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Cultures in Conflict: A Documentary History of the Mormon War in Illinois edited by John E. Hallwas and Roger D. Launius

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Book Reviews

JOHN E. HALLWAS and ROGER D. LAUNIUS, eds. *Cultures in Conflict: A Documentary History of the Mormon War in Illinois*. Logan: Utah State University, 1995. x, 369 pp. Illustrations, map, bibliographic note, index. $37.95.

Reviewed by Glen M. Leonard, director of the Museum of Church History and Art.

In this handsomely designed collection, editors John Hallwas and Roger Launius offer ninety documents to represent the disparate viewpoints of participants in what the non-Mormon citizens of Illinois came to know as the Mormon War. Fully half of the entries are drawn from period newspapers or other early published sources. Fifteen documents are reproduced from original manuscripts, most of them found in Midwestern repositories. Probably one-third of the entries will not be familiar to Nauvoo history specialists. Most of these are from regional newspapers of the 1840s, only a half dozen from manuscripts.

Notwithstanding its usefulness to Nauvoo researchers, this documentary examination of the cultural tensions of Hancock County in the 1840s is not intended as a scholarly edition of the texts. The editors present major extracts and delete extraneous data from their offerings. They dismiss explanatory footnotes and choose instead to explain the documents in headnotes. Those introductory comments serve a broader interpretive purpose as well. The book's ultimate objective is to pose a challenge for modern students of Old Nauvoo. In particular, Hallwas and Launius question the religious historiographical perspective of members and historians of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In short, while *Cultures in Conflict* reveals the differences among people in the past, it also reminds us that Nauvoo's history continues to call forth differing visions of historical understanding.[1]

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The editors are well qualified to tackle their subject. Hallwas, a professor of English and director of regional collections at Western Illinois University in Macomb, has researched and published local history for many years. Launius, chief historian at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in Washington, D.C., has to his credit articles exploring the history of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and a biography of Joseph Smith III.

As with every historical work, this compilation reflects the philosophical orientation of its authors. Launius necessarily sees Nauvoo from his perspective as a member of the Reorganized Church; Hallwas, as a midwesterner from outside the Mormon tradition. In challenging what they term the Latter-day Saint "cultural myth of innocence and righteousness," Hallwas and Launius share an outsider's perspective that combines two earlier views. The first was espoused by the anti-Mormon political party of historic Hancock County. Grounded in the assumptions of a secular world, it minimizes the workings of the religious mind.[2] The second was voiced by internal opponents of Joseph Smith's doctrinal developments in Nauvoo and represents a religious perspective that finds unacceptable significant doctrinal changes during the Nauvoo years, particularly those associated with the Nauvoo Temple. In other words, the commentary in this volume reflects the views of the secular and spiritual opponents of Joseph Smith's religious community in Nauvoo.

The editors set forth a reliable thesis for their narrative: that the Mormon conflict in Illinois was an ideological struggle between two cultures. In one of these cultures, a covenant with God created a people who were governed under a theocracy. In the other, a contract among individuals created a government functioning as a democracy. At a basic level, in their selection of documents, the editors attempt balance and fairness in presenting the views of these competing cultures. They allow twenty-eight Latter-day Saints, three dissenters, thirty-nine non-Mormons, and twenty anti-Mormons to speak. After an introductory section on the arrival of the Saints in Illinois, five succeeding parts focus on the book's central theme—conflict: its origins, the troubles in Nauvoo over plural marriage and the *Expositor,* the murders in Carthage, the

aftermath of violence and political tension, and the exodus and final Battle of Nauvoo.

Despite the presence of alternate historical voices, the compilation's narrators speak loudest of all as advocates for their own interpretive view. Their voices invite Latter-day Saint historians to move beyond their own convictions to include more of the context of secular America and more of the ambiguities and complexities of human experience. The editors argue that there is too much sacred history in the Nauvoo histories written from a Latter-day Saint perspective. And yet, while calling for a broadening (or even abandonment) of the sacred view of history, Hallwas and Launius ultimately fail to broaden their own perspective. Their attempt to correct old inequities creates a new imbalance. They applaud the secular and reformist voices and muffle the Latter-day Saint voices of faith.

The editors argue their case in cogent introductions to each section and each document. In the political arena, they endorse the perspective that sees Nauvoo as a militaristic community where democratic government was blatantly supplanted with theocratic authority (5, 67–68, 244), and they dismiss the opposite perspective (161). They praise the virtues of Thomas Sharp and other political opponents of Nauvoo's growing influence at the polls as men "devoted to individualism and democratic values, which [they] felt were threatened by the theocratic, militaristic community headed by Joseph Smith" (80, 103). They applaud the calming influence of Sheriff Minor Deming but criticize the tactics of Deming's successor, Jacob B. Backenstos, as "both foolish and repressive," concluding that "all he ultimately succeeded in doing was escalating the conflict" (280).

The religious controversy similarly is cast in terms that shift the traditional characterizations of participants. In the contest of words between Joseph Smith and John C. Bennett, the editors, while attempting fairness, allow Bennett to come out ahead (8, 116). Much is made of the "deception" employed by the Prophet in the practice of plural marriage (126, 138, 169), nothing of its religious groundings. Readers are invited to accept the internal religious opposition aired through the *Expositor* newspaper as "an ethical protest . . . against what they believed was oppression from an

ecclesiastical institution gone awry" (111, 112). The reformers "represented well-informed, respectable dissent in Nauvoo" (131), stood for traditional Christian and American values (163–64), and were "some of the most solid and dignified men of the community" (175). In contrast, those who destroyed the *Expositor,* the authors say, were guilty of suppressing freedom "under the guise of preserving liberty" (166).

The editors find unacceptable the Latter-day Saint view that the anti-Mormons engaged in religious persecution of the Saints. For them, "the only documented case of out-and-out religious persecution enacted in Hancock County [was] against the dissenters who dared to point out Mormon shortcomings in their newspaper and demand reform" (6). Hallwas and Launius acknowledge that failure, shortcomings, and human foibles exist in the complex individuals on all sides of the conflict (6, 142, 348). For the Nauvooans who would migrate to Utah, those shortcomings included their inability to recognize their own weaknesses (6, 91, 185, 191), a readiness to blame others (203), "criminal behavior and political clannishness" (262), and the use of scapegoating and the denial of justice for political and religious opponents (7–8, 149–50, 157).

Generally, Hallwas and Launius advise caution against the bias in polemical and mythic texts (126, 138) and warn against the uncritical use of reminiscent accounts (72, 103). In some instances, however, they hold such documents to different standards of reliability when to do so supports their thesis (326). For example, they accept an 1875 reminiscence from the *Carthage Gazette* as an authentic portrait of Nauvoo despite the obvious bias of the author. "Nauvoo in 1846 was characterized by factions, rowdyism, and fear," Hallwas and Launius conclude (326). Yet they classify as an unconscious reshaping of history a Utah woman's recollection of the Battle of Nauvoo. Her words, they observe, "sound suspiciously like the kind of thing that is 'recalled' when memory becomes the servant of faith" (339).

In presenting their version of "the inevitable conflict between theocratic and democratic government," Hallwas and Launius fear most "the danger of demonizing other people, and the self-deceptions fostered by the myths of innocence and political righteousness" (8). They observe correctly that both sides in the conflict

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sometimes failed in these ways. They rightly argue that the non-Mormons "had justifiable ideological grounds on which to criticize [Joseph] Smith and oppose the spread of Mormon theocracy." To their credit, the editors acknowledge that when the non-Mormon critique turned to murder, it "breached the very democratic ideals" advocated by the secular opponents of the Latter-day Saint theocratic community. Hallwas and Launius offer mild praise for the community of Latter-day Saints "for their religious idealism, hard work, and personal sacrifice," while challenging "the antidemocratic tendencies of their dogmatic, crusading spirit" (8). Their portrayal reveals the inner tension within a church that was struggling to maintain a secular view of government as democratic while at the same time advocating the establishment of a religious community founded on theocratic biblical patterns.

As a corrective to some single-minded interpretations of Nauvoo, *Cultures in Conflict* is a helpful addition to the historical literature. It makes readily available many familiar sources and a number of new ones. Unfortunately, by defending the anti-Mormon/dissident perspective and diminishing the view of Nauvoo as religious community, the book polarizes historical discussion. This volume would have been more useful had it built a more balanced understanding of the competing viewpoints as a springboard to tolerance for differences then and now.

From my perspective as a member of the religious community and historiographical world view targeted by Hallwas and Launius, it seems that because Joseph Smith's vision for Nauvoo was founded in the world of religious ideas—and not for secular purposes—Nauvoo can best be understood through the lens of sacred history. Those of us who see Nauvoo from this view must, however, learn to understand as well the secular and dissident perspectives of the opposing parties to fully understand the complex story of Nauvoo. That understanding can help to eliminate simplistic characterizations of individuals and groups as only good or only evil. It can build bridges of understanding between disparate communities in today's world.

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NOTES

[1]For a parallel documentary approach to religious dissent, see Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher, eds., *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

[2]For pertinent background on the historiographical approach taken in *Cultures in Conflict,* consult John E. Hallwas, "Mormon Nauvoo from a Non-Mormon Perspective," *Journal of Mormon History* 16 (1990): 53-69; and Roger D. Launius, "Mormon Memory, Mormon Myth, and Mormon History," *Journal of Mormon History* 21 (spring 1995): 1-24.