

Book Review

Harold Schindler. *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder*. Revised Second Edition. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983. xvi; 417 pp. \$25.00.

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He is still bigger than life, and at stage center. Orrin Porter Rockwell, acting in his many roles—as distant relative of Joseph Smith, one of the first converts to Mormonism, feared “Danite Chieftain,” bartender, bodyguard, accused assassin of two handfuls of men (and women), Indian fighter, herdsman, guerrilla, mail rider, innkeeper, lawman, army scout, temple worker, barroom brawler, and missionary—springs to life once more in Harold Schindler’s excellent revision of his 1966 biography of Porter Rockwell.

But now there is more. In this 1983 revision, Schindler has not only expanded the bibliography, increased the index, and added recently acquired information about such varied events as the Battle of Crooked River, the Haun’s Mill attack, and the shooting of Frank Worrell of the Carthage Greys, but he has also pumped a great deal of interesting though generally supplemental detail into the rich plethora of footnotes which bless the text and, indeed, deserve to be read by themselves.

While this is as near as we shall likely come to a definitive biography of Rockwell, Schindler leaves the door open for further research. For example, he has been able to identify Samuel D. Serrine as “Achilles” (xi, xv), Rockwell’s sensational defamer, but he has been unable to uncover, except for the appearance of Serrine’s name on sundry lists or committees, any further facts about him. (I noted, as well, that Schindler continues to dismiss the surgical treatment of young Joseph Smith’s leg as a “botched” job, despite evidence to the contrary offered by Dr. Roy Wirthlin in his Spring 1979 *BYU Studies* article on the renowned surgeon, Nathan Smith.)

Rockwell’s fascinating life is a kind of cross-section of Mormon experience through much of the nineteenth century. He was there;

he participated in most of it. Like many of his generation, Rockwell was unable to read or write. A loyal servant of the first two Presidents of the Mormon church, Porter Rockwell was involved in the Missouri persecutions; he served as one of the Sons of Dan (Schindler is excellent on the Danite movement, and it is from the alleged initiation ceremonies for the Danites, wherein the initiate was permitted to "become a man of God and a son of Thunder" [35], that Schindler takes part of the title of the book); he smuggled tools to the captives in Liberty Jail; he was implicated in the attempted assassination of Governor Lilburn W. Boggs (and allegedly told Colonel Patrick Edwin Connor, years later, "I . . . thought I had killed him, but I had only wounded him. I was damned sorry that I had not killed the son of a bitch!" [332-33]); he rowed Joseph Smith across the Mississippi River the night before the prophet went to Carthage; he was a messenger for Joseph at Carthage Jail (Joseph said of Rockwell, "He is an innocent and a noble boy . . . , and my soul loves him" [79]); he brought to Nauvoo the news of the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum; he was a scout and buffalo hunter for the Saints at Winter Quarters and on the Plains; he acted in *Pizarro* at the opening of the Social Hall; he met with and impressed such VIPs as Schuyler Colfax, Fitz Hugh Ludlow, Jules Remy, and Richard F. Burton; he brought to Brigham Young and the Saints assembled at Brighton's Silver Lake the news of the pending invasion of units of the U.S. 5th and 10th Infantry; he was a guerrilla and stampeder of government mules in the Utah War; he fought the Indians as a scout and guide for Colonel Connor's troops; he sought out Brigham Young (in Southern Utah) and accompanied him on a fast ride to Salt Lake City to meet a trial date which had been suddenly scheduled to embarrass Brigham and cause him to forfeit his bond; he was implicated in the murder of several men and women; he was involved in the legal hunting down and killing of several outlaws; and at his 1878 death, from heart failure, he was awaiting trial on a grand jury indictment for his alleged involvement in the 1857 killing of five of the six members of the Aiken party.

Described in his later years by George Alfred Townsend, a well-known journalist, as "a fat, curly-haired, good-natured chap, fond of a drink, a talk, and a wild venture" (359), Porter Rockwell was the subject of many accounts—though not all true—that have come together to produce the paradoxical and controversial Rockwell portrait. Certainly he was accused, especially by the *Salt Lake Tribune*, of most of the unsolved murders in the territory. Schindler is unable to dispel the uncertainty surrounding these sensational crimes. Even

the question of whether or not Rockwell shot Lilburn W. Boggs remains hidden in such Rockwellian statements as, "If I shot Boggs, they have to prove it" (72). In the matters of the deaths of the Aiken party, of an unidentified female gossip in Nauvoo (105), of Henry Jones and his mother (accused of incest), of John Tobin, Dr. John King Robinson, Thomas Colbourn (a black), Joachim Johnston, Myron Brewer, Kenneth and Alexander McRae, and John Gheen, and even in the unexplained deaths of Mormon outlaws John P. Smith and Moroni Clawson, killed after they were captured, Schindler must leave the details hidden in the folds of history; and he likewise leaves the reader not only to conjecture as to Rockwell's guilt or innocence but also to agree that Rockwell was "utterly incapable of exorcising the specter of violence" which dogged his life.

Despite these historical blanks, Schindler neatly and capably ties up most of the loose ends (though one wishes for more connubial detail—about why Porter's first wife left him; why his first plural wife disappears from history after Nauvoo; and what happens to the later wives and children), and leaves a very human portrait of a doggedly loyal man capable of great selflessness and devotion, of whom Joseph F. Smith could say at his funeral, "He had his little faults," but his life "was worthy of example, and reflected honor upon the Church" (368).

Schindler's thorough research, sustained good writing, and remarkable subject, as well as his ability to set the events of Rockwell's life in a richly detailed historical setting, combine with a pleasing format and fine pen-and-ink illustrations by Dale Bryner to make *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* in the 1980s, even more than in the 1960s, a welcome volume for Mormon, Utah, and western historians and buffs.