Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900 by Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey and Jill Mulvay Derr, eds.

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"'It is mormonism or nothing for me’" (p. 382). So confided thirty-two-year-old Ruth May Fox to her journal on Sunday, 14 July
1895—in the same week that she became a member of the Salt Lake County Republican Committee, went bathing in the Great Salt Lake, started summer school at the University of Utah, attended Primary general conference, recited some of her own poetry at Saltair, attended sacrament meeting at the Tabernacle, and performed sealings in the Salt Lake Temple. Little did she know that she would continue such a pace until her death in 1967, at the age of 104.

It is into this kind of active and vigorous female life—a life firmly centered in Mormonism—that we are permitted to dip, some twenty-five times, in Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900; and it is the compilation of these lives into one rich and notable volume which makes this book a truly significant addition to the increasing number of published memoirs and journals of Mormon women.

After culling nearly 250 diaries, letters, and journals left by Mormon women of the nineteenth century, the editors, Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr, have carefully selected for inclusion a variety of women's voices from across the spectrum of nineteenth-century Mormon history. And while one might expect to hear the powerful voices of such forceful Mormon women as Mary Fielding Smith, Eliza R. Snow, Emmeline B. Wells, Susa Young Gates, and Ruth May Fox, one may be surprised to hear a timbre in their voices not heard before, and in a context which makes such familiar voices representative of the entire Mormon sisterhood.

And we also hear the less familiar but powerfully moving voices of such women as Mary Ann Weston Maughan, Caroline Barnes Crosby, Bathsheba Wilson Bigler Smith, Patty Bartlett Sessions, Patience Loader, Nancy Abigail Clement Williams, and Martha Cragun Craig. These voices proclaim to us, their great-grandchildren, not only that they lived but also that they lived fulfilled, rich, individual lives of commitment to God, to church, to family—a commitment which unifies their various tones and enables the reader to understand more fully the remarkable vibrancy of nineteenth-century Mormonism, "It is mormonism or nothing for me."

To present such diverse voices in their historical context, the editors have ordered six decades of Mormon history into nine sections, presented chronologically and introduced by brief historical notes which skillfully set the stage for the ensuing excerpts. The nine sections range from "Becoming a Mormon" through "Kirtland," "Missouri," "Nauvoo," and "The Trek Westward," to "Immigration," "Colonization of the Great Basin," "The 1870s: A Decade of Collective and Personal Achievement," to the final section,
"Persecution, the Manifesto, and Statehood" (which includes Colonia Juarez). Each section features two to five excerpts from journals, letters, and diaries by women who were "anxiously engaged" in the momentous events of the era; each of these women is, in turn, carefully but briefly introduced—biographically, literally, and historically.

The thrust of the editors is clear: "Mormon women are not unsung heroines, ... but neither are they fully understood" (p. 1). To assist the reader in coming to an understanding of Mormon women, the editors have selected "the most moving, important, and informative" (p. vii) passages for inclusion, passages which faithfully reflect the "great movement" of nineteenth century Mormonism (p. 22). In their excellent and informative introduction, the editors make an important clarification: While only 15-20 percent of the Church populace practiced plural marriage, "plural wives seem to be disproportionately represented among Mormon women whose writings have been preserved" (p. 16). Perhaps this "faithful fifth" were more willing to obey the prophetic injunction to write, or perhaps they saw their roles as historically unique. For whatever reason, they wrote, and the volume reflects that disproportion—doubtlessly because in the voices of such committed women are heard the tones of the greatest drama, the greatest trials, and the greatest devotion to Mormonism, and the greater need to be understood by a generation of Latter-day Saints to whom plural marriage (and perhaps the other great sacrifices endured) seems not only remote but unthinkable. The volume reflects, however, though it does not underscore, both the trials and tensions of plural wifehood and the selfless love and shared affection which, as Martha Cragun Cox wrote, "single wifery never knew" (p. 15).

In our day when a few Mormon women pit themselves, quietly or vociferously, against their church, it is interesting to read of the devotion of women to that same church and of the fulfillment found in that commitment, a theme which is sounded repeatedly throughout each of the twenty-five accounts. And there are other unifying tones as well: persecution (even by Mormon families and friends), terrific hardship and discomfort, heartache at the frequent loss of babies and loved ones, ill health, the drudgery of farming, building, midwifery, home industry, constant cooking, church service, sending sorely needed husbands on foreign missions. Such hardships are ubiquitous in the volume and are lightened all too infrequently by such interludes as ward dances, concerts, plays, clubs, debates, politics, and an endless round of visits—a major activity in the lives of
these women. Conclude the editors: The contributions of Mormon women, “while not as visible as those of men, were in many ways of greater import partly because of the difficulties they faced” (p. 396).

Also common to these voices, summarize the authors, is the universal desire for beauty and the ability to recognize and foster it, whether in dugout or clapboard house, in England or Nauvoo or St. George. Common, as well, is the great importance of familial love (even for the single sister, represented here in Hepzibah Richards) and the fact that these women—along with so many other women (and men) whose records are yet to be published (or whose stories will never be known)—lived lives of commitment to a cause greater than themselves, “lives that deserve to be remembered” (p. 396).

Well-documented and edited, Women’s Voices is an important volume—for the library, the Western- or Mormon-history buff, the historian. The voices heard in this volume remind us that every life is laden with the stuff of drama, but such drama is more certain when that life is one of steadfast devotion to a cause, especially when that cause means changing one’s beliefs, leaving one’s home, enduring persecution, adopting a new and generally unacceptable lifestyle, fleeing into a wilderness, and building a community—all the while teaching and rearing a family, attempting to promote some vestiges of culture—and sending the family breadwinner on repeated, unremunerated missions to convert the very people who had caused the upheaval. These voices, in various tones, and at various amplitudes, murmur, speak, sometimes shout to us from the past with such vigor and realism as to lend these accounts literary as well as historical importance, for in these powerful records of personal lives we see enacted and recorded day-by-day, year-by-year, those little human acts which add up to important literary expression about individuals whose lives came to mean “mormonism or nothing,” and whose lives, thanks to this fine volume, now mean so much more to many.