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**Reid L. Neilson**. *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 240 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-538403-1.

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## Mormons Seek Fair Acceptance

Most people have seen the commercials on television or the Internet in which an individual describes his or her personal ambitions, interests, family life, and professions, all of which sound perfectly average in middle-class America. As the viewer starts to wonder what is being sold, the advertisement ends with the most important identifier, "I am a Mormon." This public relations campaign is the most recent attempt by Latter-day Saints to portray themselves as typical American citizens. Having two Mormon candidates in the 2012 presidential race with one winning the Republican nomination suggests that earlier attempts by Mormons to gain legitimacy and acceptance have been successful. Although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints still evokes negative reactions in some, its position in American culture in the early twenty-first century is much more secure than it was in the late nineteenth century. This is largely because of the public relations efforts that Mormons began in that earlier time.

Reid L. Neilson's book, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, is a detailed description of how Latter-day Saints used the 1893 Chicago World's Fair as a showcase to reengage with American culture after years of geographic, theological, and cultural isolation. Coinciding with the recent public relations campaign, Neilson's book is very timely. So too was the church's decision to capitalize on this opportunity in 1893. It was an enormous event in which Americans celebrated the four-hundred-year anniversary of the New World's discovery, heard Frederick Jackson Turner argue that a new phase of history had begun with the closing of the frontier, and were dazzled by the latest in modern technology. Like other Americans, Mormons were entering a new phase in their history. After years of defending their most distinguishing features, Wilford Woodruff officially declared that plural marriage would no longer be part of Mormon practice in 1890. This change came, as Neilson explains in his introduction, amid scathing criticism from fellow citizens who considered Mormons to be neither Christian nor American. Most notably, Protestant minister Josiah Strong warned that Mormons were among the most dangerous homegrown evils in the United States due to what he considered ecclesiastical despotism. The Chicago World's Fair gave Mormons the opportunity to reshape their image. Neilson draws from personal papers and church and territory records to show how the Latter-day Saints used this opportunity to dispel myths and pave the way for more effective evangelism and engagement with the culture.

In the first chapter, Neilson describes how Mormonism was exhibited and perceived prior to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. His description of their isolation and growth even in the face of the wider public's suspicions is well known, but Mormon evangelical success against such hostility is still remarkable. Perhaps most useful is Neilson's division of Mormon history into three periods–the founding era (1830-47), the pioneer stage (1847-90), and the present age of accommodation with American culture that began in the 1890s. Initially, Mormons engaged the world around them strictly to evangelize and win converts who were then encouraged to gather with other Mormons in their promised land. Whether in Missouri or Utah, it was always beyond the centers of American culture. In that founding period, Neilson asserts, Mormons represented themselves as distinct, alienated, and outcast in the defensive literature of

Parley Pratt, Sidney Rigdon, Orson Hyde, and Lorenzo Snow. In the pioneer phase, Mormons remained outside the mainstream of American religion and culture, but they had become more offensive than defensive rhetorically. Because they emphasized how they differed from other Christian groups, Neilson suggests, they still won converts, but no friends outside their church. Confrontations between the Mormons and the federal government sometimes loomed ominously and polygamy inspired legal battles as well as cultural isolation. Neilson describes the negative perceptions that characterized outsiders' views of Mormons born out of ignorance rather than contact with actual Mormons. President Benjamin Harrison's 1890 announcement that Chicago would host a world's fair gave Mormons the opportunity to alter their public persona and self-description as being in and of America.

In the following chapter, Neilson describes Mormon preparations for the fair in great detail. Although Mormons welcomed the opportunity that the fair provided, Neilson identifies a number of challenges that stood in their way. Officially, it was Utah Territory and not the Latter-day Saints who would have the official opportunity to showcase their contributions. President Harrison preemptively chose Utah's planning commission to make sure of this. Funding was problematic as well since Utah's governor and legislature debated who should pay and how much. Ultimately, Neilson demonstrates, Mormons and non-Mormons worked together to plan a successful exhibit for their territory, soon to become a state, and their predominant religion. In the tradition of the West, Neilson says, they squatted on the fair grounds to claim an advantageous location for their exhibit building. While the structure was on par with other states and territories, Utahns really invested in the exhibits themselves, especially in minerals where their territory was most extraordinary. Mummified Native Americans also distinguished the Utah exhibits and attracted visitors. Outsiders had the opportunity to read about Utah's other peculiarities as Mormon women distributed their religious history and Utahns gathered with each other at their territorial exhibition demonstrating similarities with their fellow countrymen. With twenty-eight million visitors to Chicago's fair, Utah and the Latter-day Saints had unprecedented exposure.

Although Neilson's setting of the scene and his description of the planning are interesting and necessary parts of the narrative, his next three chapters really specify how Mormons seized the opportunity to transform public perception. In chapter 3, "Mormon Matriarchs," Neilson demonstrates that Mormon women overcame negative stereotypes that other women had of them and managed to share their experiences and faith with other females in ways no elders could have. Organizers for the World's Congress of Representative Women were divided on whether or not to accept Latter-day Saints. Neilson explains that Mormon women were simultaneously seen as stupid, unsightly, fickle, domineering, and victims. While many opposed their inclusion in feminist circles, Susan B. Anthony put women's issues ahead of religious issues and advocated the admission of two Mormon women's groups, the Relief Society and the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association, into the National Council of Women. The two organizations combined at the fair to demonstrate Mormon women's homespun skills and their mutual concerns for women's rights after being disenfranchised in Utah in 1887. Mormon women befriended women in other organizations while still spreading the word about their own religion, and in this way, Neilson argues, Mormon women transformed public perceptions and their self-image.

Perhaps Neilson's most fascinating chapter is his fourth in which he details how Latter-day Saints used Salt Lake City's Mormon Tabernacle Choir to gain publicity, prestige, and respect. The opportunity came when a great choral competition, the Welsh Eisteddfod, held its proceedings at the Chicago World's Fair. Latter-day Saints participated in both the Grand Choral competition for 250-300 male and female singers and the smaller all men's choirs of fifty to sixty singers. This still required 150 Tabernacle Choir members to stay home. Paying for the rest to get to Chicago was problematic enough. Yet, as Neilson conveys, they paid their way by raising funds in Utah and holding concerts along the way at scheduled train stops. Neilson's assertion that the Mormon Tabernacle Choir represented the church's most effective "walking ads" is well founded (p. 126). They placed second in the largest competition and were many people's favorite vocal group as they were asked to sing at the dedication of the Liberty Bell to a crowd of ten thousand. Moreover, their performance in Jackson County, Missouri, where their religious ancestors had long since been driven out, demonstrated how far Latterday Saints had come.

Finally, Neilson analyzes one more episode that brought Latter-day Saints publicity and a degree of acceptance in his description of the World Parliament of Religions. This gathering, the brain child of Charles Carrol Bonney, was dominated by American Protestant churches, but Latter-day Saints had not been invited.

Neilson contends that this was because Bonney opposed polygamy and felt that Joseph Smith had borrowed liberally and deceptively from Swedenborgianism. Neilson focuses on Brigham Roberts, a blacksmith and defender of the faith, who battled Bonney and organizer John Henry Barrows to include Mormons. Although Roberts was never allowed to speak to the main hall, his published criticism of the proceedings made it impossible to ignore Latter-day Saints. As the Catholic delegate allied with Roberts, their joint complaints of mainline Protestant intolerance seemed even more justified. Thus, even without a place in the World Parliament of Religions, Neilson argues that Mormons had announced their arrival as part of America's religious culture.

Neilson concludes by mentioning other fairs where Mormonism was exhibited up to the 1933-34 Century of Progress International Exposition, but the heart of his work is still their coming-out party in Chicago in 1893. Overall, this is an exceptional example of episodic history that offers something to various specialty groups and to general readers as well. So much has already been written about the 1893 Chicago World's Fair that it is hard to imagine anything new and interesting on the same episode, but Neilson offers something of interest to historians of religion, women, and the West, and certainly those who focus on the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Any professional could learn from Neilson's use of the familiar to tell new stories. General readers can also appreciate his clarity and brevity. Neilson's thesis holds up under scrutiny although other specialized studies are required to answer some of the questions that his book raises. Why, for example, were the 1890s an ideal time for Mormons to reshape their image? Did Strong's condemnations really influence the church's direction, or did rapid railroad construction simply make it impossible to maintain isolation? And to what extent did the fair alter the relationship between Mormons and non-Mormons in Utah, or the various women's groups, or Mormons and other religious groups in America? Like all good histories, Neilson's work generates more questions and inspires more curiosity.

Other critical questions arise from Neilson's work. One might question the extent to which Bonney's animosity toward Mormonism was personal as Neilson argues. Certainly a lot of anti-Mormon feelings were born out of ignorance or disagreement with their beliefs. Neilson could say more about why Mormons were originally left out of the World Parliament of Religions. Further, Neilson's portrayal of Mormons' changing self-image requires greater attention to how Mormons in 1893 viewed their more alienated and isolated forefathers. A simple case of swapping first names is not so serious since it does not alter the argument, but Gilded Age enthusiasts may find confusing William Henry Harrison with Benjamin Harrison inexcusable. Still, this minor presidential faux pas should not take away from what is otherwise an enjoyable read and insightful history.

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