

LYNDON W. COOK. *William Law: Biographical Essay, Nauvoo Diary, Correspondence, Interview*. Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1994. xiii; 164 pp. Index. \$16.95.

Reviewed by Scott H. Faulring, Assistant Professor of Aerospace Studies at Brigham Young University.

I have long admired Lyndon Cook's persistent, painstaking efforts in writing enlightening historical-biographical commentaries and editing important historical documents crucial to the study of Joseph Smith and early Mormon history.<sup>1</sup> His most recent contribution, *William Law*, principally a primary source monograph, surveys the thoughts and actions of this apostate, who was a member of the First Presidency during the final year of the Prophet Joseph Smith's life. The reader of this book will gain a deeper understanding of the tensions and emotions of this turbulent period of Mormon history. Cook is to be commended for researching and documenting the early faith and later struggles of William Law; modern students of Mormon history now have a closer, more personal, glimpse of this controversial Church leader's life.

William Law (1809-1892), assisted by his older brother Wilson, along with the Foster and Higbee brothers and several other active Nauvoo dissenters, published the first and only issue of the antagonistic *Nauvoo Expositor*, which included among other things a scandalous and hostile exposé of Joseph Smith's polygamous activities. Law's *Expositor* fanned the already hot flames of conflict between him and leading Mormon elders. Through the auspices of the Nauvoo City Council, Joseph Smith, acting as mayor, condemned the *Expositor* press as a public nuisance and ordered it destroyed. When Nauvoo citizens acted on the Prophet's request, he and his brother Hyrum were arrested for promoting a riot, incarcerated at Carthage, Illinois, and killed by a vigilante mob who stormed the jail. That tragedy was the capstone of an emotionally tempestuous religious conflict that had existed for at least half a year between the Mormon prophet-leader and his second counselor. In William Law's view, their differences were monumental; from late 1843 until early 1844, Joseph Smith's hopes for reconciliation with his counselor in the First Presidency dimmed while the animosity between them deepened.



The greatest practical and theological difference between William Law and Joseph Smith involved the morality of polygamy. Cook's monograph fills a conspicuous void by providing modern researchers with Law's negative views on the introduction and early practice of celestial marriage. Few Church members knew of the private teachings and guarded activities of Joseph Smith and his confidants; Church leaders in Nauvoo publicly denied any involvement in polygamous relationships. As Cook points out, William Law, although an endowed member of the "Anointed Quorum," was unaware for some time that Joseph Smith and others had been sealed to additional wives (23-24). Ironically, in the summer of 1842, Law defended the Prophet against the vicious "spiritual wife" accusations leveled by another disgruntled counselor in the First Presidency, John C. Bennett. This book describes, in detail, Law's reaction to Nauvoo's clandestine plural marriages and his subsequent alienation from Smith and the other leaders over this and other religious and political issues.

Although the first section of Cook's monograph is a biographical essay providing an overview of William Law and his life, the parts of the book are disconnected. The book has no introduction. Cook could have helped the reader by writing a general overview explaining the relationship of the essay with the various documents in the rest of the book. Also, Cook might have described his documentary editorial procedures, included a William Law chronology, and transcribed other relevant documents, for example, the prospectus for the *Nauvoo Expositor* and Law's own contributions to the *Expositor*.

The biographical essay is a near-verbatim reproduction of Cook's 1982 William Law article.<sup>2</sup> Comprising more than twenty percent of the book, the essay is still the most complete synopsis on William Law, and from that standpoint alone it is an important offering. Cook details five "points of contention" (13-27) that in William Law's mind, justified his apostasy. Law believed that the Prophet Joseph Smith: (1) defied Illinois state law, (2) manipulated politicians for selfish purposes, (3) ignored the established order of the Church during his (Law's) excommunication trial, (4) used ecclesiastical authority to control the financial affairs of the Saints, and (5) introduced false doctrines and corrupt clandestine practices, thereby corrupting his priesthood authority. This article



explores all five points objectively with substantial support from relevant primary sources.

Except for some minor adjustments, Cook has not expanded or updated the biographical article. He does reverse the spin of his opening paragraph. In 1982, it read, "Dissent is not a novel topic in Mormon history. *Nor is it* the most urgent issue confronting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today." Twelve years later, it reads, "Dissent is not a novel topic in Mormon history. *Yet, it is* an urgent issue confronting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today" (1, emphasis added). In 1994, Cook's references show signs of age and scholarly neglect. All the secondary sources in the footnotes are dated before 1982. For instance, he cites an earlier, less accurate, version of his *Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.<sup>3</sup> Cook does not cross-reference manuscript sources used or cited in the footnotes which have, since 1982, been published, thus making these documents more accessible to the general reader. For instance, Cook refers to the 1974 published version of William Clayton's 1840-1842 journal but not to the printed Wilford Woodruff journal, published in 1983,<sup>4</sup> nor to either of the published versions of Joseph Smith's diary. Thus footnote 51 directs the reader to an unpublished revelation in Joseph Smith's "Scriptory Book," a document which has been printed twice since 1982.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly the book's most significant addition to the corpus of Mormon-Nauvoo history is William Law's 1844 diary. Published in its entirety for the first time, the "Record of Doings at Nauvoo" covers, in sporadic entries, the period of January 1 through the latter part of June 1844. This remarkable personal record captures the spiritual and emotional pain Law felt as he was tried and tested by the doctrinal and moral issues that confronted him in Nauvoo.

For unexplained reasons, Cook does not, in this section, identify the location of the original diary, though an obscure footnote midway through the biographical essay reveals that the diary is "in private custody" (18 n. 53). Readers deserve to know the provenance of a previously unpublished diary, particularly in the wake of Mark Hofmann's nefarious activities forging manuscripts in the 1980s. At a minimum, the diary's physical characteristics should have been described and bracketed page numbers inserted to designate the division of the original text. While the procedures used



for editing the diary and other historical documents in *William Law* are never explicitly described, Cook seems to have taken a minimalist approach, supplying a literal transcription without any editorial apparatus to expand or clarify the text.

Law's Nauvoo diary is annotated with a judicious number of footnotes—adequate yet not interfering with the strength of the primary text. However, in two instances, the footnotes are too lengthy and hence are typographical eyesores. Footnotes 7 and 11, each over two-and-a-half-pages long, include extensive extracts from supporting documents. These sources, if so important, should have been included in the book's appendix. In spite of these deficiencies in annotation, Law's diary is a vivid testament to his heartrending challenges in faith and devotion to the Mormon Church and its leaders.

As is the biographical article, the "Correspondence" section (including the first six letters, ranging in date from 1837 to 1840, and their accompanying footnotes) is reprinted from another of Cook's *BYU Studies* articles with only slight modification.<sup>6</sup> To these pre-1841 writings, Cook has added three documents from the *Times and Seasons* that were written by Law, eight letters from Law, and one affidavit. These documents provide interesting details that continue to challenge those who study the subject of Mormon polygamy in Nauvoo. Basic bibliographic information is given at the beginning of each document, but no page references are given for the previously published material.

The lengthy Wilhelm Wyl-William Law interview, conducted in March 1887, is included as the fourth section.<sup>7</sup> Because Law was Joseph Smith's close associate, this reminiscence of his time with the Mormons is revealing. Without an introduction or overview, however, the reader knows little of the context or background of the interview. Given the strong antipolygamy sentiment in America, the anti-Mormon bent of interviewer Wilhelm Wyl, Law's bitter opposition to the Prophet Joseph Smith, and publication of the interview in an openly anti-Mormon Salt Lake newspaper, it comes as no surprise that Law's recollections were predominately negative.

The last section of the book contains miscellaneous documents: Joseph Smith's positive 1842 "characterization" of William and Wilson Law and an exchange of six letters from Mayor Joseph Smith to Nauvoo Legion Major General Wilson Law. (Cook does



not indicate whether he had access to the originals of these items in Joseph Smith's 1842 journal—"Book of the Law of the Lord"—or used Dean C. Jessee's transcription of the letters in *Papers of Joseph Smith* 2:407-17.)

Generally, this book's index is comprehensive. Cook provides detailed biographical-topical subdescriptions to guide the reader to specifics. However, a few omissions and mistakes detract from the index's utility. For instance, there is a contradiction in the index entry for "Revelation, on plural marriage" (see entry on p. 160). The index asserts, "W[ilson] L[aw] claims original [1843] revelation was much *longer*" (emphasis added). On pages 128-29 the reader finds the exact opposite: "I remember DISTINCTLY that the original [1843 revelation] given me by Hyrum was MUCH SHORTER" (emphasis in original).

The cloth cover is handsome, but the dust jacket design has a serious weakness: a backdrop photograph of Law not included anywhere else in the book is obscured by a dark purple background with gold lettering.<sup>8</sup>

Still, I highly recommend this book. *William Law* is a worthwhile presentation of the "opposition's" rationale for opposing the critical doctrinal developments of the Prophet's last years. The variety of William Law-related documents brought together in this book provides substantial historical "meat" useful in understanding the mindset of these dissenters in Nauvoo.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>His most noteworthy works include the following: with Andrew F. Ehat, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991); with Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983); *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph: A Historical and Biographical Commentary of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985); *Joseph Smith and the Law of Consecration* (Orem, Utah: Keepsake Paperbacks, 1991); *Joseph C. Kingsbury: A Biography* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1985); with Milton V. Backman Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders' Quorum Record, 1836-1841* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1985); and *Aaron Johnson Correspondence* (Orem, Utah: Center for Research of Mormon Origins, 1990).



<sup>2</sup>See Lyndon W. Cook, "William Law, Nauvoo Dissenter," *BYU Studies* 22 (Winter 1982): 47-72.

<sup>3</sup>This book was originally published in 1981 by Seventy's Mission Book Store. Four years later, in April 1985, Deseret Book republished, in a corrected edition, *Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.

<sup>4</sup>See Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 9 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1983-85), 2:169.

<sup>5</sup>See Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 191-92; and Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:253-54.

<sup>6</sup>See Lyndon W. Cook, "'Brother Joseph Is Truly a Wonderful Man, He Is All We Could Wish a Prophet to Be': Pre-1844 Letters of William Law," *BYU Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 207-18. The subtitle of this article is curious since all of the letters are pre-1841, versus pre-1844. These letters are reproduced from manuscripts in the Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

<sup>7</sup>The interview was published in the July 31, 1887, issue of the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*.

<sup>8</sup>An unobstructed copy of the photograph is found in Cook's "William Law, Nauvoo Dissenter," *BYU Studies* 22 (Winter 1982): 50.