

Matthew J. Grow. *“Liberty to the Downtrodden”:  
Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer.*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009

Reviewed by Charles S. Peterson

In this heartening book, Matthew J. Grow examines the life of Mormon friend Thomas L. Kane in terms of the reform impulses that propelled America during the antebellum and succeeding decades of the nineteenth century. Born to a well-situated Pennsylvania family early in the Jacksonian era, Kane reached maturity before the economic and social opportunities of the “gilded age” opened the modern era of industrial urbanism and professional specialization. Like many of his contemporaries, he was almost forced to become a reformer, a career he later integrated with the development of an upstate Pennsylvania area where his family had long-standing land interests.

Responding to shifting times as well as to contradictory aspects in his own nature, Kane was loyal to the Democratic Party until the Civil War but then became a Republican and thereafter tended in the direction of Progressive impulses without abandoning many of his earlier commitments. Throughout his life, he manifested a penchant for iconoclasm and a distaste for the moral and doctrinal limitations imposed by the country’s evangelical Protestant majority. These characteristics were combined with a dated romantic idealism—including an affinity for dueling and related chivalrous and gentlemanly attitudes commonly connected with the Old South. Thus inclined, he became an avid foe of slavery and the nation’s foremost defender of the Mormons. “At critical junctures, . . . notably during the Utah War and the Civil War,” as Grow tells us, Kane’s efforts “changed history” while his life also cast light on the world “of mid-nineteenth century reform” (xx).

Although not widely recognized, Kane occupies an important “place both in scholarship on Mormonism and in the Mormon cultural memory.”

However, even the Mormon understanding of his role is lacking, owing in part to the Latter-day Saints' limited interest in "Kane's other activities and the broader world of reform culture" to which he belonged. Plumbing Kane's personal story fully for the first time, Matthew J. Grow opens a door into a broadened national context from which, to a degree, Latter-day Saints sought originally to escape and until now have not been at particular pains to work entirely into either their scholarship or folk culture (xx).

My own case may be instructive. I first became aware of Kane in 1947 when I read Joseph Fielding Smith's *Essentials in Church History* while an LDS missionary. Ten years later my master's thesis focused on Alfred Cumming's role in the Utah War of 1857–1858. Kane's efforts in the Mormon cause struck me as perplexing but of passing importance. Grow suggests that he may have been, after all, the key to the conflict's peaceable outcome. Another decade down the pike I found Kane again, this time enlarging Brigham Young's already expansive plans for colonizing Arizona. After another ten years I was part of a Bureau of Outdoor Recreation study of the Mormon Battalion Trail, where I again found the ubiquitous Kane. Yet I remained unmoved and failed to study him further.

Educated at Brigham Young University and more recently at Notre Dame University, Matthew Grow now teaches at the University of Southern Indiana, where he also directs the Center for Communal Studies. Essential to the invitation Grow offers Mormon studies is a wealth of Kane-related material, including papers long held by Kane's descendants, which—in another manifestation of the continuing Mormon interest in Kane—became available at BYU in 2000. Included are "thousands of letters, manuscripts of published and unpublished writings, legal and business records," and the extensive journals of his wife, Elizabeth, who survived him by twenty-six years (xx). Other important Kane collections are at the American Philosophical Society, Yale University, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Library of Congress, as well as in the LDS Church History Library and in the historical files of many newspapers.

The introduction and the first two chapters, "Raising Kane" and "Europe," give historical background and focus readers' attention on Kane as a reformer. Family, politics, and religion loom large in shaping Kane, as does Philadelphia society, its borderland locale between north and south, and its pride in its own culture and past. Kane's comment that he was "born with the gold spoon in my mouth, to station and influence and responsibility" bears on the entire the book (1). His mother was a member of a powerful political family, his brother an Arctic explorer, and his father was a confidant of presidents, a Philadelphia U.S. Court judge, and

an ardent Democrat. All enjoyed access to America's social, political, and business elites. Although he frequently disagreed with Thomas, the elder Kane was also an inveterate supporter of his children, who sometimes lived in his Philadelphia homes and enjoyed all the perquisites of the era's no-holds-barred nepotism. Always of delicate health, Thomas still managed to make two youthful tours of England and France. There his tendency toward religious heterodoxy hardened, and he mingled with all the right Americans, adding depth to his personal connections.

The book's remaining eleven chapters progress by means of reform development, subject matter, and chronology. Chapter 3, "Beginnings of Reform," Chapter 8, "Reforming Marriage," and Chapter 12, "Developing Kane," describe how reform culture unfolded generally and influenced Kane and his family and brings to focus his marriage to Elizabeth Kane, who features largely in the book thereafter. Chapter 6, "Free Soil and Young America," Chapter 7, "Fugitive Slaves," and Chapter 11, "Honor, Reform, and War," pertain chiefly to antislavery issues, one of Kane's two great passions. Finally, Chapter 4, "Meeting the Mormons," Chapter 5, "The Suffering Saints," Chapter 9, "The Utah War, Act I," Chapter 10, "The Utah War, Act II," and Chapter 13 "Anti-Anti-Polygamy," trace his rescue work among the Saints.

Grow avoids most of the pitfalls of revisionism and writes in moderate but confident terms that enable him to distance himself from outmoded concepts without abandoning their essential meaning; an example is "Manifest Destiny," a widely-known concept he addresses as the "extension of liberty" (40-41 and 102-3). He also makes difficult judgments on a wide variety of themes and issues with fairness and civility.

A weakness of the book is its failure to include a bibliographic statement. One hopes the publishing trend is not to cast serious readers adrift in a heavily annotated sea of drifting footnotes. Readers may also wonder about conclusions that are largely drawn from the record of one man and his family. They may even wonder if historian Bernard De Voto's view of Kane as "neurotic" does not have its place when considering Kane's activities and viewpoints (30).

But in the main, "*Liberty*" opens new doors of understanding about the Civil War, Jacksonian Democracy, and Sectionalism's impact on the West. In terms of Mormon studies, it is refreshing partly because it helps bring Brigham Young back into the forefront of Mormon history after two decades of emphasis on Joseph Smith and his era.

As a reformer, Kane turned naturally to writing and publishing. His life was a "convergence of politics, reform, and print culture." He was adept at "using the press, staging events, and creating images to promote

sympathy for various oppressed groups” (xvii). His influence upon some of the finest writers of Western Mormon history seems clearly suggested; William Mulder, Howard Lamar, and Wallace Stegner, for instance, have written in what might be termed a “Kane voice.” Yet Mormon history in general has been less successful in finding a voice. Indeed, as Richard L. Bushman often reflects in his introspective *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author’s Diary* on selling *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, Mormon historians have found it difficult to bring a fully appropriate voice to bear on both the Church and the profession of history. It is in the tensions of this context that “*Liberty*” is heartening. The voice of cultural studies as reflected by Grow offers a promising approach. Here’s to Thomas L. Kane, friend of the Mormons. May he “change history” once again.

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Charles S. Peterson (who may be reached via email at [byu\\_studies@byu.edu](mailto:byu_studies@byu.edu)) has served as Professor of History at Utah State University, editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly*, director of the Utah State Historical Society, and president of the Mormon History Association.