



4-1-2000

*What E'er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part: The Missionary Diaries of David O. McKay Stan Larson and Patricia Larson*

Mary Jane Woodger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Woodger, Mary Jane (2000) "*What E'er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part: The Missionary Diaries of David O. McKay Stan Larson and Patricia Larson*," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 39 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol39/iss2/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

STAN LARSON and PATRICIA LARSON. *What E'er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part: The Missionary Diaries of David O. McKay*. Salt Lake City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1999. xlvi; 268 pp. Illustrations, introduction, essays, notes, glossary, index, bibliography. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Mary Jane Woodger

Stan Larson, of the University of Utah's Marriott Library, and Patricia Larson have made available the complete firsthand account of David O. McKay's missionary experiences. The greatest contribution of *What E'er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part* is that for "the first time . . . missionary diaries have been published of someone who at the time was not a general authority but who later became a president of the LDS Church" (xxxix).

As a biographer of McKay's education, I read these journals some time ago on microfilm—a formidable task because, as McKay himself admitted, some of his penmanship is illegible. The reader could more deeply appreciate the editors' work if a copy of an original page from McKay's journal had been reproduced in this edited version. Angie Larson (the Larsons' daughter-in-law) transcribed the text with painstaking accuracy. Her exactitude and careful attention to detail, such as where McKay originally wrote one word, crossed it out, and wrote a different word above, produces a genuine rendition of McKay's thoughts.

This volume is a handy, well-annotated compilation of primary source material that is easy to read and attractively presented. Additional resources, such as other missionary journals and explanations of places and terms, are invaluable in placing McKay's words in context. The interpretation of several Scottish expressions add clarity. For example, I had no idea that *travelers* were head lice or *champit tatties* were mashed potatoes.

In addition, meticulous research of related material gives a more complete picture of the young McKay's missionary experiences. For instance, his account of angelic ministrations during a priesthood meeting is buttressed by numerous other eyewitness accounts. With academic care, the Larsons leave us with a rich account of an LDS mission experience during the last few years of the nineteenth century (1897–99). The reader empathizes with young McKay, following the growth of this rural Utahn as he exhibits an emerging sense of humor, the beginnings of a poetic style, and a refinement that becomes the hallmark of his later demeanor. Furthermore, one can also observe germinating in the mission field the faith that sustained David O. McKay as the President of the Church.

Some missionary behavior in McKay's day varied from that of modern missionaries who adhere to twenty-first-century mission rules. For example, sight-seeing was a common nineteenth-century missionary activity, and

McKay certainly indulged in it. But present-day missionaries can sympathize with and gain encouragement from his insights. Most would find it comforting that a future prophet declared, “I do dislike tracting, there is nothing pleasant about it” (81). Likewise, missionaries will take solace in evidence of moments of homesickness, gloominess, and discouragement interspersed in his diaries. As McKay rises above such feelings, his words pull at heartstrings, giving hope to those in similar situations. The diary excerpts reveal an inexperienced elder giving his first blessing, performing his first wedding ceremony, and dressing the dead.

McKay’s keen ability to laugh at himself brought comfort as he tracted the streets of his ancestral home. For example, after one street meeting, he commented, “Our singing failed to bring anyone around; in fact it drove them away” (138). On another occasion, when frustrated with the Scottish Saints, McKay tells future readers, “If one would judge our Church by the actions of some of the members in Glasgow, he would shun it as he would the hottest corner of H—I!” (165) Combined wit and a developing poetic style delight the reader in interspersed stanzas, such as

All missionaries know this stubborn fact:  
 To offer a Catholic a gospel tract,  
 Is like pouring water down the small of your back,  
 Such a look does he get as the door goes “smack!” (23)

Through the diaries, the reader catches an essence of the emerging refinement and cultural sensitivity for which President McKay was known. Ever moved by beauty, McKay includes frequent quotes from Robert Burns and openly appreciates the arts and natural beauty of Scotland. However, his eyes are also opened to a material and spiritual poverty he had not encountered prior to his mission. He describes a visit to a poorhouse, his disgust at seeing a woman picking fleas from her body, and the devastating effects of alcohol—that “soul-destroying liquid” (203). Amidst these experiences, McKay’s testimony is strengthened as he sees the powerful effect of the gospel on people’s lives. Readers see a boy who went on a mission “mainly because he trusted his parents” (xix) become a man who witnessed the “manifestation of [the Lord’s] power” (130).

Though McKay’s words could stand on their own, three introductory essays by Marion D. Hanks, Leonard J. Arrington, and Eugene England are included. The essays each offer appropriate and insightful forewords to these diaries, but England’s lengthy essay seems to me to have an agenda. While he certainly raises interest in the diaries, England struggles with the issue of McKay being conservative, moderate, or liberal. He states that his “central and crucial purpose” is that these classifications “be seen as good words to describe the great range of his ideas and the unique qualities of his character, not as limiting labels” (xx) and describes President McKay’s

“remarkable legacy that combined conservative devotion, orthodox spirituality, and liberal perspective and courage.” However, despite his apparent attempt to be evenhanded, ultimately he labels President McKay as “the most liberal and influential Mormon prophet” of the century (xxx).

This volume is masterfully edited, but a few improvements might have been made. I agree with the Larsons that these journals are “real gems” (xxxi); however, even McKay admits that on some days “nothing very interesting or important happened” (88). A dated index of important events and correlating page numbers would have been helpful. Moreover, though the number of illustrations is impressive, as a historian I was disappointed that the dates for the illustrations were not included. In addition, the map of Scotland is difficult to read.

Notwithstanding these few suggestions, I thank the Larsons for the unpolished image of an emerging prophet. All who read *What E'er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part* will benefit by knowing David O. McKay better. Though he was uncertain about his future, his missionary journals show the growing confirmation and certainty of his testimony of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The volume makes available to the casual reader or McKay scholar a complete and accurate reference tool that will be used for years.

---

Mary Jane Woodger (maryjane\_woodger@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. She received her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at Brigham Young University in 1997.