

## 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

trek was based upon faith and a hope for temporal as well as spiritual salvation. The venture could lead to success and glory or to failure and destruction of the LDS Church. The great Mormon exodus was a work in progress with both forward and backward steps. Ultimately, it achieved perhaps even greater success than Young and the original pioneer party foresaw. Between 1849 and the arrival of the railroad in 1869, approximately 60,000 people crossed the plains to establish a new home in the tops of the mountains—unarguably a triumph in migration unequalled in American history.

Mixing strong faith and good schol-

arship, Richard Bennett has created a work that leaves the reader with a greater understanding of and appreciation for the trek across the plains and settlement in the Great Basin. Among avid Civil War buffs, the question is often asked, "Do you hear the guns?" This is a way of expressing their love of this history and their enthusiasm for its powerful evocation. Perhaps one could ask those who study the Mormon Trail, "Do you hear the wagon wheels?" Until recently, I had not. But after traveling part of the trail in 1997 and then reading Bennett's excellent book, I have almost begun to hear them creak.

## A Welcome Arrival, A Promising Standard

*The Pioneer Camp of the Saints: The 1846 and 1847 Mormon Trail Journals of Thomas Bullock.* Edited by Will Bagley (Spokane, Washington: Arthur H. Clark, 1997), 393 pp. Volume 1 in the series: "Kingdom in the West: The Mormons and the American Frontier."

Reviewed by Richard E. Bennett, Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University.

THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS of the exodus from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Rocky Mountains saw the publication of several significant new works in Mormon history. Surely one of the most significant contributions of these is Will Bagley's edition of the Thomas Bullock journals of 1846 and 1847. Bagley and his publishing team are to be commended for bringing this vital and illuminating original document into public view. Whatever criticisms follow pale in importance to the

fact that Bagley has produced this valuable book. The English-born Bullock himself mars his record with small-minded complaints and petty criticism of the men around him, and his officially appointed record does not quite compare to the writings of contemporary diarists William Clayton, Orson Pratt, or Wilford Woodruff. Still, Bullock's account is a unique and wonderful addition to the literature of the Mormon trek.

The administration of the Church Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is also to be commended for the support and encouragement given this project. The publication of this original document may evidence a changing attitude, a refreshing recommitment to bringing to light important sources long neglected or forgotten in church archives. One can only hope that we will not have to wait for other anniversary celebrations to see more such publications.