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REVIEW: LIBERTY TO THE DOWNTRODDEN: THOMAS L. KANE,  
ROMANTIC REFORMER

*Reviewed by Jordan Watkins*

Matthew J. Grow, *Liberty to the Downtrodden: Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. Hardcover: £30.00

Matthew J. Grow's impressive biography, "*Liberty to the Downtrodden*": *Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer*, captures the life of a little-known nineteenth-century reformer and, in the process, illuminates understudied and misunderstood aspects of nineteenth-century American culture. Grow organized this definitive text on Kane, chronologically and thematically, emphasizing Kane's reform efforts while sufficiently outlining other aspects of Kane's life to offer a complete narrative. Grow's descriptions of Kane's reform activities, from pursuing women's rights to defending the Utah Mormons' practice of polygamy, reveal the antebellum anti-evangelical reform culture that developed within the Democratic Party during the first half of the nineteenth century. Grow, following Kane himself, placed Kane within the contemporary cultural types of 'romantic hero' and 'gentleman of honor'. Grow's study depicts Kane as both a type and an original in nineteenth-century American reform.

Born into an upper-class Philadelphia family in 1822, Kane benefited from various opportunities, including health trips to Europe during the early 1840s, which sparked Kane's interest in reform. Grow noted that in France, August Comte's positivism, which emphasized individual rights and resisted metaphysical speculation, "fuelled both [Kane's] humanitarian drive and his religious unorthodoxy" (22). This understanding informed Kane's lifelong labour for the rights of nineteenth-century religious outsiders. Upon returning to America, Kane launched into educational reform, battling the anti-Catholic evangelical reformers. Soon, Kane's reform efforts expanded to include other reli-

gious outsiders. As Grow noted, “Kane’s own religious unorthodoxy and antipathy toward evangelicalism allowed him to find value in Mormon religion” (68).

In 1846 Kane met the Mormons who became the featured group of his reform activities during the remainder of his life. Kane, who eventually married and joined efforts with Elizabeth W. Dennistown, actively engaged in multitudinous reform movements, including peace reform, antislavery, temperance, women’s rights, and marriage reform, among others. Kane’s extended efforts in behalf of the Mormons, and in particular his labors from 1846 through 1858, illustrate his place in nineteenth-century anti-evangelical reform and reflect his roles as ‘romantic hero’ and ‘gentleman of honor’. Though Kane engaged in other activities during this period, he focused most of his efforts in serving as the Latter-day Saints’ greatest non-Mormon ally. During the late 1840s, Kane used his family’s powerful standing to encourage the federal government’s support of the Mormons’ move west. After meeting with President Polk and visiting Mormon camps, Kane seized the opportunity of mediating between the federal government and the belittled Latter-day Saints, which offered him a unique chance to challenge religiously intolerant evangelical reformers.

During the period between 1846 and 1852, when the LDS Church officially announced its practice of polygamy, Kane successfully reshaped the Mormon image. Through important media organs, including Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, and the publication of his pamphlet, *The Truth of the Mormons* (1852), Kane weaved a narrative that emphasized the Latter-day Saints’ suffering. His compassionate and well-crafted account quickly drew national sympathy. As Grow explained, this represented the only period from the 1850s to the 1890s “when the Mormons prevailed in the halls of Congress and in the press” (91). Kane’s efforts and success, as Grow noted, complicates the traditional historical account of unhindered anti-Mormonism during the last half of the nineteenth-century. As Grow explained, while Kane’s narrative drew temporary compassion, it also fanned the flames of

Mormonism's separatist tendencies, encouraging further departure from a perceived American mainstream.

After the Mormons surprised Kane with the truth about polygamy, Kane encouraged a public announcement and continued to defend the Latter-day Saints. This official admission, given in 1852, reversed the public's view of the Mormons and the resulting increase in national antipathy toward Mormonism paved the way for the Utah War. Grow shrewdly noted that Mormonism and the Utah War provided a cause that temporarily united a dividing nation. As Grow highlighted, the Utah War evidenced the limits of American tolerance and religious liberty. Fighting this intolerance, Kane again constructed a powerfully successful narrative, which described Brigham Young as the leader of a peace party in opposition to a Mormon war party, and consequently, Kane argued, a peaceful resolution required the Mormon leader's help. Grow concluded that Kane's manipulation of events and mediating efforts "proved crucial in avoiding a military clash between the Mormons and the federal army and in keeping the peace in the succeeding years" (174). In this instance, and at various stages before and after the American Civil War, Kane struggled for the rights of a people below his social position, mediating between the Mormons and the federal government and battling against a powerful evangelical establishment.

Although Kane found his way from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, with various stops in between, his antebellum reform efforts illuminate the anti-evangelical reform movement aligned with the Democratic Party. As Grow observed, Kane's antislavery activities reveal Democrats in the centre of the movement to restrict and end slavery, a phenomenon that historians have largely ignored. Kane eventually joined the Free Soil Party, and during the Civil War period transferred political loyalties from the antislavery Democrats to the abolitionist Republicans. Serving as an officer in the Civil War, Kane, as Grow explained, "examined the war through the lens of honor and chivalry, but he initially tried to avoid war altogether" (211). Following the War, Kane's activities in charities, educational reform, and com-

munitarian building reveal the post-War shift from gentlemen reformers to governmental and institutional reform during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. His final efforts with Elizabeth in behalf of the Mormons and against anti-polygamy legislation further reveal Kane's role as romantic reformer and heroic gentlemen battling in behalf of the downtrodden against evangelical reformers.

Grow's cultural biography, much more than this review suggests, engages Kane in the context of nineteenth-century reform, and, conversely, his reform activities shed light on nineteenth-century America. Grow correctly noted that Kane's life "makes him an ideal window onto this culture of reformers" (xvi). Also, in outlining the period from the late 1840s to the 1850s, an understudied epoch in Mormon history, Grow's work nuances the understanding of the pre-Civil War Mormon image and illuminates the importance of the Mormon Question in antebellum America. This brief analysis incapably suggests the capability of Grow's achievement. *Liberty to the Downtrodden* successfully provides an interesting, illuminating, and comprehensive study of Thomas Kane, 'romantic reformer' and 'gentleman of honor'.