

DAVIS BITTON. *George Q. Cannon: A Biography*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999. xiv; 554 pp. Photos, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

Reviewed by William A. Wilson

On November 22, 1850, ten LDS missionaries sailed from San Francisco to Hawaii to open that land to the preaching of their gospel. Among them was twenty-three-year-old George Q. Cannon. Born in Liverpool, England, in 1827, George, with his family, had been converted to the gospel in 1840 by George's uncle, Apostle John Taylor. In 1842 the family immigrated to Nauvoo. George's mother died on the voyage, and his father died shortly following the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. John Taylor then became his surrogate father. George was ordained a seventy in 1845, at age eighteen, and was endowed the same year. He made the trek to the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. In 1849, with a few select individuals, he was sent on a gold mission to California. From there he was sent on his mission to Hawaii.

By the time he left Hawaii almost four years later, over four thousand members remained behind in numerous branches. Even more remarkable, George had learned Hawaiian well enough not only to teach the natives in their own tongue but also to translate the Book of Mormon into their language. In December 1900, fifty years after the opening of the Hawaiian mission, George Q. Cannon returned to Hawaii to participate in the mission's jubilee celebration. He visited sites of his earlier experiences, preached to the members, instructed the missionaries, and prophesied the eventual building of a Hawaiian temple. Shortly after returning to the mainland in failing health, Cannon died on April 12, 1901.

In the years between his two Hawaiian experiences, Cannon married six wives and fathered forty-three children; was ordained an Apostle in 1860 at age thirty-three; served as an additional counselor to Brigham Young and as first counselor in the First Presidency to John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow; and played such a prominent role in Church, business, and civic affairs that in the development of nineteenth-century Mormonism and in the progress of Utah toward statehood few men could be considered his equal.

Now we have Cannon's remarkable life chronicled for us in Davis Bitton's equally remarkable biography. Drawing on rich primary sources, especially Cannon's journals and letters, Bitton brings his subject vividly alive. Some may wish the narrative moved ahead at a faster pace, but it is Bitton's use of extended quotations from Cannon himself, rather than summary or paraphrase, that makes the Apostle such a believable character.

Following his return to Utah from his mission in Hawaii, Cannon married Elizabeth Hoagland and then set out for San Francisco to get his Hawaiian translation of the Book of Mormon into print and to publish the *Western Standard*, which, in addition to serving the Saints in the area, would counter the virulent anti-Mormonism pouring from the pens of other newspaper editors. While in California, he also presided over the Pacific Mission. Returning to Salt Lake City in 1858, he was sent on a mission to the East to assist Mormon immigrants on their journey to Salt Lake Valley and to incline eastern presses toward a more positive view of Mormons.

After being ordained an Apostle, Cannon was sent almost immediately to preside over the British Mission. He directed mission activities, edited the *Millennial Star*, and supervised the emigration of British Saints. During this mission, he returned briefly to the States to take part in an abortive attempt to win statehood for Utah—he was to have served as one of the state's senators.

After his return to Utah in 1864, Cannon served as Brigham Young's personal secretary, began publishing the *Juvenile Instructor* in 1866, and was called in 1867 to edit the *Deseret News*. Beginning in 1872, Cannon served for nearly a decade as Utah's territorial delegate to the United States Congress. Throughout his tenure, enemies of the Church in Utah, from the media, and in the Congress attempted to deny him the seat he had won in fair elections, finally succeeding in 1882, following the passage of the Edmunds Act, which barred polygamists from holding public office.

During the remainder of the century, Cannon continued to defend the Church against attacks from its opponents, engaged in not-always-successful business endeavors to save the Church from financial ruin, spent time on the underground hiding from federal marshals, and served time in prison for his polygamous marriages. He was a key player with President Woodruff in producing the 1890 Manifesto that would eventually bring about the end of polygamy. He was also instrumental in breaking the Church's unified People's Party into two parties, Republicans and Democrats—a move necessary to win statehood in 1896. To the end of his life, he remained a political figure to be reckoned with.

In Bitton's biography, two themes dominate Cannon's life—the struggle over polygamy and the struggle to correct the malevolent distortions and misinformation spread everywhere by the Church's enemies. Bitton attempts to present the polygamy struggle as it occurred, without taking a stand, though he does take the rather relativistic position that the conflict was ultimately not over what was right and what was wrong but over what people holding two conflicting worldviews considered to be right and wrong.

Bitton shows us the tragedy and heartbreak that resulted from families being split apart as a result of federal intervention, but his description of



polygamy itself, at least as it was lived in the Cannon family, tends to focus on the “smiling aspects” of that peculiar institution—probably because the evidence would suggest that the Cannon wives and children really did live together in harmony and because Cannon genuinely loved them all and treated them fairly. In some families, however, there was a darker side of polygamy. Bitton’s oblique reference to Annie Clark Tanner’s “poignant account” in *A Mormon Mother* does not quite get at the issue (331). What’s more, Bitton makes short shrift of post-Manifesto polygamous unions. One might have expected him at least to respond to the charges made by D. Michael Quinn regarding these unions and Cannon’s alleged role in bringing them about.<sup>1</sup>

It was the struggle over polygamy, of course, that gave rise to the need to defend the Church—and the Church could have asked for no more eloquent a spokesman than George Q. Cannon. From his days as a missionary in Hawaii, when he called other Christian leaders to task for their blasphemous charges against the Church; to his days in San Francisco, where he played the same role as editor of the *Western Standard*; through his tenures as editor of the *Deseret News* and the *Millennial Star*; during his years in Washington, when he lobbied newspaper men, representatives, senators, and presidents; through close cooperative efforts with his non-Mormon supporter, Thomas L. Kane; during his political maneuverings to win statehood for Utah—during all these times and activities, as Bitton notes, “Cannon tirelessly promoted the cause of his people” (226).

One may not always admire the word games he sometimes played in giving less than forthright answers to questions about polygamy, but no one can question his devotion to the church that had won his unyielding allegiance. He did not carry the day—that was an impossible task so long as the Church continued to practice polygamy. But at least he made sure the Church’s voice was heard.

As the figure of George Q. Cannon emerges from the pages of Bitton’s biography, certain of his character traits become crystal clear. First and foremost is an unwavering, almost childlike faith in God and in the restored gospel, combined with a positive, optimistic view that no matter how bleak circumstances may look at the moment, God will in the end overrule all things for good. “We need not fear,” he said. “God is with us; the angelic hosts are with us, the glorious army of martyrs who have died for the truth in the past ages of the world are looking down upon us, interested in this great work and in its success” (297).

Second is a profound sense of duty combined with indomitable courage. When some of his discouraged missionary companions in Hawaii wanted to give up and return home, he persisted and persuaded others to persist. Throughout his life this pattern continued; he fearlessly and without apology stood up against lions.

Third is an intense loyalty to the Church and to his Church leaders. At the death of each President he served, Cannon felt he had lost his best friend. At Cannon's own death, President Snow stated, "In our councils, whatever might be the matter under consideration, although my decision was sometimes opposed to his views, he invariably yielded his point gracefully and gave me his most loyal support" (450).

Bitton tells us that his intention has been "to see the world through his [Cannon's] eyes, for his angle of vision best enables us to understand what motivated him and why he reacted as he did" (xiv). Especially through his use of primary sources, Bitton has in large measure achieved his goal. Still a fully objective picture is probably never possible, for the biographer always stands between his subject and his readers, selecting and interpreting the details readers will see. Perhaps one leaves this biography liking George Q. Cannon because Bitton so obviously likes him, even though he acknowledges his faults. Whatever the case, Bitton has produced a faith-promoting work in the best sense of that term, a work that promotes faith not by preaching but by drawing as honestly as possible a picture of a faith-inspiring man. For that we owe Davis Bitton a debt of gratitude.

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1. D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (spring 1985): 73–82.