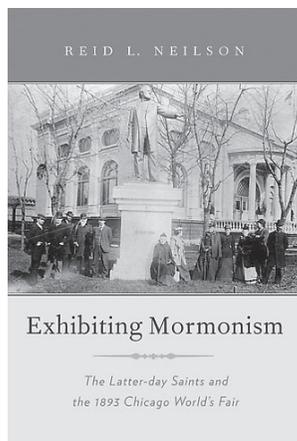


REID L. NEILSON. *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, xiv + 224 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index, \$29.95 hardback.)

Reviewed by Robert W. Rydell

In 1890, The Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints issued its Manifesto condemning polygamy. Six years later, Utah was admitted as a state. How did Americans overcome their deep suspicion of Mormonism, at least to the extent that made statehood for Utah possible? Reid A. Neilson, managing director of the LDS Church History Department, offers one plausible explanation that centers on the defining event of the Gilded Age, the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, a cultural extravaganza that imprinted the national consciousness like no other event of its time. For the Mormons, according to Neilson, what happened at the 1893 fair



was simply this: through their organization of and participation in Utah's Territorial Building, through their exhibits in other palaces on the fairgrounds like the Agricultural Building, through their involvement in the Congress of Women, and through the first national performance of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Mormons shaped an image of themselves and of their faith that blunted a half-century of sometimes vicious stereotypes and paved the way for acceptance of Utah into the Union. This fascinating and important study should inspire future studies of Mormon engagement with world's fairs and other forms of mass culture.

Exhibiting Mormonism is organized into six chapters. The first chapter provides a solid overview of the Mormon experience in Victorian America between 1830 and 1892 with a focus on how Mormons, historically, had tried to represent themselves and counter negative stereotypes, by relying especially on the press. The second chapter addresses the immediate interest of Mormons in organizing exhibits as part of the Utah pavilion at the 1893 fair. The next three chapters take up several aspects of Mormon representation at the fair: women's involvement with the Congress of Representative Women; the Mormon Tabernacle Choir at the fair (including its performance at the installation of the Liberty Bell on the exposition grounds); and the failed effort by Mormon leaders to gain representation for their faith in World

Parliament of Religions. The final chapter examines Mormon exhibits after the 1893 exposition, including exhibits at subsequent fairs and how these exhibits “ended up providing the framework and content for the permanent exhibits displayed in visitors’ centers on Temple Square in Salt Lake City” (11). All told, this is a fascinating history. Yet, for all of its strengths, this book may not be the last word on Mormon involvement with the medium of exhibitions.

The crux of Neilson’s narrative turns on explaining the paradox of the inclusion of Mormon women in the World Congress of Representative Women, a multi-day international meeting that shaped the course of feminism in the United States and abroad, and the exclusion of Mormon men from the World’s Parliament of Religion, a seventeen-day series of meetings that attracted thousands of people to hear presentations by spokespersons for Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Bhai’i, but not Mormonism. In broad brush, Nelson’s argument runs roughly as follows: Mormon “matriarchs,” because of their longstanding involvement with international meetings on women’s suffrage and relief work, had built a network they could draw on to gain a place on stage with women from around the world as they sought to address common issues confronting women everywhere. When it came to the women’s congress, the politics of gender (including women’s networking skills) trumped theological disagreements with their (mostly) Protestant counterparts. On the other hand, for LDS men, the theological divisions with mainstream Christianity and dominant society’s identification of Mormonism with polygamy led exposition authorities to deny Mormons any voice at all in an international meeting dedicated to the varieties of religious thought and practice around the globe. For Neilson, the upshot of the fair for LDS leaders, especially in reflecting on the popularity of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and of the Utah Building, was discovering that although mainstream Protestants were not ready to grant Mormonism legitimacy as theology, “American Christians were willing to embrace the Latter-day Saints as cultural contributors” (175). Inspired by this realization, Mormon leaders, Neilson argues, redoubled their efforts to participate in subsequent world’s fairs, culminating in an official Mormon exhibit in the Hall of Religions at the 1933–34 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition, and in developing exhibits, many rooted in Mormon participation in world’s fairs, for multiple LDS visitors’ centers.

This is a plausible argument, but not one with which every scholar will agree. In her recent essay about Mormon participation in the 1893 fair, Andrea G. Radke-Moss suggests that Mormon men rather took it on the chops at the exposition in venues beyond the World Parliament of Religion, for instance in the Utah Building, which Radke-Moss claims was largely nonsec-

tarian and probably did little to educate the broader public about Mormonism. Unfortunately, neither Neilson nor Radke-Moss really provides enough details about how these exhibits were received, so we will need to await the work of future scholars for answers about the broader impact of these exhibits on public opinion and the degree to which visitors' impressions of Mormonism changed as a result of their encounters with Mormon exhibits at the fair.

When future scholars turn their attention on Mormon involvement with the 1893 fair, it will also be interesting to determine the degree to which Mormon visitors recorded their impressions of the Midway Plaisance, the riotous, racialized, sexualized amusement zone of the exposition. Neilson's book, which is excellent in so many respects, may well be the first study of the 1893 fair not to include the Midway as an index entry—a silence that begs many questions about what Mormon visitors learned from the fair (which is to suggest that the fair not only informed many Americans about Mormonism, but opened Mormon visitors' eyes to the perils and possibilities of an emergent mass culture as well).

When all is said and done, *Exhibiting Mormonism* is an insightful book that merits attention from readers seeking an understanding of how Mormons developed a cultural strategy initially to win statehood and subsequently to gain tolerance and respect for their beliefs. Read against the backdrop of Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign for the presidency, this is a book that offers important insights into how Mormonism began the process of entering American political culture at the end of the nineteenth century.

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