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Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair

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Reid L. Neilson. *Exhibiting Mormonism:
The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.*
Religion in America Series.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Marian Wardle

There is a natural and overwhelming curiosity to know what manner of creature a real live flesh and blood Mormon is,” wrote an 1893 reporter for the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, quoted by Reid Neilson in his study of the participation by the LDS Church at the 1893 Chicago fair (131). Neilson is a scholar of Mormon religious history and current managing director of the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He convincingly argues that this participation with the larger world community helped Church leaders understand how they could improve the Church’s public image. He sets forth the 1893 fair as a turning point. In representing itself, the Church began to deemphasize its polarizing doctrinal differences and emphasized its cultural contributions instead.

In the last few decades, much has been written about the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition, the international fair that was organized to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of America.¹ It occupied six hundred acres on the banks of Lake Michigan, attracted 27.5 million visitors, and housed nearly sixty-five thousand exhibits from all over the world.² Dubbed the “White City” because of its many elaborate temporary white buildings made of plaster in the style of French Beaux-Arts architecture, the exposition set the standard of American urban planning and civic architecture for decades. Recent scholarship exposes the defining role of the national ruling establishment—primarily of northern European descent—in the organization of the fair. These elites, argues Robert Rydell, envisioned themselves at the apex of human development and the helm of developing civilization.³ Very little recent scholarship, however, has addressed the Mormon presence at the fair. Indeed, apart from period sources, Neilson relies on Gerald Peterson’s 1974 master’s thesis, “History of Mormon Exhibits in World Expositions,” for an overview of LDS participation at world’s fairs from 1893 through 1967. Neilson’s volume adds to the body of scholarship on Mormonism by addressing a previously neglected subject.

Short on information about the fair in general and long on facts regarding Mormon cultural history, Neilson's study seemingly addresses contemporary scholars of religion, to whom his many citations of period references in LDS publications will introduce new sources. At the same time, the stimulating chapters on the performances of the Tabernacle Choir at the fair and B. H. Roberts's controversial exclusion from the World's Parliament of Religions will prove fascinating to the general educated LDS reader.

Neilson sets up his argument by providing a history of the Church's participation in the creation of its own public image, beginning in the 1830s, initially through proselytizing efforts that led to an often-negative perception of Mormonism. He then launches into his account of LDS participation at the Chicago fair and its impact on a more sympathetic public assessment of the Church. He concludes with a brief summary of the Church's participation in later world's fairs, through 1934, to demonstrate further the importance of the 1893 Chicago experience in molding future efforts in public relations. According to Neilson, the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the 1933–34 Century of Progress International Exposition, also held in Chicago, act as “bookends to tell a larger story of the church's accommodation and assimilation into the larger American religious mainstream” (207).

In his introduction, Neilson summarizes LDS participation in world's fairs. Noting that much has been written on nineteenth-century popular representations of Mormons, he finds that “much less has been written on how the Latter-day Saints themselves were participants in the construction and contestation of their own image in America” (6). The ensuing chapters of the book are his efforts to meet that need.

The first and longest chapter, on the history of Mormonism's self-representation, largely through missionary work, from 1830 to 1892, gives a history of the Church's negative reputation based on alienating doctrines that emphasized theological differences. Neilson divides the Church's pre-1893 self-representation into two periods: the founding period (1830–46), which was a defensive and reactive time of pamphleteering; and the pioneer period (1847–90), which was a period of aggressive use of print media by the Church to represent itself by emphasizing doctrinal differences over similarities. This latter period included the 1852 public announcement by the Mormons that they were openly practicing polygamy. Neilson views this period as “a public relations disaster” (46).

In chapter 2, Neilson gives a history of Utah's participation as a territory at the Columbian Exposition. Utah would not be granted statehood until 1896, three years after the fair. As Neilson points out, the Chicago fair occurred three years after President Wilford Woodruff issued the 1890

manifesto prohibiting polygamy. At this juncture, according to Neilson, the Church was looking for public relations opportunities in its bid for statehood. The Chicago fair provided a chance to showcase the territory's achievements and lessen national prejudice. Ultimately, the territory produced the best mineral exhibit, winning thirty medals along with thirteen awards for its agricultural exhibition. The Utah Building attracted crowds with its display of a fifteen-hundred-year-old Native American mummy from a cliff-dweller tomb.

Chapter 3 discusses the involvement of LDS female leaders of the Church's Relief Society, Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association, and Primary in the World's Congress of Representative Women held on the fairgrounds. These women had already won respect through their prior participation in meetings of the National Council of Women and the Woman Suffrage Association Convention. In Chicago they continued to dispel prejudicial stereotypes and win the respect of their cohorts in the cause of national and international feminism. Neilson writes that the Church's male leadership was "thrilled with their success" (100).

The Church leaders had difficulty approving the Tabernacle Choir's journey to Chicago to perform at the fair. As discussed in chapter 4, this difficulty was largely due to the financial burden of transporting such a large group. It would be the choir's first out-of-state performance and the beginning of the Church's most successful public relations venture. Neilson's account of the choir's participation at the Grand International Eisteddfod—a choir competition staged by the Welsh-American National Cymmrodion Society of Chicago—is fascinating. The choir's performances at the fair and in cities along their train route began a demand for their performances that continues to this day, validating Neilson's thesis that the Church's participation at the Chicago fair began a public relations effort to emphasize Mormon cultural contributions.

Neilson's report on an episode of LDS involvement at the White City comprises chapter 5. From my perspective, this is his most captivating and well-written chapter. The story of B. H. Roberts at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago is illuminating and intriguing, and Neilson documents it with a wealth of period sources reporting on the parliament. The chapter details Mormon exclusion, then inclusion, and exclusion again from representation at the parliament. As reported by Neilson, the American Protestant organizers invited over three thousand leaders of Christian and non-Christian religions worldwide to present papers in Chicago. The LDS Church was the only American religious group not invited. B. H. Roberts, a member of the Church's Quorum of the Seventy, pushed for LDS involvement and was given permission to present a paper. At the last minute,

however, he was relegated to a small side room. He withdrew his paper in protest and helped publish his unfair treatment in the national press. This incident came on the heels of the success enjoyed by the Tabernacle Choir. According to Neilson, the juxtaposition of the two events can help scholars understand the limits of religious tolerance in nineteenth-century America.

The last chapter of the book summarizes LDS participation in ensuing world's fairs as an extension of the public relations effort begun in Chicago. Neilson asserts that dating from its participation in the 1893 fair, the Church stressed its cultural contributions over its polarizing beliefs. He points out the paradox of Mormonism being mainstreamed into American culture as a religion because of its nonreligious achievements (178). The book fittingly ends with a report of successful Mormon involvement in the 1933–34 Century of Progress International Exposition, again in Chicago, where the seventy-six-year-old B. H. Roberts was invited to present two papers at the First International Congress of the World Fellowship of Faiths. Roberts died two weeks later.

In the end, Neilson acknowledges that, in agreement with the national mainstream, Mormons believed in a trajectory of progress, but he missed an opportunity to address the dichotomous position of Mormons in this regard. Included in the notions of progress and advancement promoted at the Columbian Exposition were theories of evolutionary and racial progress, points discussed in other scholarship in recent decades. Standing apart from the exhibition halls and the auxiliary world's congresses of the "civilized" nations was an area of the fair known as the Midway Plaisance. There, exhibitions of and performances by "primitive" and "exotic" peoples created an "alliance between entertainment and anthropology."⁴ Contemporary beliefs in evolutionary racial progression were put on display in a carnival-like atmosphere. Mormons were at least indirectly complicit in these ideas, as witnessed by Neilson's reports of the popularity of the exhibition of a Native American mummy in the Utah Building and Utah visitors' enjoyment of the Midway Plaisance, where they viewed tribal dances, harems, and displays of and by tribal peoples.

Mormon identity with progressive evolution, along with the successes of the Tabernacle Choir and the LDS women's auxiliary leaders in Chicago, aligned Mormons with mainstream American culture. Yet their polarizing doctrines, especially the practice of polygamy, aligned them with the exotic. Just as fairgoers enthusiastically viewed the primitive peoples displayed on the Midway, they were curious to see a "real live flesh and blood Mormon." A discussion of the collusion of Mormons—a marginalized, even exotic people—with 1890s secular theories of progress could have deepened and strengthened Neilson's analysis of Mormon acceptance through cultural

mainstreaming and nonacceptance through doctrine. It would also have made a fascinating contribution to recent scholarship on world's fairs.

Overall, Neilson adds an interesting piece to a growing body of scholarship on Mormonism and makes his case for a change in the Church's public relations program after the 1893 Chicago Fair. Along the way, he provides an intriguing account of little-known episodes of Mormon participation at the fair.

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1. See, for example, Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 38–71; Robert Rydell, "Rediscovering the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition," in *Revisiting the White City: American Art at the 1893 World's Fair* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art and National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 19–61; and Norman Bolotin and Christine Laing, *The World's Columbian Exposition: The Chicago World's Fair of 1893* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002). [^]
2. Bolotin and Laing, *World's Columbian Exposition*, 4, 11. [^]
3. See Rydell, "Rediscovering," 25, 53–56; Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 63–71. [^]
4. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 63. [^]