Matthew J. Grow and R. Eric Smith, eds. *The Council of Fifty: What the Records Reveal about Mormon History*. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017. xvi + 201 pp. Index. Cloth: $21.00

Reviewed by David Golding

For decades, a certain mystique surrounded discussion of the Council of Fifty, owing to traits ripe with intrigue: the council's origins rested in the theocratic ambitions of Nauvoo's elite and their most telling records lay restricted to researchers. Perhaps temple rituals or polygamy secrets graced the minute books, details certain to fall under LDS Church policies aiming to protect the sacred. Or so historians reasonably suspected until the Joseph Smith Papers Project published the minutes in 2016.[1] Even while putting to rest a few hypotheses about Joseph Smith's aspirations, the minutes present readers and researchers with a dense record.

The collection of short essays in *The Council of Fifty* adeptly answers the occasion with a succinct introduction to the council and its effects on Mormon history. More importantly, the essays convey an agenda for further research grounded in current debates over the politics and legal philosophies of the antebellum period, the settlement of the American West, encounters between Native Americans and white settlers, and industrialization, to say nothing of other Mormon-specific themes.

The editors' strategy is apparent in the book's design: fifteen essays span fewer than 190 pages, giving accessible treatments to a number of subjects. The essays keep to a tight focus on one concern at a time, with the whole favoring an array of potential launch points for future scholarship. This allows novices room to survey the Council of Fifty while also alerting specialists to the contents of newly available source materials. Matthew J. Grow and R. Eric Smith's volume introduction lifts the council's mystique by not simply exposing the minutes' contents to public view, but by also giving an account of the artifact's provenance and the work of the Joseph Smith Papers team in preparing the minutes for publication. The book counters the predictable anticlimactic reveal—no sensational material to be found here—with a strong case for wide applicability. Lest we assume the council offers scant insight, the essays contend that the minutes illuminate many intriguing questions.

Richard Lyman Bushman leads with several of such questions, ultimately proposing that the Council of Fifty both challenges and supports notions of early Mormon separatism. The Mormon relationship to government

[1]Matthew J. Grow et al., eds., *Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*, vol. 1 of the Administrative Records series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016).

informs several subsequent essays. Patrick Q. Mason revisits his argument[2] that Joseph Smith and associates conceived of a novel political philosophy of theodemocracy. Whereas Mason had developed his thesis prior to the release of the minutes, he could now weigh a crucial source against theodemocratic concepts. He concludes "plain old theocracy" resounded in the council's meetings, suggesting foundations for later authoritarian styles in Utah Mormonism (35). Spencer W. McBride, Benjamin E. Park, Nathan B. Oman, Christopher James Blythe, and W. Paul Reeve each examine council members' various sentiments toward government, and the surprisingly diverse approaches the council entertained in planning and executing an exodus from the United States. Oman's contextual reading of the council's efforts to render a constitution for an anticipated "Kingdom of God" presents crucial vocabulary for analyzing the legal theory at play in Nauvoo and, later, Utah. Both Oman and Park enhance our view on Mormon reverence and rationales for revelatory standards.

Themes important to western history receive careful attention by Matthew J. Grow, Marilyn Bradford, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Matthew C. Godfrey, and Jedediah S. Rogers. Grow and Bradford note the potent effects the work of the council had on Brigham Young's leadership paradigm, a key contribution to the early Utah period and questions surrounding the particulars of succession. Mahas alerts us to the critical dimension of the council in determining civic and religious contact between Mormons and American Indians. Though the council failed to secure an alliance with Native American nations, and missionaries broadly failed to achieve mass conversions of Indian peoples to Mormonism, council members' strategies display important new variables, particularly attitudes and expectations held secret within the confidential space the council provided. Godfrey detects an industrious ethic within the council's ranks that orchestrated the final construction of the Nauvoo House, a structure once planned as a complement to the Nauvoo Temple. Rogers assesses the place of the Council of Fifty in the historiography of the American West and identifies a scheme of kingdom building that further distinguishes the Mormons' pursuits in settling the west from those of their neighbors.

Some essays frame the activities of the council more than plow new ground. Readers unfamiliar with the circumstances surrounding the organization of the Council of Fifty will learn from Richard E. Turley Jr. about the strong connection between Missouri violence and the council's foundations. Gerrit J. Dirkmaat highlights selected teachings from prominent figures who attended the council. Richard E. Bennett solidifies the decisions of the council and other factors that bore on the Mormon exodus. R. Eric Smith finds in the

[2]Patrick Q. Mason, "God and the People: Theodemocracy in Nineteenth-Century Mormonism," *Journal of Church and State* 53, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 349–75.

minutes confirming evidence of record-keeping precedents celebrated in the pioneering archival work of later clerks.

The volume presents itself as an astute foray into the contents of the minutes and the possibilities for further study on the Council of Fifty. It does not attempt profuse analysis, but rather explores major themes suggested by the minutes with enough detail to satisfy initial questions. Historians of Mormon women may yet wonder about the role of the council in leading to the suppressing of the Nauvoo Relief Society, or themes relating to the experiences shared by women, like the practice of polygamy, the economics of resettlement, and the overlapping interests between the council and women's charity work. Even so, as a thoughtful consideration of what the Council of Fifty offers the study of Mormon history—an objective announced by the book's subtitle—this volume performs well and demonstrates how concise, accessible treatments can deliver scholarly value.

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