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*From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet*  
**Valeen Tippetts Avery**

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VALEEN TIPPETTS AVERY. *From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xii; 357 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Hardbound, \$49.95; paperback, \$19.95.

Reviewed by Richard P. Howard, historian emeritus, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS Church).

Valeen Avery's work on Emma Hale Smith<sup>1</sup> coincided with her doctoral dissertation on the life of David Hyrum Smith, the youngest child of Joseph and Emma.<sup>2</sup> These two works form a solid foundation for her book *From Mission to Madness*, which also benefits from Avery's judicious use of the RLDS Archives' recently cataloged papers of David Hyrum Smith and his only son, Elbert A. Smith.

Avery's title points to David Smith's journey through nearly ten years of mission work mixed with severe and often lengthy bouts of "brain fever" (208), followed by three years of frightening upheaval as family, friends, and other benefactors tried unsuccessfully to care for him and his family, ending with his forced committal to the hospital for the insane at Elgin, Illinois, in 1877. But this "ending" was only the beginning of a dreary, twenty-seven-year denouement marked by fading hopes for improvement—which was not sufficient even for his return to family life—and pervasive shadows of confusion, loneliness, despair, paranoia, and mercifully, death in 1904.

Avery's book is a skillful, detailed weaving of a rich and varied body of sources into the themes and the difficult course of events that mark David's life and times. Her introduction sketches the background of early Mormonism (1830–44) before David's birth, which occurred five months after the assassination of his father in 1844. This engaging summary could benefit from a better sketch of the geography and a clearer chronology of the Ohio-Missouri transitions marking the three phases of Mormon settlement in western Missouri: initial settlement in Jackson County, 1831–33; forced exile in Clay County, 1834–36; and the final Missouri settlements farther north in Caldwell and Daviess Counties, 1836–38, which ended with Missouri mobs forcing the Saints into Illinois in the winter of 1838–39. This chronology might have been more precisely interwoven with the Church's Kirtland, Ohio, history (1831–38) for a clearer picture of how early Mormon development in Missouri makes Nauvoo more understandable.

The author uses nearly half of this introduction to chart Joseph Smith's role in starting polygamy in Nauvoo and to record Emma Smith's turmoil at Joseph's departure from monogamous marriage. This scenario sets the stage for David's intense struggle with the polygamy issue during his mission work in Utah in 1869 and 1872.

Avery links David and his mother symbiotically by depicting Emma's heroic efforts to manage her household and family of five children, steer a life path independent from Mormonism and its leadership in the aftermath

life path independent from Mormonism and its leadership in the aftermath of her husband's sudden death, and scratch out a living in what was once a bustling town of some 12,000<sup>3</sup> (Avery claims 20,000 [29]) but what had become a ghost town of several hundred. In the process, Emma married Lewis C. Bidamon in December 1847, when David was three years old. David had never known his father, but he would come to know and respect his stepfather, even though they were to have their moments of estrangement and tension, such as "Major Bidamon" often had with all his stepchildren.

Even with the scant primary sources covering David's early life, Avery sketches something of his personality traits and behavioral patterns. The images Avery depicts of David as he grew to manhood in Nauvoo are those of artist, poet, lover of nature, dreamer, and young man deeply touched and refined by his mother's influence. He read good books, many of which came into the family library through the generosity of John Bernhisel, a Utah Mormon who traveled regularly between Salt Lake and Washington, D.C. Bernhisel had been a close family friend before Joseph's and Hyrum's deaths, and he extended his friendship and support to Emma and her family. He was perplexed at Emma's negative feelings toward Salt Lake Mormon leaders—especially Brigham Young—and longed for her to bring her family west. But for David, the die was cast early. He would come to manhood with a staunch loyalty to Emma and the family, which also meant a deep inclination to disbelieve the Utah Church. Avery poignantly describes this strong loyalty Emma's family exhibited. Joseph III rejected several appeals to from Utah-based Smith cousins and uncles to come west and unite with the religion of the founding prophet. After years of disinterest in Mormonism, Emma was baptized into the RLDS Church at the time young Joseph was ordained its president—a decision Avery sees as having influenced David positively towards the RLDS orbit. In August 1861, David himself was baptized, one of the first in the RLDS movement. Avery rightly notes the impact on David of his brother Frederick's death in April 1862, which deepened David's commitment to the direction the Nauvoo Smiths were taking in embracing the RLDS faith.

Avery recounts David's remarkable transition from dreamer-artist-poet to preacher in the field and writer for the RLDS magazine, *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*. In 1863, Joseph III, president of the RLDS Church, began sending missionaries to Utah. In 1869 he finally teamed David with their brother Alexander on a mission to Utah and sent David again in 1872. Joseph hoped that the founding prophet's sons would command respect and wide response to the RLDS message. These months in Utah, however, and especially the months spent there on his second mission in 1872, confronted David with the plural marriage issue in ways that forced him to come to conclusions about his father that were radically different from

anything he had ever suspected could be true. The foundation of his previous stance on this matter was swept away by evidences of his father's active role in the inception of plural marriage. Avery wisely avoids oversimplifying this issue as the cause of David's mental and emotional breakdown, but she correctly identifies it as an important element in his sustained illness after 1872.

Regarding David's attempt to take on the responsibilities of having a wife and family of his own, Avery's evidence points to a man who, despite recurring skirmishes with darkness of soul and mind, realized during his first trip to Utah that he wanted to marry Clara Charlotte Hartshorn. After several months of battling illness, David married Clara in May 1870, and they moved into the Mansion House in Nauvoo. Their only son, Elbert Aoriul, was born there the following March. Avery's sources indicate that David was a man torn by feelings of uselessness and helplessness as Clara and their new baby were being cared for by Emma and others while he could find no steady employment to support them. He was restless, yearning to reenter the mission field—anxious to engage in the only pursuit that gave his life some respite from the deep gloom that marked his days in Illinois.

Val Avery is more than a gifted storyteller, scholar, and researcher. Her deep awareness of the Smith family's generations of anguished silence over David's sad life and demise are revealed in the pages of this volume. She knows the hazards of psychohistory and refuses to fall prey to them. She refuses to speculate on the specific medical or psychological causes of David's malady, choosing rather to portray him in deeply human terms. She places him in the patient, compassionate, and bewildered Smith family support system, stretched beyond its limits by the relentless force of insurmountable odds.

To read these pages is to be drawn into the poignant struggles of all—family members, physicians, hospital workers, neighbors, and friends—who battle to form networks of care for those who suffer any of the myriad forms of mental illness. Avery does not answer every question behind the tragedy of David Hyrum Smith's fractured life, but she brings him and the issues of his existence alive to our minds and hearts in ways that enrich and refine our sense of what it means to be human, caring for those who, like ourselves, sometimes lose their way.

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1. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984).

2. Valeen Tippetts Avery, "Insanity and the Sweet Singer: A Biography of David Hyrum Smith, 1844–1904" (Ph.D. diss., Northern Arizona University, 1984).

3. Susan Easton Black, "How Large Was the Population of Nauvoo?" *BYU Studies* 35, no. 2 (1995): 91.