times

and distinguishes his original contributions from others' ideas that were incorporated within his scriptural commentaries. For instance, the author traces many of Reynolds's ideas regarding membership of the Anglo-Saxons within the house of Israel to a secular "cult of the Anglo-Saxon" that attracted many adherents in the Victorian era; then Van Orden shows how Reynolds rejected some of the major tenets of this school of thought. Likewise, he shows how Reynolds responded to anti-Mormon allegations regarding the Spaulding manuscript by melding others' arguments with Reynolds's own research and ideas.

As the biography of a member of the "second-echelon" of Church leaders, this work makes a modest step in the direction of social history—the study of ordinary people rather than great figures. Although he did not belong to the first echelon of Church leaders, Reynolds was clearly extraordinary in terms of his ecclesiastical positions. Nevertheless, as Van Orden shows, Reynolds differed little from the average resident in Salt Lake City in terms of wealth, and his polygamous marriages resembled the average in terms of timing, living arrangements, and spousal relationships.

In identifying the significance of Reynolds's life, Van Orden focuses, as biographers of great figures traditionally have, upon service rendered in prominent administrative positions and on tangible accomplishments such as Reynolds's writings. Another reason for George Reynolds's significance, albeit one that Van Orden does not emphasize, is the fact that his life and journals reveal much about the experiences and emotions of ordinary people, ranging from missionary service to relations between parents and children in an era when death frequently claimed the lives of children in infancy and early childhood.

Readers with an interest in social history will appreciate Van Orden's care in extracting and presenting information regarding family relations in Reynolds's polygamous household and the practical arrangements that fathers and husbands were required to make prior to their departure on missionary assignments. Van Orden reports, for instance, that when Reynolds's second wife Amelia complained to her imprisoned husband that he wrote more frequently to Polly, the first wife, than to her, he responded, "Last night after

receiving your letter I counted up and find I have written . . . twenty letters to you and sixteen to Polly, or five to you to every four to her. So you see your complaints on that score are not just” (110). This book leaves one yearning for even more details about Reynolds’s private life—his reactions, for instance, to the death of a child or his feelings about the necessity of masquerading as a woman to attend his wife’s funeral during the raid against polygamists—and more attempts to extrapolate from his experiences to those of others who lived at his time.

One of the sterling accomplishments of this work involves Van Orden’s careful reconstruction of the evolution of the Reynolds court case. Van Orden dismantles the myth that Reynolds volunteered for this role and casts doubt upon the notion that Reynolds’s poor health in his later life resulted from his incarceration following his conviction. The author shows that what commenced as a cooperative effort on the part of ecclesiastical and federal officials to test the constitutionality of the Morrill Act evolved into a bitter rivalry, with Church leaders doing their utmost to prevent Reynolds’s conviction. This research demonstrates that this failure to cooperate with federal officials predisposed President Rutherford B. Hayes to reject pleas for a commutation of Reynolds’s prison sentence.

On balance, this attractively illustrated and gracefully written biography merits careful attention. Readers will find themselves agreeing with Van Orden that Reynolds’s life and writings help to illuminate “some of the most important events, issues, and individuals in LDS Church history” (viii).