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*We'll Sing and We'll Shout: The Life and Times of W. W. Phelps*  
By Bruce A. Van Orden

Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University;  
Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018

*Reviewed by Donald Q. Cannon*

Latter-day Saints who know of William W. Phelps tend to associate him with the hymns that he wrote. In fact, the words in the title of Bruce A. Van Orden's biography, "We'll Sing and We'll Shout," are taken from one of his most famous hymns, "The Spirit of God." As influential as his hymns have been to Latter-day Saints then and now, Phelps contributed much more than that in his efforts to build the Church. Van Orden's book is a detailed biography of this interesting and influential writer and Church leader. The book provides insight into both his ecclesiastical contributions and his personality. Phelps was eccentric and peculiar in some regard, sometimes dressing and behaving in strange ways and stating his religious views somewhat fanatically. Through a wide array of primary and secondary sources, Van Orden illuminates these little-known aspects of Phelps's life and provides a more complete image of him, both as an individual and as a contributor to the Latter-day Saint movement.

The scope of the book runs from Phelps's colonial American ancestry to his death in 1872. After a brief account of his life before he joined the Church, the majority of the book deals with his life after. Van Orden advances the following argument: William W. Phelps made major contributions to building the kingdom of God, and he deserves to be recognized as much more than a writer of hymns. He was one of the most influential leaders in the early Church. He was close to the Prophet Joseph Smith and worked with him in every aspect of his ministry.

Van Orden's biographical sketch begins by outlining Phelps's conversion, which was facilitated by Thomas B. Marsh and Brigham Young. Phelps and his wife, Sally Waterman, read the Book of Mormon and believed that it was the word of God. Phelps was also acquainted with Martin Harris, a fellow Anti-Mason from nearby Palmyra.

Van Orden writes extensively about Phelps and his family, giving the reader a glimpse into his personal life. Phelps married Sally Waterman in Smyrna, New York, on April 28, 1815. They had ten children; three died in infancy, and most did not remain faithful members of the Church, a possible result of Phelps's authoritarian approach to raising a family (171).

His experience in publishing provided valuable skills as both a writer and an editor that became useful to the early Church. In a special blessing given by Joseph Smith, Phelps was told he would create "writing to lift up an ensign to the nations" (164). Smith also received a revelation that told him he would assist in selecting, writing, and printing books to be used in the schools of the Church (D&C 55:4). Phelps certainly fulfilled the promise given in that revelation. In fact, his skills as a writer, poet, editor, and publisher are evident throughout his entire Church experience. Van Orden explains that significant role, providing a few examples. In Kirtland, for instance, Phelps wrote several hymns for the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. Best known of these hymns is "The Spirit of God," which is still sung at temple dedications today.

In Jackson County, Missouri, Phelps published the Church newspaper *The Evening and the Morning Star*, the first newspaper in western Missouri. Later, in Nauvoo, Illinois, Phelps served as either the editor or a writer for several newspapers, including *The Wasp*, *Nauvoo Neighbor*, and *Times and Seasons*. After migrating west to Salt Lake City, Phelps published several almanacs, each entitled *Deseret Almanac*, following a long-established custom in early America.

Many of Phelps's writings reflected unique Latter-day Saint viewpoints. His poem and later hymn "The Red Man," for example, highlighted the Church's interest in the American Indians, who Latter-day Saints considered to be descendants of the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon.

This biography of Phelps introduces new information and provides insights into the man and his contribution to early Church history. For example, in addition to his work as a writer, editor, and publisher, a major contribution of Phelps was his work as a ghostwriter. According to Van Orden, Phelps wrote some of the articles that were attributed to Joseph Smith. For example, the well-known editorial attributed to Smith called "Try the Spirits" was probably written by Phelps. The following excerpt from the editorial exemplifies Phelps's lyrical skill as a writer: "A man must have the discerning of spirits, before he can drag into daylight this hellish influence and unfold it unto the world in all its soul destroying, diabolical, and horrid colors: *for nothing is a greater injury*

*to the children of men than to be under the influence of a false spirit, when they think they have the spirit of God” (407, italics in original).*

This biography also sheds light on a common practice in the early days of the Church—excommunication. This practice was used much more frequently in the early Church than it is today, and Phelps was excommunicated three times in his life. During the Church’s first years, excommunication often lasted for just a short period of time, and many, including Phelps, were eventually restored to full fellowship without rebaptism.

This study of William W. Phelps fills a large void in Latter-day Saint biography. Historian Ron Esplin asked Van Orden to go back and finish his work on Phelps, which he had started earlier in his career. No complete biography of Phelps had ever been written, and one was sorely needed. A result of Van Orden’s years of study, this biography adds a great deal to our understanding of almost every event in the first few years of Church history.

The extensive use of both primary and secondary sources throughout the biography is most impressive, and the research supports the thesis of the author. This biography is well written, with careful analysis and sound conclusions. The finished product provides a complete and accurate picture of the man and his times. For the book’s main audience of Church members who are interested in Church history and especially historical biography, it provides excellent information about an understudied early Church leader. Those interested in Latter-day Saint biography will want to add this book to their library.

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