Wells, “Defender : the life of Daniel H. Wells” (reviewed by Dennis Clark)

Title: *Defender : The Life of Daniel H. Wells*
Author: Quentin Thomas Wells
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Reviewed by Dennis Clark for the Association for Mormon Letters

This book was a pleasure to read. From it I learned of an entire life that I had known only as a gray name. I learned of small moments in that life, moments that fit Daniel H. Wells into the mosaic of the history of the 19th century. And I learned of larger moments, in which Wells stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries — sometimes literally.

As an example of the former, I offer the following anecdote. Wells was living in Commerce, Illinois at the time, before Mormons bought it and renamed it Nauvoo:

“Another Illinois lawyer with whom Daniel established a friendship was Abraham Lincoln. They became acquainted in April 1839 when Lincoln visited Hancock County as defense attorney for William Fraim, a man accused of murder... Daniel was called to serve on the jury and, according to the story he later told, when he met the future president, Lincoln exclaimed, ‘Prepare to die! I swore that if I ever met a man who was uglier than I am, I would shoot him.’ To this the young squire replied, ‘Shoot away. If I am as ugly as you are, then I don’t want to live’” (23).

One thing I appreciate about the author’s writing is that phrase “according to the story he later told.” This alerts the reader to the fact that the story has all the polish of an oft-told tale, like those in folklore that attach to famous people. The author lists as his source “Daniel H. Wells, Letter to Horace S. Eldredge, January 24, 1871 (Salt Lake City: unpublished document, copy in author’s possession).” Since Wells was born on October 27 1814, he would have been 56 when he wrote that letter, perhaps still young enough to have a clear memory, and obviously old enough to still relish the tale and the telling. And still able to appreciate Lincoln’s policy of “plowing around” the Mormon problem in the preceding decade, during the Civil War. The author does not bury in a footnote Wells’ use of the story to link his name with that of Lincoln.

By that time, 1871, Wells was mayor of Salt Lake City, second counselor to Brigham Young in the LDS Church’s First Presidency, commander of the Nauvoo Legion (the de facto Utah Territorial Militia), and a successful businessman — one who had nonetheless faced reverses. The largest occurred when the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroad companies both “defaulted on their construction contracts” once their rail lines were joined at Promontory, “leaving their Mormon contractors, subcontractors, and businessmen, including Daniel, to absorb over $1.5 million in losses—much of it unpaid wages to Mormon workers who labored on the two lines, and the balance in unpaid bills for ties, lumber, coal, food, and supplies for the track gangs who laid and spiked
down the rails” (315). I hadn't known, in my naiveté, that businessmen acted like that so long ago — I thought it was a phenomenon of the Trump era. And Daniel, as a businessman, supplied many of those commodities to the railroads — but made whole his workers before himself.

Through frugality and discipline Wells paid his workers, and gradually recovered. And Union Pacific Company “offered Brigham Young $600,000 worth of rails, ties, construction equipment, and rolling stock in part payment of its portion of the debt” (315). That, of course, wouldn't pay the workers or suppliers. However, Young and Wells and other investors could use all of it in constructing a spur line to the territorial capital, Salt Lake City, which had been bypassed in the construction of the main railroad line. They eventually built a railroad from north to south in Utah, including a spur line to Granite, “located at the stone quarry in the mouth of Little Cottonwood Canyon” (316) where granite blocks were quarried for the Salt Lake Temple, a construction project Wells was overseeing. Wells was never a railroad magnate — his participation in the railroad building was limited to such practical applications as faster travel and better haulage of materials. He did what he needed to help the Mormon settlers prosper.

There is a third incident that helps me get a clear sense of Wells's life, and explain the author's title. In fact, he opens the book with it. This occurred in Nauvoo, during the period when the Mormons were being forced out, after the assassination of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Wells was not yet baptized a Mormon, partly because his wife would not join the Church with him, and partly because he thought he would be more effective as a non-Mormon, even though he was by then a devoted follower of Joseph Smith. This long excerpt will give you some sense of the man:

“Daniel H. Wells awoke early on a September morning in 1846 to the sound of gunfire outside his home. He dressed quickly and saddled a white horse in the corral beside his house. Arming himself with a pair of pistols and a rifle, he mounted and rode east across the open fields in the direction from which the shots were coming. Others, mostly on foot, hurried after him. They arrived at a defensive line of entrenchments and wooden barricades that spread east and west from Barlow’s barn and quickly took up firing positions alongside those already engaged.

“In front of the defenders a large opposing force of about twelve hundred well-armed men was advancing in a bunched column from the southeast in a determined effort to reach Mulholland Street, the main avenue leading west into the city of Nauvoo. The attackers were supported by half a dozen artillery pieces that repeatedly hurled round shot into the defenders' breastworks and beyond into their homes and farm buildings. As the oncoming troops neared one side of the line behind which Daniel stood, still astride his horse, it became apparent to him that they would overrun the severely outnumbered defenders within minutes. With that realization, he became an instant general and acted decisively to direct the course of battle.

“At age thirty-three, Daniel had no military combat experience and had never fired a shot in anger at an opposing army. He did, however, have a strong knowledge of history and the strategy that
some of his forebears had used in earlier American conflicts. ...

“Urging his horse to a gallop, he rode swiftly to the northern end of the line where another group of men were firing at the advancing forces from too long a range to be effective. Swinging his hat overhead and shouting, he rallied the group to follow him south into the thick of the battle. Seeing the number of their opponents, only a few rose immediately to obey his call, but as the rest saw him stand in his stirrups and urge them onward while enemy bullets whined past his exposed body, they also responded. With Daniel in the lead, the company raced back over the field he had just crossed, some falling as they went, and reinforced the southern end of the line. Within an hour, as the self-appointed officer directed their fire, the defenders turned back the attacking army. His leadership would be needed even more in the following days when this temporary victory was swallowed up in defeat” (introduction, vii-viii).

This was a very effective introduction for me, since I had no previous knowledge of Wells. I was particularly interested to learn that Wells had been “chosen Hancock County constable and justice of the peace, Nauvoo City alderman, lieutenant general of the Nauvoo Legion [and] superintendent of Public Work” (viii) long before he was baptized. He had helped build his community and won the trust of his neighbors through his fairmindedness even before the Mormons arrived. The encounter with Abraham Lincoln that I mentioned earlier occurred at about the same time Joseph Smith was escaping from captivity in Missouri and headed for Commerce, when Mormon agents had just begun to look at the settlement as a place to move to.

The book abounds with such interesting detail. In structure, the book is simple: a discussion of the current state of the Wells family opens each chapter. At first these discuss Wells's position in his own birth family — youngest brother to five sisters, with whom he corresponded throughout his life. Then the chapter openings add his wife and son in Commerce, and eventually his six plural wives in Utah, and each of the children born to them in the period covered. Each chapter then goes into his activities in the community for the years covered; then the author discusses in depth the main focus of Wells's activities in those years, such as the Black Hawk war. This structure makes it necessary for the author to return in the next chapter to the chronology of events not emphasized but concurrent with the big events. It builds a picture of the effect of local and national conditions on Wells and the Mormon community he helped build — but leads to a jumping back and forth in chronology that can be a little confusing.

The author tells much of his story with many different primary sources, including a pronounced reliance on the Joseph Smith Papers website for much of the Nauvoo period. But at times he relies on such standard LDS materials as *History of the Church* uncritically, especially when describing conflicts between Mormons and Gentiles in Nauvoo and Salt Lake City. Since these are bitter and partisan conflicts, I would expect some evaluation of the reliability of those sources; in these conflicts there was fully as much bitter partisanship as in current national politics, but the author seems to take the received Mormon sources at face value.
On the other hand, he does not hesitate to explore conflicts within the Church and between its leaders. For example, Wells and George Q. Cannon had a bitter, extended battle over son John Q. Cannon's marriages to two of Wells's daughters. This story spans two chapters, 21 and 22, near the end of the book, and can rightly be seen as a family conflict somewhat like that between the Montagues and Capulets — down to the hostile civic environment in which it unfolds. He also includes conflicts that Wells seems to have been unaware of, like Heber C. Kimball's "continuing animosity against Daniel and other Church leaders" expressed in Kimball's journals (274), even though, and possibly because, Wells was guarding Kimball's residence, as well as Young's and his own, against attempts by hostile authorities to arrest them.

In part because of his willingness to treat all aspects of Wells's life, I found the book instructive, balanced, enlightening and entertaining. One can't ask for much more than that in the dusty pages of dry histories of Deseret.
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