



10-1-1990

The History of the Mormons in Photographs and Text: 1830 to the Present Douglas F. Tobler and Nelson B. Wadsworth

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Recommended Citation

Holzapfel, Richard Neitzel (1990) "*The History of the Mormons in Photographs and Text: 1830 to the Present* Douglas F. Tobler and Nelson B. Wadsworth," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 30 : Iss. 4 , Article 15. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol30/iss4/15>

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DOUGLAS F. TOBLER and NELSON B. WADSWORTH. *The History of the Mormons in Photographs and Text: 1830 to the Present*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. 294 pp. \$39.95.

Reviewed by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, the director of the Institute of Religion, University of California, Irvine, and T. Jeffery Cottle, an attorney in Provo, Utah.

Tobler and Wadsworth's *The History of the Mormons in Photographs and Texts: 1830 to the Present* is certainly the most important collection of historic Mormon photographs available to date. Although published in 1989, the sesquicentennial of the invention of photography, the book is essentially a translation of their 1987 volume, *Der Weg zum Licht*. We were pleased to see an English version of this book.

The book borrows heavily from an earlier work by Wadsworth, *Through Camera Eyes* (1975), the first major attempt to publish the photographic history of the Church and in many ways superior to the Tobler-Wadsworth effort, though the latter offers many more photographs. The similarities are especially notable in the chapter "Freezing Moments of Time." However, the two works do contain inconsistencies. For example, in *Through Camera Eyes* the photograph of George Edward Anderson (91) is reversed from its appearance in the *History of the Mormons* (38).

Wadsworth provided the majority of the photographs for *History of the Mormons* from his twenty years of research. Historians have only recently come to share Wadsworth's vision that photographs are historical "documents" that help illuminate the past. "My philosophy," Wadsworth writes, "has been to get them preserved and protected before someone decides to throw them away" (8). His preservation of these treasures has been invaluable.

The current book is potentially a promised valley for the historian, but it does not achieve that potential. Attempting to absorb the book's wealth of material is reminiscent of the experience of the pioneers who entered the Salt Lake Valley after the initial trailblazers: beautiful vistas are in sight with little more than a hastily cleared trail leading to them. The pioneers wanted to savor their travel into the valley, but the burdensome trail prevented them from doing so. In this book the images of the Saints are powerful. The daguerreotype of pioneer children (16) and the photograph of four generations of the F. D. Richards family (230) are compelling visual reminders of the real people of flesh and bone who are sometimes lost in the black ink of historical writing. But the flawed structure of the book—for example, inconsistencies between text and captions—and the failure to complete the adaptation from a German to an American audience presents serious impediments to enjoyment.

Minor revisions were made to the 1987 German version, but it is evident that minimal effort was given to prepare it for an American audience often more knowledgeable about Mormonism and certainly less concerned about German Mormon history and its “famous” German Mormons or German scholars. At first we were delighted that a history of the Mormons had broadened beyond the generally parochial view of the Church, but we soon discovered that this book, which includes the basic Mormon story, never gets out of the Black Forest as it moves beyond the Anglo-American story line. It ignores Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands, and South and Central America. Its Eurocentric attitude is pervasive, as shown by the phrasing of its discussion of polygamy: “Though rarely preached and never practiced in Europe” (99). The narrow German context is also seen in the comparison of Joseph Smith and the German reformer Martin Luther: “In a guileless attempt, like Luther,” Joseph Smith ventured “to answer troubling personal questions” (51). Though helpful to a German audience, the Germanic perspective may puzzle American readers, who cannot be expected to know German history very well or to translate for themselves German quotations such as those from Busch and from Meyer found in footnote 17 (292).

Inherent in any photographic history is the struggle to combine text and photographs in a way that will not lose the reader, who must move between the photographs and the written word. Leading the reader from one page of text to another when several pages of photographs divide them is difficult. Help is sometimes provided in this book. For example, the reader is informed that a quote from Brigham Young that begins on page 99 is “continued on page 105.” In other places, though, the difficulty of following textual material among the photographs is considerable. For example, the text on page 105 continues on page 112 without any indication of such a long textual gap.

The history presented in the text includes several oversimplifications and errors of fact or source checking. An example of such inaccuracy is the authors’ explanation that “John D. Lee, a leading Mormon in the area, was hanged for his part in the [Mountain Meadows] affair”(147). They cite Arrington and Bitton’s *The Mormon Experience* as their source. But Lee is not mentioned on the pages specified in the footnote, and instead of describing Lee as “hanged,” Arrington and Bitton write that “he was executed by a firing squad at the site of the massacre.”¹ Oddly, Tobler and Wadsworth relate the story correctly in a photograph caption on page 145.

While these problems may seem small, larger problems face the historian interested in using the book for research. The bibliog-

raphy and note sections are incomplete and contain inaccuracies, and there is no index. The bibliography has surprising weaknesses. For example, Wadsworth's early work is not cited. Christian Anderson's private journal, which is quoted only once (292), is cited as a source, but George Edward Anderson's journal is not cited in the bibliography. There seems to be no rhyme or reason for deciding which materials were included in the bibliography. While we realize more attention is given to reference sections in books intended for scholarly dialogue than those for a general audience, editorial consistency is helpful to any reader. The bibliographic, footnote, and index sections in Wadsworth's 1975 book are generally more complete and helpful.

The most fundamental problem with *The History of the Mormons in Photographs and Text* is that it is not a reliable source for the reader. For example, on pages 24–25 there are three photographs. The first photograph, of Mormon Apostle Erastus Snow, is identified as being located in the “LDS Church Historical Department daguerreotype collection.” For the other two photographs there is no source information provided. When the authors do include the source for the photographs, they are sometimes misleading. Is there a real difference between the “Mormon Church Historical Department” (65) and the “LDS Church Historical Department” (24)? Are the “Utah Historical Society, John F. Bennett Collection” (206) and the “Bennett Collection, Utah Historical Society” (97) the same collection? Those not already familiar with various collections will find these inconsistencies confusing.

The authors do not always identify the locations of photographs, a particularly regrettable omission in the case of George Edward Anderson, whose photographs are located in several institutions and in various private collections. The captions could include both the name of the photographer and the current location of the photograph. For example, the caption “George Beard, BYU Photo Archives” (185) contains the information necessary for a reader to locate the photograph. Thus every photograph should have been referenced at least with the location of the photograph.

Photographs of sites are sometimes misidentified. For example, in the Nauvoo photographs (91, 94–95, 113), the home labeled as John Taylor's (91) is actually Sylvester Stoddard's home, recently reconstructed in Nauvoo. The homes identified as Orson Pratt's and William Law's (112–13) are the homes of Aaron Johnson and Jonathan Wright.² Tobler and Wadsworth have simply relied on the “faith-promoting rumors” of previous publications to identify these photographs. More problematic are captions that contain historical errors. For example, a tombstone (69) identified

as that of “Don Carlos Smith, aged 14 months, died June 15, 1829,” is actually that of Alvin Smith who died in 1828. Don Carlos died in 1841.³ In addition, the dating of some of the photographs is questionable, such as the Lucian Foster photograph of Brigham Young, taken in “Nauvoo in 1843”(112). Contemporary documents, such as Joseph Smith’s diary, indicate that Foster arrived in Nauvoo on 27 April 1844. Foster’s first business advertisement appeared in the *Nauvoo Neighbor* on 14 August 1844, and other contemporary witnesses verify that Foster’s photographic work in Nauvoo did not begin before April 1844.⁴ The quality of the photographic material demands better verification.

Photographic histories bear the burden of any type of history: authors must use reliable sources and cross-check them. While Tobler and Wadsworth have provided some significant historic photographs, they sometimes leave a difficult trail for others who want to locate these valuable materials. Their work could have benefited from the careful attention to detail exemplified by Martin W. Sandler’s *American Image: Photographing One Hundred Fifty Years in the Life of a Nation*, also published in 1989. Dedicated to exploring American history through photography’s unique medium, Sandler’s book provides an excellent model for photographic histories. Especially useful is Sandler’s “Photograph Sources” section, which lists all sources in a consistent format.

Because the Tobler and Wadsworth book lacks this thoroughness, its value to the historian who is interested in using these documents is decreased. As a popular history of the Saints, *The History of the Mormons in Photographs and Text* suffers from overgeneralizations and mistakes about the past. Despite flaws both major and minor, this volume remains the single most important collection of Mormon photographs, which makes it all the more regrettable that more care was not given to the critical details necessary to make a text accessible and reliable.

NOTES

¹Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 168.

²Richard N. Holzapfel and T. Jeffery Cottle, *Old Mormon Nauvoo, 1839–1846: Historic Photographs and Guide* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book Co., 1990), 116–17, 140; Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., Land Records, Nauvoo, Illinois (photostatic copy in possession of author); LDS Historical Department, Salt Lake City.

³Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), 623; Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1984), 12–13.

⁴Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 474–75; Nelson B. Wadsworth, *Through Camera Eyes* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, [1975]), 4–8.