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Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847-1869 Eugene Campbell

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EUGENE CAMPBELL. *Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847–1869*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988. ix; 347 pp. \$20.95.

Reviewed by Ronald W. Walker, an associate professor of Church history and senior research associate, Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History at Brigham Young University.

I liked Eugene Campbell. I found him genial and very much a gentleman, honest in his opinions yet seasoned with an occasional salty iconoclasm that probably owed something to his Scottish forebears. And “Cam” loved his Mormon history, perhaps more than he himself knew or understood. *Establishing Zion*, his last book, carries much of his personality. It is devoted to the first two decades of the Mormon hegira in the West, 1847–69, when the familiar stories and symbols of Mormonism were forged. But Campbell, in death as in life, is not content to sing the traditional saga. Panorama, drama, and certainty, the stuff of old-line history, are replaced by the materials of modern matter-of-fact history, human complexity and errancy. He adopts a credo early on. “I will never,” he approvingly quotes a friend in the early pages, “knowingly teach my students something they will have to ‘unlearn’ later on” (ix). *Establishing Zion* clearly is meant to set the record straight, at least as Campbell understood it.

There are two main themes: colonization and confrontation. Campbell wants to tell how the Mormon expansion worked within its geography, how the settlers interacted with their Indian neighbors, and how the Saints got on with those imported federal officials who, at least from the pioneers’ view, proved so troublesome to their colony. Make no mistake. These categories are quite traditional, whatever the book’s claims to “new approaches.” Campbell takes the familiar topics that have long dominated Utah history and tells them in his own way. In the process, there is a strong reliance on the findings and language (but not necessarily the conclusions) of previous writers, particularly Leonard Arrington’s pathbreaking work.

Other topics, some of them equally important and mainline, receive less attention. Campbell deals only in passing with emigration, Mormon proselyting, and social and cultural developments. Newer historical topics are also put at arm’s length: community study, demography, feminism, race, ritual, and folklore. Even allowing an author’s right to choose his own terrain, Campbell’s approach leaves open the question of proper emphasis, not to mention freshness.

One figure dominates almost to the exclusion of others. Brigham Young is everywhere, much as he was in early Utah. Campbell works with yeoman effort to present him in a balanced way. But the figure of the pioneer prophet proves elusive. Conceding that the Brigham Young enigma may forever be a matter of personal judgment, let me at least express my view. There was a warmth and spiritual dimension to the man that lies beyond Campbell's writing.

The flavor of Campbell's views is fairly consistent. The narrative tells of pioneers who were not always pliable. Some resisted the injunctions of rebaptism or their emerging Word of Wisdom health code. Others were still more wayward, seeking the greener pastures of California and apostasy. Some contended with each other and their leaders. Even General Authorities found unanimity a challenge. While most will welcome Campbell's candor on these items, his treatment of the Mormon Indian experience is more open to challenge. Following a major interpretative school of the 1960s and 1970s, he sets aside the traditional view that the Mormons pursued a kindly and enlightened policy, leading him to conclusions that are not always consistent with his own data.

What might this book have become had Campbell lived to rework his early draft? I suspect there might have been greater story-line depth and detail, perhaps even greater balance. Certainly there would have been better documentation, which with the exception of an inadequate bibliography is wholly lacking. His posthumous editors apparently justified this lamentable omission as a lesser offence than not printing the manuscript at all. Perhaps they were right. There is much to be learned in reading Campbell. He particularly succeeds in telling the story of colonization. Most will welcome his openness and frankness. We are left to mourn his death and his unfinished scholarly labor.