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A Gentile Account of Life in Utah's Dixie, 1872-73: Elizabeth Kane's St. George Journal

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Elizabeth Wood Kane's recently discovered St. George journal is a companion piece to her previously edited journal, Twelve Mormon Homes Visited in Succession on a Journey through Utah to Arizona, published in 1973. The St. George journal records the events of her stay in St. George during the winter of 1872–73. Unknown to the editors of Twelve Mormon Homes, the St. George journal was among the Thomas L. Kane family papers donated by Kent Kane, Elizabeth Kane's grandson, to the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. A Gentile Account of Life in Utah's Dixie is the fourteenth volume in the series Utah, the Mormons, and the West published by the Tanner Trust Fund. Norman R. Bowen, who also edited Lowell Thomas, the Stranger Everyone Knows, was a former journalism teacher at Brigham Young University and the University of Utah, a city editor of the Deseret News, and a correspondent for several national publications. He completed most of the editing for Kane's journal before his unexpected death in 1992. A short sketch of the life of Elizabeth Kane, written by Bowen's daughter Mary Karen Bowen Solomon, precedes the text of the journal.

Elizabeth Wood, a native of Liverpool, England, was born in 1836. Soon after her family emigrated to New York, Elizabeth, age sixteen, married her cousin Thomas Leiper Kane. Of the Kane's four children, the younger two, Evan and William, accompanied their parents on their journey to Utah in 1872. Thomas Kane's admiration of Brigham Young and association with the Mormons distressed the religious Elizabeth, who did not consider Mormons to be Christians, primarily because of their embrace of polygamy. Thomas Kane's assistance to the Mormons during their exodus from Nauvoo and his intervention when Johnston's army descended on Utah in 1857 were trials for Elizabeth. The couple's long separations, including the time Kane served in the Civil War, however, led not only to her studies of literature, medicine, history, and even Mormonism, but also to her lifelong journal writing.

Thomas Kane's persistent ill health, exacerbated by a severe war wound, led Brigham Young to invite the Kanes to accompany him on his annual winter pilgrimage to the mild climate of Southern Utah in 1872. Elizabeth took with her not only her two young sons and a fervent dislike of polygamy

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but also an uncommonly perceptive eye and a curious mind. The resulting record of their winter stay—written from letters, notes, and diary entries—is an extraordinary account of Mormon village life as well as an inadvertent revelation of the reluctant visitor herself.

Though the text is well annotated, one editorial deficiency is the absence of an introduction explaining the historical and social background of 1872 St. George, which would have provided a useful context for Elizabeth’s observations. Another small oversight is the uncorrected reference Elizabeth makes to Lucy Bigelow Young’s mother as Mrs. Benbow, rather than Mrs. Bigelow. Otherwise, the editor has carefully identified the numerous persons, events, and places mentioned in the journal.

Elizabeth’s journal reveals an educated, sensitive, intelligent, and articulate woman. While her journal is more anecdotal than chronological, it covers a wide range of subjects and displays an enviable power of observation and description. Her numerous historical and literary allusions attest to the extent of her self-education. Strands of sardonic humor occasionally weave their way into her colorful commentary, especially about polygamists, but on the whole she is respectful of her subjects and sometimes admiring.

The journal begins on December 25, 1872, with the entry, “I wonder how we shall get through the days here” (1). Two months and 175 pages later, Elizabeth confesses, “I cannot forget what rest and peace of soul I have enjoyed among them [the Mormons]” (175). The intervening pages record not only the education of an inquisitive mind but also the transformation of a querulous guest. When the Kanes arrived, they found a small community of about eleven hundred people—only a few more than the 130 pioneer families who arrived a decade earlier and stayed despite the searing summers, constant river floodings, failed crops, brackish water, alkaline soil, and disconcerting isolation. Larry M. Logue’s A Sermon in the Desert: Belief and Behavior in Early St. George, Utah asks the question, “Why did people who took pride in their rational choices endure living in this place?” (12). Elizabeth’s journal begins to answer that question.

There was no hiding the region’s hostility to settlement. Abandoned fields, crumbling foundations, and scrawny animals were evidence enough of the desert’s destructive and unyielding soil. Santa Clara settlers, Elizabeth noted, were better off than their St. George neighbors. She facetiously added that if she were “a faithful niece of my Uncle Sam,” she would laugh at their industry until their labor proved productive and then “drive the accursed Mormons out, to make new combs of honey in still remoter deserts for us to eat in turn” (89–90). But she did not laugh. The determination she found among the settlers to conquer nature’s deficits was too formidable a human force to be ridiculed or exploited.
If the land was forbidding, then the landscape was enchanting, and Elizabeth Kane had the words to portray its uniqueness. A hike to one of the low volcanic ridges that edged the community yielded a panorama she frequently described. “Ranges of mountains that had been entirely hidden from us down in St. George by the red cliffs that wall in the valley,” she wrote,

rose before us, tier on tier. Behind the “Sugar Loaf” bluffs we saw the Pine Valley Mountains robed in new-fallen dazzling snow. But its purity was partly overshadowed by a great snow-cloud that rested on the summits of that mountain group alone. Its shadows darkened the slopes, while the bright mountain peaks here and there pierced through its soft masses, and rose into the sunny atmosphere above, as if they would fain float off and become clouds themselves. (15–16)

No two views from her numerous hikes to the tops of the ridges and plateaus evoked the same response, and literary clichés seldom found place in her vividly drawn descriptions.

The Native Americans whom she encountered on the streets of St. George also claimed many pages of her journal. She and her boys were fascinated by their appearance, their speech, their customs, and their culture. They listened intently to the stories related by Mormon Indian scouts and missionaries. She recounts in detail the trial of one accused Indian and was delighted to see justice served in his acquittal granted by an all-white court.

Balls, dinners, and parties, while frequent, seemed less absorbing to this faithful Presbyterian than the weekly LDS services that she regularly mentioned. “I mean to remember,” she explained, “that it was right and not wrong to worship with the Mormons as with Christians” (176). The message in the sermons, the sincerity (and sometimes irreverence) of the speaker, and especially the joyful singing of the congregation (without an organ) prompted her to write, “It is such a comfort to be with people who are in earnest!” (176). Moreover, she did not discredit the accounts of spiritual manifestations and eagerly listened to and recorded stories of conversion, the beginnings of the Church, and the exodus from Nauvoo. She also quietly observed the charitable activities of the Relief Society, concluding that “much of it was picking up the dropped stitches of the Bishops” (32–33).

Flowing like a steady counterpoint to Elizabeth’s perceptive, often eloquent observations that make up this episodic journal are her disdain of polygamy and wonder at those who practiced it. In a community where one-third of all husbands had plural wives,1 meaning that at least two-thirds of the wives were polygamous, Elizabeth could not avoid feeling immersed in the practice. Convinced that a “communion of mind and heart” could not exist in plural marriages, she believed her happiness to be “a stronger missionary sermon” for monogamy than her words (21). In
time, however, the independence and self-reliance displayed by the plural wives and their efficiency in household management gained her admiration. She also relished the love stories she elicited from two plural wives, though she rationalized that only a studied indifference to their husband’s shared affection enabled the women to endure the practice. By the time she left, however, despite her rueful comments about the multiple “Mrs. Youngs” or “Mrs. Snows,” she admitted she had adjusted to seeing several wives adjoining a single man.

Elizabeth found that this desert community with its faith-tried settlers evoked comparison with ancient Palestine and its early inhabitants, who transformed that desert land into a fruitful oasis. She noted that she often felt she was living in an old Syrian world among “pastoral folk” fulfilling Isaiah’s promise of making a fertile land of the desert plains. But even as she wrote of the remarkable transformation of a resistant land to the coaxing cultivation of a determined people, she simultaneously recorded the transformation she was undergoing. The Elizabeth Kane who left St. George in February 1873 was not the same woman who had arrived there just two months earlier. Both Elizabeth’s outright admission that were she to write the journal again, the entries “would be written in a kindlier spirit” (168) and her acknowledgment that she could finally think kindly of Brigham Young demonstrate how the St. George experience had clearly mellowed the opinions of this sensitive, strong-minded woman. From the humble folk eking out a living to the more favored wives of Church leaders, Elizabeth came to recognize that “they can all teach me something” (155). If historian Larry Logue saw St. George as a “sermon in the desert,” Elizabeth Kane’s book is a sermon from the desert.