

Book Review

The Diary of James J. Strang. Deciphered, transcribed, introduced and annotated by Mark A. Strang. With a foreword by Russel B. Nye. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1961. xlv + 78 pp. \$3.75)

Over a hundred years ago, in July of 1856, James Jesse Strang, self-styled Mormon prophet and king of Beaver Island, died at the hands of assassins. But one of the curious if minor phenomena of American history is that his ghost, like that of Banquo, will not rest. Again and again it has returned to haunt historians—to ask them who he was and what motivated him to establish his version of the kingdom of God on earth. Many of the questions about Strang's enigmatic but fascinating life have been answered. And yet, admits one of his biographers, "in seeking for the deepest truth of Strang's character I may have erred." This "deepest truth" we will perhaps never know, for much of what was buried in Strang's mind is now forever buried in his grave. But thanks to the indefatigable and painstaking efforts of Mark A. Strang, a grandson of King James, historians are now permitted additional glimpses into the mind of a man who was the founder of the first schismatic group in Mormon history.

An earlier version of this diary was published by Milo M. Quaife in *The Kingdom of Saint James, A Narrative of the Mormons* (New Haven, 1930). But Quaife, who made a number of serious mistakes in his transcription, failed to crack the private cipher which Strang had used to guard his most intimate thoughts and actions from the eyes of possible future readers. Mr. Mark Strang has succeeded in deciphering the code and is now, for the first time, publishing the diary fully transcribed and corrected. It is to be regretted, however, that Strang only recorded the events of his life from 1831 to 1836.

This record reveals a young man torn between heaven and earth, between the world of dreams and reality. His overriding ambition occasionally stops little short of delusions of grandeur: "I have spent the day in trying to contrive some plan of obtaining in marriage the heir to the English Crown. It is a difficult business for me, but I shall try if there is the least

chance. My mind has allways been filled with dreams of royalty and power." At other times he dreams about nature and its "benevolent spirit" in an almost visionary manner only to return to earth by proclaiming "I am a perfect atheist." He is an able debater and shows a strong concern for public affairs. The nullification controversy arouses within him great anxiety about the future of the United States. But he has one consolation: ". . . if our government is overthrown some master spirit may form another. May I be the one. I tremble when I write but it is true." He reads Walter Scott and concludes that if Scott's fame came from his writing, "who could not be great . . . I have better writing." Among the latter he counts the *Age of Reason* by Tom Paine and Blackstone's *Commentaries*. The diary thus reveals Strang as a dreamer who was also enough of a realist to accomplish some of his dreams. "Some time since took a resolution which I now solemnly confirm, to be a Priest, a Lawyer, a Conqueror, until I find better business." Perhaps Mormonism was this better business. That he used his membership in the Church (he was baptized in 1844 by Joseph Smith himself) to further these ambitions is a matter of history.

The grandson-editor's own exegesis, which fills some twenty odd pages of introduction and numerous footnotes, is an attempt to correct a view which stamps "one of the world's great thinkers and teachers" as overly ambitious. Biography, understandably, lends itself more to adumbrations of the hagiographer than other areas of history. But this does not excuse the editor from painting halos. True, Milo Quaife's incorrect transcription made some of Strang's statements appear more ambitious and selfish than intended. The most glaring example is Quaife's misreading of "ignorant" for "eager," which completely reverses the meaning of a sentence. But to claim, as the editor does, that the image of Strang's character for the last thirty years has largely rested on this error is an exaggeration, to say the least. Yet even if one grants distortion and misinterpretation to Quaife and those that follow him, the editor's overemphasis on Strang's resolve to devote his life to the service of mankind backfires and dissolves in irony. For a reading of the diary as a whole reveals that its tone is not so much set by Strang's desire to serve, but by his overriding ambition. And none other than the editor himself is respons-

ible for the necessity of a new interpretation of Strang's character that will show the king of Beaver Island even more ambitious than his biographers to date have made him out; for almost all of the numerous passages in cipher, with the exception of those dealing with Strang's amours, are recordings of his secret dreams of ambition and power. It is thus only unfortunate that the editor, instead of leaving the record to speak for itself, has distracted from the excellence of his otherwise superior job of editing by succumbing to ancestor worship. The same bias can be found in an otherwise excellent annotated bibliography which serves as a helpful introduction to the vast literature on James Strang.

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