

REVIEWS

Mormondom's Second Greatest King

King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang by Roger Van Noord (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), xii, 335 pp., \$24.95.

Reviewed by William D. Russell, chairperson of the division of social science at Graceland College, Lamoni, Iowa, and past president of the Mormon History Association and the John Whitmer Historical Association.

IN THE FALL OF 1971, Roger Van Noord, a reporter for the *Flint Journal*, went hunting with two friends on Beaver Island, Michigan. When the leader of the Beaver Island Historical Society showed them what he claimed to be the robe and crown used in James Strang's coronation ceremony in 1850, Van Noord became interested in this prophet and king of one faction of post-martyrdom Mormonism.

Van Noord's subsequent study of Strang's career resulted in this book. It is a successful, well-documented biography, the first significant book-length study of Strang since Milo M. Quaife's now-dated *Kingdom of Saint James* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1930). While the author has not consulted all the secondary sources, he seems to have examined virtually all extant primary sources. Van Noord used the three most important collections of Strangite materials — at Yale University, the Detroit Public Library, and

Central Michigan State University — as well as the collections of the LDS and RLDS churches, the National Archives, and the state historical societies of Wisconsin and Michigan.

The portrait of Strang that emerges is not fundamentally different from that given by previous non-Strangite writers. We see a young atheist with dreams of royalty. Converted to Mormonism a few months before Joseph Smith's death, he claimed to be Smith's successor by producing the famous "letter of appointment" from the Prophet, announcing a divine visitation on the day of Smith's murder, and unearthing the alleged Rajah Manchou Plates. Subsequent revelations strengthened his claim that he was the prophet God wanted to lead the Mormon movement. After all, he insisted, what revelations had Brigham Young produced? The Strangites came to use the words of a popular Mormon hymn as a taunt: "A church without a prophet, / is not the church for me; / It has no head to lead it, / in it I would not be" (p. 37).

But while most earlier studies focus on Strang's leadership of a community of saints in Wisconsin, the bulk of Van Noord's book concentrates on the Beaver Island years of his political career. This is where Van Noord makes a major contribution to our knowledge of Strang. LDS and RLDS historians have been more interested in the early years of Strang's career as religious leader, when he set forth most of his religious ideas, and in the nature of his claims

to be Smith's successor. But by 1851, Strang was established on Beaver Island, had been crowned king, was engaging in polygamy despite his early opposition to it, and had published his *Book of the Law of the Lord*. While the final years of his career, culminating in his 1856 assassination, may be less significant to LDS and RLDS church history, they are more interesting as Michigan history.

Van Noord concentrates on the economic and political opposition that Strang encountered from Gentiles, the legal actions against the Strangite Mormons, and Strang's reasonably successful political career. Although he did not achieve his ambition of being governor of Utah Territory, Strang was elected as a Democrat to the Michigan legislature. A newspaper usually hostile to Strang, *The Detroit Advertiser*, wrote that as a legislator, his "standing for influence, tact, intelligence, ability and integrity was second to none" (p. 194). Another newspaper called him the most talented debater in the House. After the Republican Party was organized in 1854 and took control of the legislature, however, Strang's political influence waned.

Twin Contributions

Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847–1869 by Eugene E. Campbell. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988, ix, 346 pp., \$20.95.

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WHILE GENE CAMPBELL lived through much of the twentieth century (1915–86), the focus of much of his historical research and interest was the nineteenth century. His earlier research and writing on Brigham Young, Fort Bridger, Fort Supply, Mormon colonization in the West, and polygamy all served as foundation stones for what he no doubt considered to be the capstone of his career, *Establishing Zion*.

What motivated this unique Mormon prophet/king? According to Van Noord,

The most credible explanation is that after the death of his daughter in 1843, Strang realized his life span was limited and his goals might never be accomplished. However, when he viewed the power and promise of Joseph Smith and the Mormon church, his dreams of royalty and empire were rekindled. With Smith's assassination Strang saw his opening and, in a bold bid, presented himself as Smith's successor. In debater's terms, he assumed the affirmative position of prophet and presented his proof: the letter of appointment, the visit by an angel, the brass plates, the testimony of witnesses—the latter with precedents in Smith's career. Based on the evidence, it is probable that Strang—or someone under his direction—manufactured the letter of appointment and the brass plates to support his claim to be a prophet and to sell land at Voree" (pp. 273–74).

Strang lay dying for some three weeks without naming a successor. His church dwindled, but even today a few hundred Strangites remain, still hoping that one day God will call a successor to the prophet who was one of America's rare kings.

During virtually all of his professional career, Campbell was employed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He began as a seminary teacher in Magna and later became an Institute of Religion instructor and director in Logan. From 1956 until 1980, he was a member of the history faculty at Brigham Young University, serving part of this time as chair of the department. Although well known throughout his professional career of nearly four decades for his sense of humor and easy-going manner, he was best known for his uncompromising search for historical truths. On one occasion in describing his method of teaching he said, "I will never knowingly teach my students something they will have to 'unlearn' later on" (p. ix).