

Riley M. Moffat, Fred E. Woods, and Jeffrey N. Walker.  
*Gathering to La‘ie.*

La‘ie, Hawaii: The Jonathan Napela Center  
for Hawaiian and Pacific Island Studies, 2011.

*Reviewed by Steven C. Walker*

I stayed in La‘ie last winter, a stone’s throw from the temple, which is within easy walking distance of Brigham Young University–Hawaii, which is next door to the Polynesian Cultural Center—all the major landmarks of the town within an easy ten-minute circuit. It is surprising to see how compact a place has earned so expansive a reputation. This book surprised me in the same way. There’s a lot going on in this history of the little town—*Gathering to La‘ie* traces how the sleepy village wrought dramatic influence on Hawaii, managed the miracle of melding diverse factions into a united community, exerted far-flung impact on the history of the Church.

President Hinckley, as an Apostle in 1981, underlined what visionary after visionary has affirmed about the significance of the locale when he stressed its disproportionate importance in the Lord’s work: “I never come to La‘ie that I don’t have a feeling that this place occupies some peculiar position in the plan of the Lord” (1). The feeling of condensed momentousness, of implicit significance, is as palpable in this brief history as it is on the quiet streets of La‘ie.

Riley Moffat serves as senior librarian at BYU–Hawaii. Fred Woods is Brigham Young University Professor of Church History, resident expert on gathering. Jeff Walker is currently a series manager of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, trustee and treasurer of Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, and managing editor of its journal, *Mormon Historic Studies*. They’re a competent team for documenting the historical impact of La‘ie, not least because they’ve accumulated among them considerable onsite familiarity with the subject.

In addition to those personal and professional qualifications for chronicling gatherings to La‘ie, the authors position themselves strategically to compile an accurate and thorough history by taking full

advantage of the archives and expertise of the Jonathan Napela Center for Hawaiian and Pacific Island Studies. Moffat and Woods and Walker manage a further advantage in their writing: they don't allow their vested parochial interests to get in the way of their objectivity. This local history is more than a cheerleading session; it recounts with engaging frankness the town's foibles and faux pas, its failures as well as its triumphs.

The book's strength is also its weakness: diversity. It's better at gathering than sorting—probably tries to do too many things at once. That's a persistent temptation among Hawaii's many appeals. My class of two dozen students at BYU-Hawaii was a rainbow of nine different nationalities, not counting ethnic variations of that remarkably variegated group we lump under the term *Hawaiian*—the La'ie university deserves its reputation as “the most culturally diverse campus in the United States” (185). The hydra-headedness of diversity makes it hard to control. But its kaleidoscopic inclusiveness gives it both balance and range. Multiple authorship can be a liability—“a camel is a horse built by a committee.” Yet there are ways the triple perspective works well with the complexities of this project. *Gathering to La'ie* mostly manages to weave disparate historical filaments into a coherent mural. A rainbow of visual vignettes contributes to that *e pluribus unum* amalgam of diversity—the volume is energized and enlivened, sometimes almost incarnated, by nearly three hundred photographs.

So the book is something of a catchall, but not catch-as-catch-can. The theme of gathering helps make its episodic anecdotes cohere. That motif—the town's pivotal position as a long-term destination for cultural and spiritual commingling—braids the divergent strands of the La'ie narrative, stringing disparate events into a linked lei. Recurrent gatherings are absorbed into a shared story in the same way the town itself has brought divergent groups and idiosyncratic individuals into communal closeness. Chronological portraits of La'ie—from its early origins through its gathering phases to the visionary culmination of the temple and the university and the cultural center—simmer in a narrative stew that blends all sorts of La'ie experience. That throw-everything-into-the-cauldron recipe makes for some interesting historical flavors, perhaps the most satisfying the sense of how much the past informs the present.

If you want to know more about La'ie, this is the book for you. If you don't care to know more, this could well make you care. If you think, as I thought, you know La'ie well enough, these anecdotal annals will

persuade you otherwise. *Gathering to La‘ie* stimulates an appetite for the local history by setting out flavor after fresh flavor in its documentary smorgasbord:

- The roots of La‘ie as a place of peace can be traced to early origins as a “City of Refuge,” a haven protecting fugitives from such horrific threats as the death taboo (*kapu*) for allowing the shadow of the king to pass over you (2).
- Charles Murray Gibson, en route to his mission in Japan, stopped off in the La‘ie vicinity to scam newly democratic Saints into “a glorious little kingdom” (22).
- Missionaries Francis Hammond and William Cluff, in separate dream visitations, were informed by Brigham Young that La‘ie was “the chosen spot” (23) for Sandwich Islands gathering.
- La‘ie Saints were disfellowshipped en masse when they rebelled against directives to stop drinking *awa*—and, even more upsetting to them, to root up that lucrative cash crop altogether (35).
- A severely depressed King Kamehameha IV called for a blessing from Mormon elders. By the end of their ensuing seven-hour conversation, the king, joking with the elders, had evidently regained his will to live (53).
- Queen Kapiolani sent a request to the mission home to send an elder to baptize her. Unfortunately no elder showed up (57).
- Queen Liliuokalani, the last Hawaiian regent, was baptized in 1907. Her personal copy of the Book of Mormon can still be seen on her nightstand at the Iolani Palace (63), the building that features as police headquarters on *Hawaii Five-O*.
- George Q. Cannon was feted to “hula-hula” dancing during a local conference (43).
- Joseph F. Smith was charmed by the La‘ie custom of untying a handkerchief at the pulpit to wave out the contents of the “love-container, that the love may be dispensed to the congregation” (45).
- The Polynesian Cultural Center, most-visited paid tourist attraction in the Hawaiian Islands, mushroomed out of a neighborhood building-fund hukilau on the beach (142).

If that sort of thing intrigues you, this book will. *Gathering to La‘ie* isn’t the best evocation of place to come out of Hawaii. It doesn’t have the epic scope and grandeur of James Michener’s *Hawaii*. It lacks the

witty insight into Hawaiian psychology of Sara Vowell's *Strange Fishes*. It can't match the portrayals of lush beauty of Hawaiian landscape captured by any of the dozens of Hollywood films made in Oahu. It can't boast the absorbing story line of Michael Crichton's *Micro* or even of *Hawaii Five-O*. *Gathering to La'ie*, is, after all, a town history.

That's not my favorite genre. I've worked on a few town histories and read more than I'd like. But this is by quite a bit the best local history I've seen. It is town history on steroids. It's not just that the little town matters well beyond the borders of La'ie. It's not just a matter of the book's accuracy and thoroughness and objectivity. It's not just that the theme of gathering moves it into the mainstream of Mormon history. *Gathering to La'ie* manages what town histories almost never manage: it's not *Hawaii*, but it's a good read.

For me the best thing about that good read, even better than the book's lively skits of historic moments in La'ie, is the underlying narrative of the advent of a kinder, gentler God. Stern New England missionaries replace the violent native religion with their Calvinistic Bibles. That stiff-necked Congregationalist harshness provides in its turn fertile soil for the Book of Mormon and the blossoming of early Latter-day Saint missionaries like Joseph F. Smith and Samuel Woolley and such stalwart native converts as Jonathan Napela, people whose travails and tenacity nurtured La'ie into a garden spot for the faith. There are moments when observing La'ie bloom into its religious and cultural maturity through the viewfinder of this volume is as phenomenal as watching the time-lapse unfolding of a hibiscus.

If the struggle of this vibrant community from the "dry, dusty landscape of the City of Joseph" (30) to its present cultivation is a miracle, the maintaining of its native Hawaiian warmth through those growing pains is more of one. The book traces the influence of the Church on the growth of La'ie in all kinds of intriguing ways, from the warmly communal to the sublimely visionary to the amusing, even the inadvertently amusing, as with this testimony of the gospel of fertility: "The effects of the true gospel are manifest, for we can show, by statistics, a greater increase by births, according to the population, than in any other district" (31).

*Gathering to La'ie* says "aloha" to readers. It's an open invitation to the historical and cultural and spiritual texture of a charming place. The book enthusiastically invites readers to participate in the La'ie experience. If you can get to La'ie by plane or boat or walking on the water,

you'll want to gather there. If you can't, the next best thing to being there may be this colorful compilation of the developing spirit of the little town on the north shore of Oahu that makes big waves.

---

Steven C. Walker (who can be reached via email at [byustudies@byu.edu](mailto:byustudies@byu.edu)) is Professor of English at Brigham Young University. He received his PhD from Harvard University and specializes in modern British literature and the Bible as literature. He is the author of twelve books, including *Seven Ways of Looking at Susanna* (Provo, Utah: Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, 1984), *The Power of Tolkien's Prose* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), and the forthcoming "Man Thinks, God Laughs": *The Illuminating Humor of the Bible* (Cascade).