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The Life of Orson F. Whitney: Historian, Poet, Apostle, As Recorded in His Daily Journals

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Dennis B. Horne. *The Life of Orson F. Whitney: Historian, Poet, Apostle, As Recorded in His Daily Journals.*

Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2014.

Reviewed by Neal W. Kramer

Dennis B. Horne, a technical writer in the Materials Management Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is no stranger to writing about the Church's Apostles. His books include *Bruce R. McConkie: Highlights from His Life and Teachings*,¹ *An Apostle's Record: The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon*,² and *Latter Leaves in the Life of Lorenzo Snow*.³ This latest biography from Horne arose out of his discovery of a biographical sketch of Lorenzo Snow authored by Orson F. Whitney and his subsequent reading of Elder Whitney's daily diary. It was a fortuitous discovery. Whitney's life and work have for the most part faded from LDS cultural memory. Except for a few references periodically in general conference, his considerable contributions to the building up of Zion from 1880 to 1930 are not as known as they should be. Horne's book, therefore, makes a much-needed contribution to our awareness of this Apostle's commitment to the Church in a period of great upheaval and change. The book is filled with fascinating information about Elder Whitney, and I have found its presentation—that of a man of considerable talent, intelligence, and promise who submitted to God's will to better serve the kingdom—quite inspiring. I shall focus my review on some of the key decisions and events in Orson F. Whitney's life, as presented in Horne's biography, that made him an influential and faithfully devoted leader in the Church.

1. Dennis B. Horne, *Bruce R. McConkie: Highlights from His Life and Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2000).

2. Abraham H. Cannon, *An Apostle's Record: The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon*, ed. Dennis B. Horne (Clearfield, Utah: Gnolaum Books, 2004).

3. Dennis B. Horne, *Latter Leaves in the Life of Lorenzo Snow* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2012).

With access to so many of Whitney's autobiographical writings and diaries, Horne seems to have made the decision to write a life of Orson Whitney in the mode of Whitney's own biography of his grandfather Heber C. Kimball⁴—that is, Horne's book gives us a firsthand view of what Whitney himself thought important to his life, as he both lived it and then later reflected on it. Much of the book consists of extended quotations in Whitney's own voice. The choice to let Whitney speak for himself gives the reader a unique view into the heart and mind of a man of considerable ambition on the one hand and impressive ability to submit his will to God and to LDS Church leaders on the other. These characteristics manifested themselves early in his life and continued through his call to the Quorum of the Twelve and his subsequent ministry.

Whitney had some reason to believe he was a child of promise. His grandfathers were Heber C. Kimball, First Counselor in the First Presidency, and Newel K. Whitney, Presiding Bishop of the Church. His father, Horace, was a writer and musician of some talent, and his mother, Emma Mar Kimball Whitney, was also an eloquent writer and advocate for the restored gospel. Since he was part of the first generation of Latter-day Saints born in Utah, young Orson had no memory of Kirtland or Nauvoo, the Church's first settlements. His call to serve a mission in these areas awakened his historical awareness and poetic imagination to his relatives, ancestors, and the sites of the Restoration.

Whitney notes, however, that the beginning of his mission was more devoted to writing newspaper articles about Pennsylvania and Ohio for the *Salt Lake Tribune* than it was to seeking new converts. He had decided he wanted to be a newspaperman and was using his mission for professional training. All this changed over the course of one night when he received a vision. This experience remained alive in Whitney's mind throughout his life thereafter and found its way into important sermons and biographical materials.⁵ Whitney titled the written account of his spiritual manifestation "In Gethsemane." In the dream, Orson found himself strategically placed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of the Savior's suffering and arrest. He observed all the Lord's dealings with

4. Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball, an Apostle; the Father and Founder of the British Mission* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888).

5. See, for example, Orson F. Whitney, "The Divinity of Jesus Christ," *Improvement Era* 29 (January 1926): 219–27, which features excerpts from an address Whitney delivered at the Sunday evening session of the MIA jubilee conference, held on June 7, 1925; later published as "Gospel Classics: The Divinity of Jesus Christ," *Ensign* 33 (December 2003): 6–11.

his Apostles and his sacred appeal to the Father. As Whitney described, “As he [Christ] prayed the tears streamed down his face, which was toward me. I was so moved at the sight that I wept also, out of pure sympathy with his great sorrow. My whole heart went out to him. I loved him with all my soul and longed to be with him as I longed for nothing else.”

The well-known events played out, including the Savior’s admonitions to the Apostles asleep in the garden. Whitney describes his empathy increasing and feeling a profound desire to support the Christ. He longed to be with him. Suddenly the scene changed. Having given the ancient Apostles their charge, the crucified and risen Lord prepared to ascend to heaven. Whitney, still hidden from the others, could no longer hold back: “I ran out from behind the tree, fell at his feet, clasped him around the knees, and begged him to take me with him.” The Savior’s response redefined Whitney’s life, setting a new course of discipleship and service for the young man. He told Orson, “No, my son; these have finished their work, and they may go with me, but you must stay and finish yours.” Whitney then solicits a promise that he will be with the Lord “at the last.” The Savior makes no such promise. He speaks the following life-changing words: “That will depend entirely upon yourself.”⁶ The turnaround in Whitney’s life was immediate, and he began preaching the gospel, strengthening Church members, and baptizing converts.

Upon his return to the West, Orson F. Whitney followed the advice of Brigham Young Jr., left the *Salt Lake Tribune*, and went to work for the *Deseret Evening News*. A few months later, he was called as bishop of the Eighteenth Ward in the Salt Lake Stake, a position he held until 1906 and his call to the Twelve. Opportunities followed. He married Zina Beal Smoot, daughter of Abraham O. Smoot and sister of Reed Smoot. He tried to settle down but was soon sent to England to work on the periodical the *Millennial Star*. When he returned from England, he found Salt Lake City in considerable chaos. The United States was bent on crushing the Church into submission and stamping out plural marriage. Church leaders went underground, and Whitney was asked to step forward. By that point, he had become a powerful and popular orator. He was a regular speaker at Sunday afternoon meetings in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. He was visible, active, and becoming better known to Church leaders.

Horne uncovers some aspects of Whitney’s life during this period that remain somewhat murky. For example, Whitney developed friendships with multiple women who were not married to him. The details of

6. Whitney, “Divinity of Jesus Christ,” 224–25.

the relationships are never explored, though Horne suggests that Whitney may have considered one or more of these women as possible plural wives. There is almost no specific evidence from the diaries that Whitney was actively courting plural wives, though Horne's inference is not unreasonable. However, it is also likely that Whitney pursued platonic friendships with intelligent, artistically inclined women because of the commonalities in their lives. Though Whitney did take a plural wife, Mary Minerva Wells (before the 1890 Manifesto), plural marriage was an incredible burden for him; he even kept his second marriage a secret from his children by his first wife, Zina, until after her death, when he combined both families (113–15, 206–8). Further, Whitney's close association with the Manifesto (he presented and read it to the Saints assembled at the October 1890 general conference) and his efforts to stop plural marriage as a member of the Twelve strongly suggest that Whitney supported the Manifesto's call for plural marriage to cease.⁷

Another troubling aspect of Whitney's experience during this period is his interest in theosophy and support for the idea of reincarnation. Belief in reincarnation had a long tradition in his family; it was taught by his grandfather Heber C. Kimball. Eliza R. Snow, Lorenzo Snow's sister and Whitney's poet mentor, also believed that Joseph Smith had taught the doctrine to her. More significantly, during his mission in England, Whitney had fallen sway to his mission companion, Charles W. Stayner, a charismatic advocate of the belief that reincarnation was a crucial part of the restoration of all things promised by the gospel. Stayner made such an impression that Whitney gave him money, met with him quite regularly over many years, and even seemed to have believed Stayner was foreordained to become the president of the Church (64, 94). Though Horne is inclined to believe that Whitney fell seriously under Stayner's influence, what remains unclear is the degree to which reincarnation became a central doctrine for Whitney. He certainly believed it was consistent with the Restoration and did not easily part with it.

Word of his infatuation with reincarnation eventually found its way to Church leaders at the highest level. At the time, George Q. Cannon of the First Presidency was preaching openly against reincarnation and denouncing it from the pulpit at general conference. It was well known that Whitney was close to Church President Lorenzo Snow and that his name was being mentioned as a possible member of the Twelve.

7. The crisis experienced by B. H. Roberts because of the Manifesto and his outspoken disappointment with it never makes an appearance in the writings of Whitney.

President Cannon would certainly have chased down any rumors and put a stop to the teaching of reincarnation as restored truth, but Charles Stayner was the only member of the group preaching reincarnation who was ultimately excommunicated. (His brother, Arthur Stayner, on the other hand, remained an active and important local Church leader.) Whitney was never openly disciplined.

There is, however, an important footnote to the relationship between Cannon and Whitney. In writing and preparing volume 4 of his *History of Utah*, Whitney fell behind and did not meet the deadlines for submitting the manuscript. George Q. Cannon and Sons was the publisher of the work, and Cannon needed the money the sale of the books would bring. When Whitney fell behind, Cannon developed an unfavorable opinion of him, considering him someone who did not meet his obligations. This caused a rift between the two men,⁸ and the issue of reincarnation could only have made their relationship worse. This rift was a genuine burden for Orson. Later, when he heard that Cannon was ill and near death in California, he traveled there to reconcile with the Church leader before his death. It was a happy meeting, and Cannon asked Whitney to bless him. Cannon died a few days later. Sometime after Cannon's death, Whitney was called before Joseph F. Smith and three members of the Twelve. They questioned him vigorously about reincarnation. After the meeting, he asked permission to write a document on reincarnation for them to consider. He submitted it a couple of weeks later, but it proved unconvincing. He was asked to stop advocating the doctrine, and he agreed (187–89). These reconciliations were a critical step in Whitney learning to submit to his Church leaders and bringing himself into line as a disciple of the Lord rather than pursuing an independently rebellious course.⁹

The Second Manifesto, which reiterated the message of the 1890 Manifesto, was issued in 1904 in response to concerns raised by some

8. The complicated process of completing the *History* is described in detail in chapter 9 of Horne's book.

9. The most complete account of reincarnation in Mormonism I have found is a Sunstone podcast featuring Kirk Watson and Robert Beckstead. Watson deals extensively with Whitney's case, but he also places it within the larger context of early Mormon esoteric teachings that seem very close to reincarnation. It is of some interest to note that the word *reincarnation* was coined in English only following the death of Joseph Smith. Thus, there can be no direct reference to the word in Joseph's revelations, but there are multiple words and phrases that suggest one or another version of similar concepts. Kirk Watson and Robert Beckstead, "Reincarnation in Mormonism," talk given at Sunstone symposium, 2006, <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/reincarnation-in-mormonism/>.

in the U.S. Congress about the seating of Whitney's brother-in-law Reed Smoot in the U.S. Senate. After the manifesto, there was trouble in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The quorum had been under tremendous duress during the long process of moving away from plural marriage and communitarian economics. There were financial conflicts of interest. The demise of Mormon political independence and the rise of the state of Utah created ideological rifts. And there were questions about keys and doctrines associated with plural marriage that had not been resolved to everyone's satisfaction by either manifesto. Moses Thatcher resigned from the Quorum because of his opposition to the "Political Manifesto," which he believed compromised the Church's position of neutrality in politics. John W. Taylor and Matthias F. Cowley were dropped from the Twelve in 1906 because of their continued practice of plural marriage. To help resolve the disunity, Orson F. Whitney was called to fill one of three vacancies in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He was joined by George F. Richards and David O. McKay. Whitney came to the Twelve neither as a theologian nor as a person with an independent agenda. His preparation of faithful submission to the Lord and the Church served him well as a trusted brother capable of communicating accurately and efficiently. These traits allowed him to build unity and write in the spirit of consensus on matters of concern to Church leaders. He served as a staunch defender of Joseph Smith, the Restoration, and fundamental Church doctrine in sermons, official Church statements, tracts, poems, and magazine articles.¹⁰

One of the great strengths of Horne's biography is its detailed account of Whitney's service as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. Whitney devoted himself with great vigor to the defense of the faith. Horne characterizes these years as being filled with "strong and persuasive teachings of worthy personal behavior, his exercising of the gifts of the Spirit and powerful Apostolic ministry" (308). Whitney's special skills were often put to good use in the service of the kingdom. While Horne does not look at any of these projects in detail, he gives us enough information to see that Whitney was actively engaged as both writer and thinker in building and strengthening Zion. For example, Horne gives just a brief glimpse into Whitney's work with the committee preparing the 1920 edition of

10. In 1911, Joseph F. Smith wrote approvingly of Whitney's first stages of ministry: "Ever since he was a little boy, and I a young man, I have had a more than an ordinary appreciation for Orson F. Whitney. He possesses talent, and has seen fit to use it for the building up of Zion, and in making her name good and pleasant throughout the world" (316).

the Book of Mormon. Whitney's primary task seems to have been writing "headlines," as he called them, for each chapter; the headnotes were concise and informative. Another big project was the forty-page missionary pamphlet *The Strength of the "Mormon" Position*.¹¹ The tract, which was in use for fifty years or more, is an extended argument supporting the truthfulness and superiority of the restored gospel in relation to the doctrines and practices of Protestants and Catholics. It served as a compendium of the central beliefs and practices of the Saints and presents key places where the Restoration and traditional Christianity diverge. Whitney also ghostwrote regularly for the First Presidency. Among his contributions is the statement that outlined the Church's stance on Creation and evolution, titled "The Origin of Man."¹² Another very important project turned into the book *Saturday Night Thoughts*, which comprised a collection of Whitney's sermons given during the influenza outbreak of 1918–19.¹³ During this time all meetinghouses were closed as a necessary part of the government-mandated quarantine. To inspire and uplift the Saints, Whitney was tasked with providing weekly radio sermons on Saturday nights. Whitney was, of course, involved in many more such endeavors. He seldom refused a request and became extremely popular as a speaker throughout the Church. He thoroughly enjoyed his service and was also proud of his popularity and reputation. At the time of his death in 1931, he may well have been the most beloved leader in Utah.¹⁴

With so much to praise, a little must be said about the weaknesses of the biography. While the decision to use the diaries as the primary source for the book is inspired and justified, it gives us a skewed view of Whitney's life. For example, Whitney's home life with his wives and children gets very limited attention. Did he have different relationships with his wives Zina and Mary? Was the amount of time he spent in Provo connected to its place as Zina's hometown and not just the home of good friends like the Hickmans? Speculation in the book about his possible lingering support for plural marriage calls for some real-life examination of the plural marriage he was already in. His lengthy service as bishop of the Eighteenth Ward is also missing, even though Whitney's

11. Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1918.

12. *Improvement Era* 13 (November 1909): 75–81.

13. Orson F. Whitney, *Saturday Night Thoughts: A Series of Dissertations on Spiritual, Historical and Philosophic Themes* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1921).

14. I may be biased. My grandfather Harry Hurst noted in his journal with great excitement that he was set apart for his mission to Hawaii by his "favorite apostle," Orson F. Whitney. Samuel Harris Hurst Jr., "Memoirs of Samuel Harris Hurst," n.d., 14; copy in possession of author.

preferred title throughout his life was “Bishop Whitney.” What besides the obvious reference to Newel K. Whitney, his ancestor and Presiding Bishop of the Church, brought him such joy during those twenty-six years of service? And then there is the question of his oft-stated love for Zion. Why did he love Utah so much? What drove him to fight so hard to defend and protect it? Why did he always get sick when he was away from Zion? And why did the story of the Restoration excite him so much? Why was he drawn to it over and over? Of course, asking Horne to answer such questions would be to ask him to write a different book, which would be unfair.

Perhaps one of the biggest gaps in the biography that could use more elaboration is Whitney’s lifelong connection with the arts, especially literature, poetry, drama, and music. There is precious little on this topic in the book, even though Whitney is often seen as the father of Mormon arts and letters. Since style and presentation were such a crucial part of his oratorical ministry, how did the arts inspire his often-soaring prose? Did his arts advocacy influence the culture of Salt Lake City? Within the larger project of telling Whitney’s life story, Horne does do a nice job of integrating information about Whitney composing and reading aloud much of his poetry. Horne says little, however, about the poems themselves, how they were received, and what they tell us about why Whitney devoted so much thought and energy (and sought so much inspiration) to his art. Over his adult life, he published four impressive volumes of poetry and many essays devoted to literary criticism. For him, the unveiling of Mormonism was among the great events in world history. Its truths were sublime and its power to exalt unmatched. Poetry was the only language that could elevate the narrative and the theology to the levels necessary to communicate their beauty, power, and godliness. Limited space allows brief discussion of only a few poems here.

Whitney’s mission to Ohio and Pennsylvania inspired his poem “The Land of Shinehah,” which recounts a vision in which the Kirtland of the 1870s is contrasted with the same city almost fifty years earlier. Shinehah, or Kirtland, is addressed by the narrator: “The cradle of a nation thou hast been; / The rise of Zion’s glory thou hast seen; / A Pentecost, a Prophet to thee sent, / And later still, a people’s banishment.”¹⁵ The poet’s major themes of revelation, gathering, banishment, and exile all appear in this poem. Whitney revisits them with great power in “The Jubilee of Zion,” composed for the fiftieth anniversary of the Restoration and

15. Orson F. Whitney, *The Poetical Writings of Orson F. Whitney* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1889), 20.

read aloud before an audience on Pioneer Day in 1880. In that poem, he emphasizes what had become a Mormon commonplace—that is, that the Restoration of the gospel must be attended by the revival of liberty: “When Israel’s fold refound the narrow way, / And planted firm the gospel’s glorious tree, / On Joseph’s land, the land of liberty.”¹⁶ Exile cries out for redemption, and redemption leads to liberty.

The poet became an Apostle in the Church, dedicated to witnessing of Jesus Christ. Unsurprisingly, his mightiest poetic achievement details the cosmic life and ministry of Jesus Christ. *Elias: An Epic of the Ages* remains Mormonism’s true epic poem. It aspires to reach the heights of Milton, Spenser, and Homer. The hero, Jesus himself, transcends the verse. Whitney tinkered with it for many years and was never satisfied. With such subject matter, how could he be? However, there are moments when the verse, the narrative, and the doctrine combine to make supernal Mormon poetry. These few lines from “Elect of Elohim” reveal the majestic grace of the premortal Christ in council with his Father and those he would redeem.

He spake;—attention grew more grave,
The stillness e’en more still.

“Father!”—The voice like music fell,
Clear as the murmuring flow
Of mountain streamlet trickling down
From heights of virgin snow.

“Father,” it said, “since one must die,
Thy children to redeem,
Whilst earth, as yet unformed and void,
With pulsing life shall teem;

“And thou, great Michael, foremost fall,
That mortal man may be,
And chosen Saviour yet must send,
Lo, here am I—send me!
I ask, I seek no recompense,
Save that which then were mine;
Mine be the willing sacrifice,
The endless glory, Thine!”¹⁷

16. Whitney, *Poetical Writings*, 72.

17. Orson F. Whitney, *Elias: An Epic of the Ages* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1904), 31.

Ultimately, for Whitney, both poesy and prophecy came from the Holy Ghost. The writer, in concert with the Spirit and under the limitations of his own talent, sought the highest form of expression to celebrate God's greatest truths. Whitney's work was a noble effort, worthy of our respect and remembrance.

The Life of Orson F. Whitney is a welcome addition to the growing number of biographies of LDS Apostles. It also helps fill the gap in LDS scholarship of the Mormon "lost years," the time between the two world wars. We need to know more about this era and about Mormons like Whitney. Much good can be gleaned from witnessing the actual lives of great individuals whose reputations tend to relieve them of any human weaknesses or challenges. One hopes that Dennis Horne will be led in the future to other interesting finds that will inspire him to write again about such individuals and that Cedar Fort will continue to publish his work.

Neal W. Kramer is a retired adjunct faculty member at Brigham Young University and most recently taught in the School of Family Life. He currently serves as a member of the *BYU Studies Quarterly* advisory board. He has published numerous essays and reviews on the literature and culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including "Orson F. Whitney and the Consecration of Poetry," in *Proceedings of the Association for Mormon Letters*, and a review of *People of Paradox* by Terryl L. Givens in *BYU Studies Quarterly*. He has also served on the board of the Association for Mormon Letters, including two terms as president.