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Mormon Gold: The Story of California's Mormon Argonauts J.
Kenneth Davies

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J. KENNETH DAVIES. *Mormon Gold: The Story of California's Mormon Argonauts*. Salt Lake City: Olympus Publishing Company, 1984. 429 pp. \$12.95.

Reviewed by Samuel W. Taylor, a writer who lives in Redwood City, California.

You can't tell a book by its cover, but you can judge its worth in my personal library by its position. *Mormon Gold* isn't on my coffee table, which is reserved for large and flashy works, such as a picture book of old-time auto-MO-biles, to impress guests. Nor does it rate space on the breakfront shelf, reserved for my own works. We have two bookcases in the living room, while the entry hall is lined with bookshelves containing books of author friends and titles such as *Complete Works of Shakespeare* and *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which I hope to read someday. (A friend of mine read the latter over a period of eight years in the bathroom; but we have no books there.)

Mormon Gold doesn't fit anywhere in the house. It is in my office, where I toil with two typewriters (one for spiritual material, the other for profane). All four walls have bookshelves. To gain shelf space here means a book is of permanent value, and I will tell you that the author of *Mormon Gold* has literally left no stone unturned in recounting all there is to know about Mormons and the California gold rush. The depth of his research is incredible.

And he has filled the book with nuggets:

Following the discovery of gold by members of the Mormon Battalion, Brigham Young preached against the lure of gold and in fact prohibited all prospecting and mining by the Saints. However, he actively participated in the gold rush by calling men to go to the diggings. He dispatched Apostles Amasa Lyman and Charles C. Rich to oversee the mining and to collect tithes, while Apostle Orson Hyde made headquarters at a way station in Carson City for the same purpose.

More than \$80,000 in gold was delivered to Brigham Young's gold accounts during just three years, 1848-52, while individuals used private funds from the diggings to purchase much-needed supplies for the Utah Saints. In fact, "had it not been for these 19th Century Mormon Argonauts," the author states, "the infant Mormon economy might well have foundered" (xv).

Subsequently, President John Taylor sent George Q. Cannon to California as his personal gold missionary.

The book has two fascinating maps with place-names which indicate the prominence of the Saints at the diggings: Mormon Station,

Mormon Ravine, Mormon Bar, Mormon Island, Mormon Tavern, and the Mormon Emigration Trail, while Brown's Settlement, Salt Lake Trading Company, and Rhodes's Diggings were operated by Saints.

Similar nuggets can be gleaned from many of the twenty-five chapters.

However, no book is perfect (not even my own), and Kenneth Davies's determination to include details of absolutely every Mormon known or reputed to have gone to the diggings makes the reader wonder if this is really more than he wants to know about the subject. Here I don't fault Davies so much as his editor, who might have said, "Hey, this is good stuff, but you've got to cut it by 50,000 words." A shock for an author, I admit, for it happened to me with the manuscript of *Nightfall at Nauvoo*. But my book was improved by tightening. Nobody misses what was left out. And my good friend Frank C. Robertson, author of many western novels, told me many years ago that a book was successful more from what you leave out than put in.

An author criticizes a book from the viewpoint of how he would have done it; what I miss in *Mormon Gold* is the word-of-mouth anecdotes that add spice and zest to the story. For example, we have heard the tale of how Amasa Lyman, accompanied by the most feared gunman of the frontier, Porter Rockwell, called at Sam Brannan's saloon in Sacramento to collect tithing from Sam's fabulously profitable operations and also to recover the gold which Brannan had levied against LDS miners as tithes. When Brannan flatly refused to surrender a single ounce of dust, Rockwell produced a hogleg as persuader. "Sam, we come for the Lord's money."

Looking at the sawed-off barrel of the pistol held by a zealot who freely admitted to killing more than a hundred men ("But nobody who didn't deserve it"), Sam showed the stuff he was made of.

"Tell you what, Port," Brannan said, without turning a hair. "I'll give you the Lord's money if you'll give me a receipt signed by the Lord."

Boggled, Rockwell allowed Lyman to lead him away.

In *Mormon Gold* this choice anecdote is given two lines, then rejected because the author couldn't find any written record of it in a journal, letter, or other primary source. Well, okay; but if we don't accept stories based on oral legends we'll have to reject some important works, one being the New Testament. In my own research, I've found that verbal anecdotes from several sources will vary in exact wording and minor detail, but agree on basic truth.

Another anecdote I missed is Parley Pratt's malediction of Sam Brannan, who became California's first millionaire from the gold rush.

Parley found his missionary labors in San Francisco hampered by dire poverty. He and two wives lived in a hovel on Pacific Street, sometimes going hungry. Parley Pratt and Sam Brannan had been friends years previously and were associates in publishing *The Prophet* in New York, before Brannan sailed with a shipload of Saints in the *Brooklyn* to San Francisco Bay. Brannan's mother-in-law, Fanny Corwin, attended church services which Parley held, and Parley suggested to her that his old friend and fellow Saint might contribute a few dollars to assist the mission.

When Fanny relayed this to Brannan, Sam retorted, "You can tell Parley Pratt that if he needs money he can come to me and ask for it."

Fanny relayed this message to Parley at next Sunday's services. "Sister Corwin, I am not a beggar," he stated. "And you may tell Sam Brannan that he may be a Midas now, but the day will come when he will want for a dime to buy a loaf of bread." And this proved an accurate prediction.

But enough of carping criticism. *Mormon Gold's* solid scholarship has won a favored position in my library, and for scholars, students, history buffs, western fans, trivia freaks, the Salt Lake samizdat coterie, and members of the far-flung Taylor Spy Network, I recommend it.