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The Council of Fifty: What the Records Reveal about Mormon History

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Although some readers may quibble with the books' interpretations, MacKinnon has performed a remarkable feat in finding and reproducing these vital documents. These books will appeal to readers who are interested in learning about Mormon history, the Utah War, Manifest Destiny, and the colonization of the American West.

—Devan Jensen

Matthew J. Grow and R. Eric Smith, eds., *The Council of Fifty: What the Records Reveal about Mormon History* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017)

The announcement in September 2013 that the LDS Church would be publishing a transcript of the Council of Fifty minutes came as welcome news to the Mormon scholarly community. Previously considered confidential and kept in the First Presidency's vault, the record had been unavailable for reading and research for 160 years. This secrecy had two consequences: debate and speculation among the scholarly community about the record's contents, and complete ignorance of the council among most average Church members. But at long last, the transcript was published in 2016 as the sole volume in the Administrative Records series of the Joseph Smith Papers: *The Joseph Smith Papers, Administrative Records: Council of Fifty Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*, ed. Matthew J. Grow and others (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press).

While the publication is a welcome and valuable addition to the corpus of publically available documents on Church history, it is likely difficult for most readers to comb through the eight-hundred-page tome (complete with over one thousand footnotes) and glean what is new and important in the

record. The solution? A compilation of fifteen essays, written by historians for a broad audience, on the new insights found in the Council of Fifty minutes.

The Council of Fifty: What the Records Reveal about Mormon History begins with an introduction briefly outlining the history of the council and explaining the decision to publish the record and make it available to the public for the first time. The fifteen articles that follow cover a variety of topics that touch on the nature of the council and how it functioned, as well as its objectives and influence in the Mormon community. Some of the topics covered include Joseph Smith's campaign for the US presidency, the concept of "theodemocracy," religious liberty, significant statements made by Church leaders in council meetings, and what the minutes reveal about Brigham Young's leadership style and personality. The volume also discusses the council's constitution, record-keeping practices, mission to reach out to American Indians, efforts to complete the Nauvoo House, and role in preparing for the Saint's westward migration.

Both of the editors for the volume currently work in the LDS Church History Department. Matthew J. Grow is the director of publications in the department and a general editor for the Joseph Smith Papers, and R. Eric Smith is the editorial manager for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Both were heavily involved in the publication of the full transcript of the Council of Fifty minutes. Several of the other contributors to the volume are also historians with the Joseph Smith Papers Project, and others are scholars in Mormon studies from several different universities and organizations.

Clocking in at just two hundred pages, this book is an accessible introduction to a record and an organization

that has long been shrouded in mystery and speculation. At the end of the introduction, the editors state they “hope that this collection of essays both increases public knowledge about the Council of Fifty and spurs further scholarship” (xv). Meant to be a starting point for future discussion, this compilation will be helpful to any reader or scholar interested in learning about the Council of Fifty or wishing to enhance their study of the complete council minutes.

—Alison Palmer

Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook, eds., *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2017)

At the Pulpit joins other notable recent books on Latter-day Saint women such as *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, *The Witness of Women*, the books in the *Women of Faith* series, and the long-running series of books from the BYU Women’s Conference. Each of these seeks to bring the records of female Saints out of relative obscurity. Editors Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook help move this effort forward in *At the Pulpit*, which presents fifty-four discourses of fifty-one women in full and takes the reader from 1830 up to the present.

Many of the discourses included here were previously hard to find, such as several early talks recorded in journals and minutes. The editors cast their net widely and included a song, a discussion group, and speeches outside of general Relief Society meetings and general conferences. The women featured include a few from places outside the United States, namely, Germany, Russia, South Africa, Mexico, and Kenya. Each of the discourses is introduced by a brief biography and description of the talk’s original setting.

It is inspiring to not only read the women’s words but to also realize and recognize the contributions their words have made in the growth of the restored Church. The messages of these women teach readers to look to God, develop Christlike characteristics, and understand and appreciate the depth of the gospel. In one discourse, Drusilla Hendricks tells of her husband becoming paralyzed in the violent encounters in Missouri and of facing the decision of her son to join the Mormon Battalion (51–54). Francine R. Bennion delves deeply into the theology of suffering and individuals’ role in their relationship with God, leading to wholeness (212–31). And Julie Beck sees priesthood quorums and Relief Society groups as instrumental in creating a kingdom of God on earth (295–307).

The book also reminds Latter-day Saints that Church structure was not always like it is now. For example, in the 1970s and ’80s Elaine A. Cannon advocated for a magazine dedicated to the youth of the Church, for Sunday religious instruction for young sisters in addition to Sunday School, and for a general women’s meeting (204–11).

An index helps users find discourses on topics, making it easy to use the book in talks and lessons. An appendix collects the names of all the women who have spoken in general conferences and leadership meetings associated with general conferences. The list begins with Lucy Mack Smith, who spoke at a general Church session in 1845; the next women to speak in a general session were Louise Y. Robison, Ruth May Fox, and Mary Anderson, who spoke over eighty years later in the October 1929 general conference. The book fills in this gap, featuring at least one discourse from every decade since 1830.

The Church Historian’s Press has published the entire volume free online