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Valeen Tippetts Avery. *From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xii + 357 pp. $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06701-3; $52.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02399-6.

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Child of Promise <a name=

David Hyrum Smith (1844-1904) was a poet, painter, singer, hymn writer, missionary, theologian, naturalist, traveler, husband, father, son, and madman. Perhaps he is most remembered, however, as the last born son of Mormon founder and Prophet Joseph Smith, Junior.

Valeen Tippetts Avery's new biography of David Smith vividly portrays each of these aspects of "Sweet Singer of Israel[s]" finally tragic life, but not in an entirely successful way. Avery, a historian at Northern Arizona University and co-author of the seminal biography on David's mother, Emma Smith, draws on an impressive array of sources–letters, poems, theological writings, songs, naturalistic writings, travel writings, hospital records, reminiscences, diaries–to tell David's tale.

Avery's biography proceeds in traditional fashion. After a preface and introductory chapter (1830-1844) setting out the contexts in which she wants to place David's life–the contexts of American Religious History, Mormon History, Smith Family History, and the History of Madness–Avery allows Smith's life course to set the pattern of her narrative. Chapter two (1844-1850) relates David's birth, childhood, and adolescence in Nauvoo, Illinois. Chapter three (1851-1865) explores how David, and his brothers Alexander and Joseph Smith III, like the many other Latter Day Saints who did not make the exodus to Utah with Brigham Young, coalesced into what would become the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) or "Josephites". Chapter four (1866-1868) continues the tale of David's spiritual development as he becomes a successful missionary in Iowa and Michigan. Chapters five (1869) and 6 (1869-1871) narrate Smith's missionary journey to Utah and California, a mission that would end in mental sickness, David's return home to Illinois, and Smith's marriage to Clara Hartshorn. Chapter seven (1871-1872) finds Smith on another Midwestern mission and details his heretofore unknown and unauthorized (by the Church) quick trip to Utah. Chapters eight (1872), nine (1872), and ten (1872-1873) recount David's second mission to Utah, his flirtation with Spiritualism and Liberal Religion (in the form of the Godbeites), his growing certainty that his father practiced what his mother preached he didn't, namely, polygamy, his return to Nauvoo, his confrontation with his mother over the issue of his father's practice of polygamy, and the reappearance of his madness. Chapter eleven (1873-1877) follows Smith's further descent into insanity and paranoia. Chapter twelve (1872-1877) excavates the nature of David's relationship with his closest friend, Charles Jensen (was it fraternal or homosexual?). And finally, Chapters thirteen (1877-1880) and fourteen (1880-1904) follow David to the Northern Illinois Hospital and Asylum for the Insane in Elgin, Illinois where he was incarcerated and eventually ended his days.

There are many things to praise in Avery's narrative. She seems first of all to have made use of every possible source for the study of the life of David Smith. Particularly praiseworthy is her use of Smith's poetry to provide access to David's inner feelings and struggles. Attempts

at psychological reconstruction are always fraught with difficulty but Avery makes a plausible case that David's poetry, for instance, is a mirror into his soul.

Avery also nicely places David Smith's life into Smith family contexts. She sympathetically explores, for instance, the conflicts and loves of an extended family unit beset with many problems–poverty, close living quarters, family secrets, jealousies, religious duties and expectations. She does a fine job of detailing the complex and sometimes contradictory relationships David had with his mother, his brothers, his step-father, and his wife. Avery's exploration of these aspects of Smith's life impart a flesh and bones quality to her narrative. Her David Smith seems almost alive. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in Avery's exploration of the poverty that dogged and troubled David all his life, a poverty largely resulting from his missionary activities. Again and again she utilizes source material in order to reveal David's concern that he could not support his wife and son while being a missionary "without purse or script".

Avery is not attentive solely to the family relationships that both supported and troubled Smith throughout his life. She also explores David's relationship with his best friend, Charles Jensen. In Chapter twelve Avery suggests that while Jensen may have viewed his relationship with David in homosexual terms, David certainly did not. Recognizing how Charlie viewed their relationship, however, did not force Smith to abandon their relationship. Rather he tried to help his friend deal with his feelings in ways that from a contemporary vantage point, seem both humane and compassionate.

There are problems with Avery's analysis of the Smith-Jensen relationship, however. Chapter twelve, in which this relationship is detailed, seems an afterthought. Up to this point David's life course has structured Avery's narrative. This chapter, however, disrupts the books chronological narrative flow. It seems to be included primarily to flag the author's response to the current academic interest in the nature of male-male relationships than anything else. The data on the relationship between the two seems, at least to me, ambiguous. There is no clear evidence that the relationship was perceived in any but fraternal terms.

It is in this chapter that a fundamental problem in Avery's analysis becomes apparent. In the end, the discussion of the relationship between Smith and Jensen could have benefited from a more thorough dialogue with the now immense social scientific and historical literature on male-male relationships. Particularly relevant here, for example is Donald Yacovone's essay on fraternal discourse in nineteenth century America. Yacavone has argued that there was a religiously infused discourse of fraternity, that parallels the female discourse of sisterhood and that was not homosexual in nature.[2] Could Smith's and Jensen's language be the language of brotherhood rather than the discourse of homosexuality or was it something more complex and contradictory than these two alternatives allow? This is an interesting and important question but unfortunately it is a query which receives no discussion in Avery's biography of David Smith. Despite this lack of interrogation, this chapter remains, somewhat ironically, the best one in the book because it steps outside the chronological structure of the book to investigate, albeit somewhat unsuccessfully, a theme of theoretical importance in contemporary historiography and social science.

This same dynamic is evident in other aspects of Avery's analysis as well. While Avery does a nice job of placing Smith's life in the context of Mormon History, she fails to relate her insights to wider historical, social scientific, and theoretical issues relevant to her analysis. For instance, Avery shows that Smith became a lightning rod, a symbol, of the struggle between Utah Mormons and Midwestern Mormons. It was during David's missionary visits to Utah that this clash became particularly apparent. All Mormons, whether of the "Josephite" or "Brighamite" varieties, expected great things of David Smith. Joseph Smith had, after all, predicted a leadership role for his son in the Church he had founded. For "Reorganites" David's missionary work in Utah had an almost messianic quality to it. "Josephites" believed that Smith had the ability to lead Utah Mormons out of the sinful bondage of polygamy. "Brighamites", on the other hand, expected the son of the Prophet to repent, join, and eventually lead their Church. As Brigham Young said, if only David would repent of his sinfulness and recognize the centrality of polygamy to the life of the Church, he would, as his father predicted, play a central role in the Church hierarchy.

Avery uses this messianic aspect of David's life nicely to tie Smith's personal and Church lives together. As she shows, the struggles between the various branches of the Smith family, those Smith's in Utah and those Smith's in the Midwest, replicate Mormon wide struggles that were occurring in nineteenth century America. It was a struggle that centered around polygamy and authority. Midwest Mormons denied that Joseph Smith had either taught or practiced polygamy. They blamed "the Principle" on Brigham Young and argued that they and

they alone were the rightful successors to "the Prophet". Young, on the other hand, proclaimed that he was teaching the "Restored Gospel" as Joseph had taught it. It was he who was the true leader of the Mormon community and it was only if the Midwestern Smith's came to see the central role polygamy played in the Church that they could fulfill their prophetic destinies and leadership roles in that Church.

As Avery shows, this struggle over the issue of polygamy was not only a struggle between two churches in nineteenth century America. It also had familial and personal dimensions. David, like his brothers, believed his mother's denial that his father had never taught and practiced "the Principal" of plural marriage. During his second missionary stay in Utah, however, he began to investigate claims that that his father did preach and practice polygamy. Smith even went so far as to interview his father's close friends and polygamous wives in order to ascertain the truth about his father's relationship to polygamy. His growing realization that his mother had been less than forthcoming with respect to the issue of plural marriage was one of the factors Avery suggests led to David's second mental breakdown. In other words, church and family wide debates had consequences in Smith's life.

Here again, however, Avery's inability to place her biography within the context of the historiographic and social scientific literature affects her exploration of how these debates may have played in David's insanity. She does nicely place Smith's madness in Mormon and familial contexts. For instance, she well delineates the contemporary explanations given for Smith's "melancholy" and "mania" by family members, friends, concerned co-religionists, and "professionals"–"brain fever", a weak constitution combined with the fatigue and stress of missionary travels, a consequence of David's realization that his father taught and partook of polygamy, a result of David's involvement with Spiritualism. Apart from this context her analysis is rather anemic, however. She does not place the discussion of madness into the context of the social scientific and historical literature on insanity. She argues that David's weak constitution, the fatigue and financial insecurity that resulted from missionary travels, and David's discovery that what his mother had told him about his father and polygamy, all contributed to Smith's madness. Yet she does not take the discussion any further despite her concern to place the issue within the context of the history of American madness. Such a discussion would have been helpful. Instead, Avery fails even to review the range of perspectives offered by social scientists and historians to account for the nature and etiology of madness. Such perspectives, of course, have ranged from the purely biological to the purely cultural. One cultural perspective that is particularly interesting and perhaps relevant to Smith's case is that proposed by by Julius Roth in his book Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America. Roth locates the origins of "melancholy" in cultural developments in Protestantism, in particular to a sense that God had withdrawn his love from the believer. Avery would have done well to engage in a dialogue with Roth in particular and the theoretical literature on madness in general. This would have been helpful since Avery's study seems to offer support to the perspective that cultural factors do play an important role in the onset and expression of madness.

So even judging by the criteria Avery sets, this biography is a mixed bag. It nicely sets David Smith's life into Mormon and Smith Family Histories. It is less successful at relating Smith's life to American Religious History and the History of Madness, however. Clearly it is an important contribution to Mormon History and will undoubtedly be read by those whose primary interest is Mormon History. But its success is also its failure. Charles Peterson in an essay in a book celebrating the contribution of Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* to Mormon and American History, drew attention to the parochialist impulse in much LDS History. Avery's book in the end does not escape this tendency. While she hoped to make a case for the relevance of the study of David Smith's life to wider historiographic and social scientific concerns, she has not achieved these goals. In the end, this book, like so many other explorations into Mormon History, does not escape the parochialism the field is too often mired in. Perhaps the only way it could have escaped this trap would for it to have been thematically organized around historiographic or theoretical issues.[4] As it is not it remains a partly successful excursion into the life of an important nineteenth century Mormon figure.

NOTES

[1]. The title of this review is taken from a quote in Grant McMurray's " 'True Son of the Father': Joseph Smith III and the Succession Question" in *Restoration Studies* edited by Maurice Draper and Clare Vachos (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House), 131-145 as quoted in Valeen Tippetts Avery, *From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 1998.

[2]. Donald Yacavone, "Abolitionists and the 'Language of Fraternal Love' " in Mark Carnes and Clyde Grif-

fin. *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 85-95.

[3]. Julius Roth, Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[4]. For an example of a thesis driven biography see Marie Caskey, *Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978).

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