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The History of Louisa Barnes Pratt: Being the Autobiography of a Mormon Missionary Widow and Pioneer S. George Ellsworth

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S. GEORGE ELLSWORTH, ed. *The History of Louisa Barnes Pratt: Being the Autobiography of a Mormon Missionary Widow and Pioneer*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998. xxviii; 420 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Andrew H. Hedges, Assistant Professor of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University.

Louisa Barnes Pratt's *History*, published here as volume three in Maureen Ursenbach Beecher's series, *Life Writings of Frontier Women*, could have asked for no more qualified editor than S. George Ellsworth. Along with being a founding editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly* and editor of *The Journals of Addison Pratt*, Ellsworth has written and edited several books and articles on pioneer women, the history of southern Utah, and the history of the LDS Church in the South Pacific.¹ These topics are central to Louisa's narrative, which comprises a valuable resource for students of the Saints' trek west, Mormon missionary work, early Mormon settlement in California, and life in nineteenth-century southern Utah.

For all its bearing on these important subfields of Church history, however, the greatest contribution Louisa's *History* makes is in the field of LDS women's history. Married, but often separated from her husband, and involved with everything from the Nauvoo exodus to teaching the gospel in French Polynesia, Louisa offers her reader a woman's view of life in the Church unparalleled by other memoirs or biographies. As such, *History* will be an essential read for a long time to come for anyone interested in LDS women's history.

Louisa begins her life story by recounting events she remembered growing up Anglican in Massachusetts, Lower Canada, and New York. These included the War of 1812, in which her father fought for the British, as the family—although Americans in sentiment—were living in Canada at the time. She next recalls events surrounding her marriage to Addison Pratt and their early life together, their introduction to the Church, and their subsequent move to Nauvoo.

Louisa describes at length Addison's mission call to the South Pacific, Joseph's martyrdom, the exodus from Nauvoo, and life in Winter Quarters, as well as her subsequent settlement in the Salt Lake Valley and her rather awkward reunion with Addison after five years' separation. Their time together is brief; Addison is called to accompany a wagon train to California and from there is asked to return to the islands. Louisa and Addison are spared several more years of separation when Church authorities permit Louisa and her four daughters to join Addison on Tubuai, although one could conclude from her lively account of the journey from Utah through gold-rush California and across the Pacific that her lot would have been easier had she stayed in Utah.

A detailed account of her life on Tubuai and in San Bernardino—where the family settled after the mission—follows as does a description of her return to Utah, sans Addison, at the approach of Johnston’s army. Louisa finishes her account by detailing life in Beaver, Utah, where she lived until her death September 8, 1880.

For all of her involvement in some of Church history’s most epic events, Louisa’s narrative is remarkably personal. In most cases, she limits her account of important events to what she saw and experienced rather than undertaking to explain for her reader all that was happening around her. Relationships with friends and family members and their personal challenges and triumphs as well as her own receive far more attention than do the activities of mobs in Illinois or French policy in Polynesia. Loneliness, depression, joy, death, birth, and separation from loved ones—Louisa comes across them all and spares her reader nothing in their retelling.

Even more importantly, Louisa is quite free with her own thoughts and ideas about her experiences; however, exceptions to this rule were not uncommon. Good manners and a sense of propriety required her to speak only in vague terms of offenses she received from various people. For example, she mentions nothing more about her failing relationship with her husband than “[m]y domestic sorrows I forbear to mention. I carry them in my own bosom, and bear my injuries in silence” (222). For the most part, though, Louisa gives voice to her introspection and meditations and drops ideas about everything from how much adults might reasonably expect from children (11) to how to be a gracious benefactor (122). The result is a book rich in human interest and personal reflection, and I felt after reading it that I not only knew about Louisa’s life but that I actually knew Louisa and what her experiences meant to her.

Ellsworth’s editing, for the most part, adds to the value of the book. He breaks Louisa’s narrative into four parts and twenty-four chapters, with numerous subheadings in each chapter. Helpful descriptions of the book’s key characters are provided near the beginning of the text, the index is thorough, and the original journals and memoir are described in detail. On a less positive note, I found the introduction to be somewhat limited in scope and occasionally redundant. As noteworthy and deserving of comment as Louisa’s varied experiences are, Ellsworth focuses the introduction almost exclusively on her relationship with Addison; he tells the story twice in the introduction and alludes to parts of it again in his brief introductions to later chapters (195–96, 212–14).

Another helpful addition would have been an indication under “Editorial Procedures” (xxii) that chapters 9, 10, 13, and 14 were taken from Louisa’s journals rather than from her memoirs and that the reader could expect to find in these chapters several clarifying statements, in brackets,

contained in the memoirs but not in the journals. Instead, the use of this procedure is discussed at the end of the book under “Sources” (382), and until I stumbled across that discussion, I was at a loss to know where the statements in brackets in these chapters were coming from.

Finally, I would have appreciated more background information in the notes. Some, I know, feel that extensive notes detract from reproductions of original sources and that the fewer notes an editor employs, the better off the reader is. Given Louisa’s cursory treatment of the historical context in which her life took place, however, I think notes that detailed the history of the French in Polynesia, for example, or reminded the reader about what took place at the Battle of Plattsburgh and its significance in the War of 1812 would have done more good than harm.

These are relatively minor problems, however, and detract very little from this award-winning resource² for historians and laymen alike interested in Mormon history. It is the last book Ellsworth completed before his death in 1997, and it is a fitting end to his distinguished career.

1. S. George Ellsworth, ed., *The Journals of Addison Pratt: Being a Narrative of Yankee Whaling in the Eighteen Twenties, a Mormon Mission to the Society Islands, and of Early California and Utah in the Eighteen Forties and Fifties* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990); S. George Ellsworth, *Samuel Claridge: Pioneering the Outposts of Zion* (Logan, Utah: S. George Ellsworth, 1987); S. George Ellsworth and Kathleen C. Perrin, *Seasons of Faith and Courage: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in French Polynesia, a Sesquicentennial History, 1843–1993* (Sandy, Utah: Yves R. Perrin, 1994); S. George Ellsworth, *Mormon Settlement on the Muddy* (Ogden, Utah: Weber State College Press, 1987); S. George Ellsworth, ed., *Dear Ellen: Two Mormon Women and Their Letters* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1974).

2. Recipient of the Mormon History Association’s *Steven F. Christensen Best Documentary/Bibliography* book published in 1998.

In some copies of the last issue of *BYU Studies*, the last line on page 215 was inadvertently repeated on the top of page 216. In other copies, this line, which reads “life path independent from Mormonism and its leadership in the aftermath,” was lost. Our press apologizes for this printing error, which appeared in Richard Howard’s review of *From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet*, by Valeen Tippetts Avery.