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## Defender: The Life of Daniel H. Wells

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Quentin Thomas Wells. *Defender: The Life of Daniel H. Wells*.  
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*Reviewed by Cherry B. Silver*

His wives referred to him with tongue-in-cheek respect as “the Esquire.” Brigham Young and other associates addressed him as Squire Wells. Militia members followed their “General.” The people of Salt Lake City elected him mayor for ten years. Church members honored him as counselor in the First Presidency for twenty years and president of the Endowment House for nine. He presided over the European Mission twice and served as first president of the Manti Temple.

The accomplishments of Daniel H. Wells (1814–1891) are amply documented in a new biography by his descendant Quentin Thomas Wells. This volume, entitled *Defender: The Life of Daniel H. Wells*, unfolds Wells’s military roles, public service, business acumen, church callings, and family life with convincing detail and skillful narrative flow. It offers an overview of a developing frontier society. It describes an impossibly busy life for Daniel Wells, who held overlapping roles in the public sphere as he supported six wives and many children. Yet he was not personally ambitious, claims the author: “As with other civic positions to which he was elected, Daniel did not actively seek the job of mayor. . . . Brigham Young requested Daniel to stand for the office. He agreed and was elected by a large majority” (293).

Biographer Quentin Wells has had a long career in investigative and advertising fields, communications, and media, including seventeen years at Salt Lake Community College. He has collected Daniel Wells documents for thirty years or so with an eye to expanding on a 1942 biography written by Bryant S. Hinckley. That book was commissioned by President Heber J. Grant out of respect for the man who years before had helped lift his mother, Rachel R. Grant, out of poverty. The story is that Daniel H. Wells brought his nephew N. Park Wells and wife to the Grant house asking for bed and board. The very satisfied young couple

paid Sister Grant twenty dollars weekly. They also introduced General Alexander G. Hawes, who mentored young Heber J. in the insurance business (311).<sup>1</sup> Full of useful documents and anecdotes, the Hinckley biography feeds Quentin Wells's current study of Daniel's influence during fifty years of LDS history and social growth.

Daniel Hanmer Wells was born in 1814, only son in a farming family that settled in Oneida County, New York. When the family farm was sold, Daniel sought his fortune in Illinois, accompanied by his widowed mother and younger sister. In 1834, before he was even legally of age, Daniel bought his first eighty-four acres in Hancock County, eventual site of Nauvoo. He was elected constable and justice of the peace as soon as he came of age. In 1837, Daniel married Eliza Robison, the daughter of an evangelical preacher and widower who had courted and married his mother. Crops were bountiful, the markets rewarding, and Daniel began to sell land to newcomers like the Mormons. Daniel's future in Nauvoo seemed promising. He accepted a post on the city council and associated with the Mormon leaders as a nonmember colleague. However, in August 1846, after armed forces attacked the city, he asked Almon W. Babbitt, one of the trustees of the Church selling property in Nauvoo, to baptize him a Latter-day Saint. Because Eliza never shared his faith, he settled her with relatives in Burlington, Iowa, and left behind his property, his public position, and his wife and son to meet the Saints in Winter Quarters in June 1848, where he became Young's aide-de-camp for the journey west.

At this point, the author helps us understand his motivation. He quotes Daniel Wells years later saying that he abandoned the world for honor in the kingdom of God (85). He also cites Daniel's mournful letter to Brigham Young in February 1848 at his crisis point, "I see no prospects short of a complete sacrifice of everything I hold dear on earth, as well as in a pecuniary point of view, as the kindlier affections of the human heart. Please remember me before the Lord that I may be sustained through the dark day" (102).

The epithet "Defender," as used in this study, reveals Daniel Wells as not just a military leader but a protector of law and morality, a man of basic kindness and integrity. His efforts as mayor, struggling to secure the land rights of the founding Mormons (303–8) and resisting the

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1. See also Bryant S. Hinckley, *Daniel Hanmer Wells and Events of His Time* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1942), 7–8.

machinations of the Gentile League of Utah (339–44), provide gripping stories of conflicting political values in the early 1870s. There is a vivid depiction of the train of carriages escorting Daniel back from prison in May 1879 and the cheering people lining the road (345–46). Daniel's refusal to reveal sacred ceremonies of the Endowment House before a judge who threatened church and culture caught the public imagination (360–72).

Quentin Wells's research uncovers valuable accounts of human relationships among LDS leaders. One example comes from Heber C. Kimball's diaries of 1862, which indicate a rupture not registered in Daniel's own writings (170–71). The author detects possible jealousy on Kimball's part over Brigham Young's confidence in Wells: "Why Heber felt oppressed or how he had been 'sat on' by Daniel or what good the latter might have done him, he never revealed to anyone. Daniel never mentioned any conflict or distancing of himself from the first counselor and was unaware of Heber's feelings. But the fact remains that Daniel's influence with Brigham increased significantly after his calling as second counselor and the number and scope of his assignments grew from 1857 onward while Heber's duties remained static" (171).

My interest in the Wells family has come from annotating Emmeline B. Wells's Utah diaries, 1874–1921. She was the sixth wife of Daniel Wells in Utah, and diary entries frequently refer to family dynamics among Daniel, his wives, and children. For example, when Emmeline first penned articles for *The Woman's Exponent*, family members were skeptical: daughters "Belle and Em. were indignant with me for working in the Office, as if I had to earn my living."<sup>2</sup> Daniel too had to be convinced by others that editing was a worthy occupation for his wife, as she expressed with some sarcasm: "In the afternoon we had an excellent meeting, Sister [Eliza R.] Snow was present *my husband seemed proud of my literary acquirements for once in his life* called to me as I was passing and spoke to Br. [George Q.] Cannon of my being a journalist, invited me to go to Lake Point with an Excursion Party tomorrow—*something indeed very wonderful for him.*"<sup>3</sup> Thereafter Daniel, having his

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2. Emmeline B. Wells, Diary, original in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, March 24, 1875, Vault MSS 510, 2:159.

3. Emmeline B. Wells, Diary, June 3, 1875, Vault MSS 805, 1:8–9, emphasis added.

eyes opened, encouraged Emmeline in her literary talents and included her in entertaining visiting dignitaries.

While the author has helpfully drawn on primary documents from the Daniel H. Wells files at Utah State University and a personal narrative from the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, some of his secondary sources prove less than reliable. Fact checking, I believe, would have prevented obvious errors. He gives Daniel's famous wife's maiden name as Emmeline Belos Woodward and says she was born on April 29, 1828 (138 and index), whereas she is Emmeline Blanche and had a leap year birthdate, February 29. Then he speaks of her having a son, Newell, in Winter Quarters who died within a day (139), citing a sketch in volume 8 of Kate Carter's *Our Pioneer Heritage*. Newell Melchizedek Whitney was actually the son of Newell K. Whitney and his first wife Elizabeth Smith, not of Emmeline, though as a young woman she tended the little boy. Also, the boy did not die within a day, but through his father's blessing he survived, though as an invalid, for nine years.<sup>4</sup>

Quentin Wells explains that under financial duress Daniel Wells sold his large home and bought separate cottages for his wives. He says Daniel lived with Emmeline in a house at 327 Second Avenue and died there (414, 419). In fact, to avoid prosecution, Daniel made his residence at the home of his son Junius Free Wells, while Emmeline was housed in the old adobe Church historian's office on South Temple Street.<sup>5</sup> She describes him visiting her undercover to avoid arrest for cohabitation.<sup>6</sup> This subterfuge adds poignancy to the story of his older years. Daniel was ill in March of 1891 when Emmeline returned from a women's rights conference in Washington, DC. She joined friends and sister wives watching at his bedside, affirms Carol Madsen, until he died in wife Hannah's house on A Street three days later.<sup>7</sup> Emmeline's words pay tribute: "O, such a glorious entrance into the celestial world for him."<sup>8</sup>

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4. Emmeline B. Wells, Diary, February 6, 1891, Vault MSS 510, 14:67, and February 6, 1894, Vault MSS 510, 17:41.

5. Emmeline B. Wells, Diary, March 20, 1891, Vault MSS 510, 14:109. She labeled it "my old Rookery[,] the Owl's nest."

6. Emmeline B. Wells, Diary, December 27, 1887, Vault MSS 510, 10:385, and Memoranda 1887, Vault MSS 510, 10:394.

7. Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017), 313.

8. Emmeline B. Wells, Diary, March 25, 1891, Vault MSS 510, 14:114.

Obviously, this is a man worth knowing, and we can be grateful to Quentin T. Wells for detailing the Daniel H. Wells story in such a readable form. It will be the landmark volume on this leader for many years to come.

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With a background in American literature, Cherry B. Silver has taught courses at Brigham Young University and colleges in Washington State and California. For fifteen years, she has focused on women's history in her own research and through MWHIT, the Mormon Women's History Initiative Team. With Carol Cornwall Madsen, she edited *New Scholarship on Latter-day Saint Women in the Twentieth Century* (2005). She is currently annotating forty-six years of diaries written by Emmeline B. Wells, the fifth general president of the Relief Society.