



In the Whirlpool: The Pre-Manifesto Letters of President Wilford Woodruff to the William Atkin Family, 1885-1890

Reid L. Neilson

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Political and religious turmoil in the late 1800s plagued the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its leaders. As Utah statehood loomed, Congress aggressively moved against Mormons who engaged in polygamy. More than a thousand men were jailed and others were forced into hiding. One of those who went into hiding in 1879 was Wilford Woodruff, who became church president in 1887. Woodruff sought sanctuary with the family of William and Rachel Atkin and others throughout the 1880s. This never-before-published collection of Woodruff's letters to the Atkins, edited by Reid L. Neilson, reveals the church leader's political and spiritual conflicts in the five years leading up to his 1890 Manifesto, which officially disallowed polygamy.

Woodruff's nearly 60 letters reproduced here depict a man "in the midst of a whirlpool." The church leader believed he and his people were being denied the basic American right to practice the religion of their choice, yet he recognized that polygamy was incompatible with American society. The letters also reveal Woodruff's humanity—his longing to be with friends, his sorrow over the loss of his first wife, and his struggle with illness.

Essays by Neilson, Jan Shipps, and Thomas G. Alexander provide context for Woodruff's writing. Neilson discusses the Atkins' family life, Alexander offers a history of plural marriage among Mormons, and Shipps analyzes the impact of the Manifesto on Mormon women and men. Nearly 20 images further flesh out the correspondence and its depiction of Mormon people—who were then, like Woodruff, in the midst of change.

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