

## Making the Mormon Trek Come Alive

*We'll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846-1848.* By Richard E. Bennett (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1997)

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AUTHOR RICHARD E. BENNETT DESCRIBES HIS BOOK AS:

... not so much a study of the train or of the trek, but of a religious exodus of one of the 19th century's most persecuted and despised groups of religionists—the Latter-day Saints—who were bound neither for Oregon nor for California but either for survival or extinction. This was not just another march westward “across the wide Missouri” in fulfillment of America's Manifest Destiny; rather, it was a destiny in motion yet to be manifest, for it was not at all certain that this enterprise of Joseph Smith, Jr.—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—would ever survive to live a new day. The story of the Mormon exodus is that of a religion in torment, desperately seeking to save itself from persecution, to rid itself of its own detractors and obstructionists, and to find itself in some unknown valley, “far away in the west.” It was Mormonism in the raw and on the move—forging a new identity while seeking a safe refuge in the tops of “the everlasting hills” (xiv).

Bennett has combed an exhaustive number of primary sources for descriptive and often poignant quotations from those who traveled the trail. With these nuggets of wisdom, hope, frustration, fear, even a little pettiness here and there, Bennett ably humanizes people who are often lost in Sunday school glorification and conveys the hope, pain, and uncertainty of an exodus of biblical proportions.

In addition Bennett has benefitted from numerous secondary sources that enable him to move beyond narrative to scholarly contextualizing and analysis, which add to the reader's understanding of this pivotal period in LDS history. He provides new insight into James J. Strang's role as Brigham Young's rival, into the Quorum of the Twelve's claim to authority, and concerning the great uncertainty of the move west. He portrays Strang and his rival religious movement as a threat to Young and Young's associates which “showed initial, surprising strength and worrisome appeal” to a church which “lay strewn and uprooted across the plains” (361). Strang offered something the LDS church would lack until after the trek to the Great Basin—a “prophet leader.” To followers of the martyred Joseph Smith uncomfortable with Young's leadership and wavering and fearful of the unknown, Strang, with his claim to a prophetic calling, seemed an attractive successor.

Bennett also gives a compelling account of the uncertainty which the Saints faced in their quest for a new home. Indeed, the advance company's