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John Lyon: The Life of a Pioneer Poet T. Edgar Lyon, Jr.

William G. Hartley

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T. EDGAR LYON, JR. *John Lyon: The Life of a Pioneer Poet*. Religious Studies Center Monograph Series, vol. 6. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1989. xiv; 368 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, bibliography. \$14.95.

Reviewed by William G. Hartley, assistant research professor in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History, Brigham Young University.

In this sixth volume of the BYU Religious Studies Center's Specialized Monograph Series, Ted Lyon provides a perceptive life study of his talented great-grandfather poet as well as a needed cultural history. The book is well organized, extensively researched, effectively written, handsomely packaged, and an important history/biography. What more could we ask of a book or its author?

When John Lyon (b. 1803) died in 1889 he was widely known through his work as territorial librarian, Endowment House superintendent, newspaper arts critic, and poet. The first LDS writer to publish a complete book of poetry, he reigned as Mormondom's premier male poet (counterpart to Eliza R. Snow). Seven of his poems became early LDS hymns. Because his work has since slipped into obscurity, one purpose of this history, according to the author, is to give new life to this once famous man and rescue him and his poetry from "dark anonymity" (xiii).

The author breaks John Lyon's life into six long chapters, averaging fifty pages each. Chapter 1 covers John's life from birth in Glasgow to apprentice weaver at nine and through schoolless years to adulthood—twenty-one years that made him curious, hard working, and largely self-taught. Here the author splendidly recreates the early nineteenth-century Scottish social milieu—a must-read for anyone researching ancestors of that place and time.

The second chapter, "Weaving a Tale," tells of John's moving to Kilmarnock, marrying Janet Thomson, joining an intellectual fraternity that changed his life pattern, and studying night and day to learn how to write. Here is balanced coverage of both career and family. We follow his career as a "penny-a-liner" news gatherer and correspondent for small local newspapers (71), a career which shifted him from weaving cloth to weaving tales—he became a full-time writer and part-time weaver. His local-color reports often dealt with societal reform and extolled the common laborer, as did his poetry, which contained much Scottish dialect. After affiliating with the Baptists in the 1830s, he converted to Mormonism in 1844 and locally "preach[ed] and poeticiz[ed]" (108).

Chapter 3 focuses on John's missionary labors (1849–53) soon after his wife bore their twelfth child. While he was conference

president in Worcester and then Glasgow, he walked 5400 miles, baptized at least 360 converts, kept a missionary journal for 1849, wrote 1000 letters, and penned 70 poems, of which 18 appeared in the *Millennial Star*. With mission presidency approval, he published 105 poems in the *Harp of Zion* (1853), the first recorded book of LDS poems, as a fund-raising project to benefit the Perpetual Emigrating Fund. (Of 5100 printed, fewer than 2000 sold.)

The publishing year of 1853 was also the family's emigrating year, and Chapter 4, "Our Ain Mountain Hame," gathers them to Zion and sets forth John's fine description of the *International's* voyage. Chapter 5 covers John's Utah years, 1853–1889, including his poems, newspaper reviews, other prose, Endowment House employment, plural marriage, and cultural circles.

The final chapter evaluates John's works, including Mormondom's first serialized novel. Ted Lyon notes "His poetry may not be great, but much of it is good" (310). It served to teach, persuade, warn, cheer, and uplift the nineteenth-century Saints. Like other poet converts, John forsook the poetic modes and styles of the day "in order to create uniquely LDS poetry" (293). Today his *Harp of Zion* poems seem "didactic, trite, and formally and thematically weak" (294). Most of John's poems explore, extol, and animate religious themes—fleeing Babylon, gathering to Zion, the Second Coming, assisting the poor, and praising specific leaders. Perhaps ten percent of the poems are humorous. *Songs of a Pioneer*, published posthumously, contains his Utah poetry.

A major contribution Ted Lyon makes is the ten-page list of John's poems (Appendix A) identified by opening words, date, and place of publication.

The author's sleuthing found some remarkable sources, and his pondering of the sources produced some keen insights. He analyzed John Lyon's early poems to cull autobiographical details. He found and used several good firsthand accounts that mention John, including the journals of John's friend William Gibson and of Elder Franklin D. Richards, and immigration accounts by Christopher Arthur, James Farmer, and Frederick Piercy. He also used Kilmarnock directories and parish registers, and LDS Worcester Conference, Glasgow Conference, British Mission, and Seventies records.

Some tantalizing finds surprise and reward the reader. Ted Lyon compared public versions of the *International's* voyage (in the *Millennial Star*) with John Lyon's and found the public account "eliminates most of the unpleasantries and normal problems" (176). Ted provides other tantalizing finds such as the fact that the Presbyterians in Glasgow held a monthly fast day (92) and the "paid

and lay members” of the Free Church of Scotland visited in homes, like LDS home teachers (93). In Utah, John’s seventies members and spouses (1854) held monthly fast and testimony meetings before such meetings became a general Church practice (224). The Church conducted endowments (1851) at the Council House before the Endowment House was built (221). Children were circumcised at the Endowment House when eight days old (229).

The book has a few minor problems. With only a few exceptions, the author uses the best secondary sources on the topics treated. However, he apparently did not use Paul Peterson’s study of the Mormon Reformation, Glen Humphries’s *BYU Studies* article about home missionaries, and the studies of plural marriage subsequent to Stanley Ivins’s “Notes.” The author admits that documents “are very scarce” (269) for John Lyon’s last twenty years. Five unpublished manuscripts that are not listed in the bibliography comprise the main source for Lyon’s early years. The annual city street directories, tax records, and the Eighteenth and Twentieth Ward records were not checked. The bibliography also contains a citation to “Church Records, LDS Family History Archives, Salt Lake City,” a citation too vague to be useful. Several passages contain undocumented information that is not general knowledge, for example, Glasgow having the “worst slums” in Europe (18), industrial revolution facts, a statement about posting wedding banns (63), Joseph Smith being burned in effigy in Clackmannan in 1842 (94), and a custom that fathers not baptize their children (104).

The author gives a few dubious “facts” or assumptions, such as John baptizing and, therefore, helping to convert at least 360 people (123)—he may not have converted all those people because English converts often had high officials do the baptizing rather than the missionaries who taught them. He jests that gulls did not come in 1855, but in fact they did. He says that John’s plural wife Caroline Holland was born in 1858 in Kanessville, which had already been renamed Council Bluffs by 1853.

Because I row in the family history river, I wish the author had given us a short postscript about the Lyon family after John’s death. How was his estate handled in his plural family? Did his children have and pass along any of the Scottish heritage? Did they stick with the faith of their father? And, given the scholarly careers of both John and Ted Lyon, is there not a cultural heritage coursing through the Lyons’ veins that merits mention?

This attractive book contains superb illustrations and maps. Should not the editors, however, give credits to the cartographers?

And could they not print in a back page a dust-jacket type summary about the author (because jackets disappear)?

The author concludes that “John Lyon willingly, joyously, filled his role as pioneer, pioneer prose writer, and poet” (325). I conclude that grandson Ted Lyon brilliantly filled his role as researcher, interpreter, and writer. This is an outstanding contribution to LDS history, writing, and literature, one of the best LDS nonfiction books to appear in recent times.