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My Best for the Kingdom: History and Autobiography of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman by William G. Hartley

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WILLIAM G. HARTLEY. *My Best for the Kingdom: History and Autobiography of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman*. Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1993. xiii; 511 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Michael N. Landon, Mormon Trails Association, Salt Lake City.

William Hartley originally intended to write a biography of John Lowe Butler just for the Butler family organization. At the urging of colleagues at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History, he has fortunately made available to a much broader audience his highly readable account of Butler's life. Using two versions of Butler's autobiography as core documents included in a sixty-five-page appendix, Hartley thoughtfully reconstructs Butler's life and provides fresh perspectives and new insights into a number of neglected areas of Mormon history.

John Lowe Butler, an early convert from Kentucky, figured prominently in the Gallatin voting riot, participated as a Danite in the Missouri conflict, fled with the Saints to Illinois, served two brief missions to the Sioux, and practiced polygamy beginning in Nauvoo. He became a member of the James Emmett and George Miller companies, traveled to Utah in 1852, served as a bishop of Spanish Fork during the Reformation and the Utah War, and died in 1860 at the age of fifty-two. Hartley's careful research expands on each of these experiences, using them as springboards to examine Butler's life in its broader historical context.

Organizationally, the book reads well and includes numerous illustrations and maps. An additional and helpful feature is the family genealogical information included inside the front cover. The book is well indexed and includes an extensive bibliography.

Those interested in the dynamics of the Mormon westward migration experience will find the chapters describing Butler's involvement with the James Emmett expedition and the George Miller company particularly intriguing. Hartley adds significant insight to these often misunderstood aspects of Mormon history. Emmett, supposedly acting on orders given by Joseph Smith but irritating Brigham Young and other Church leaders, led a group of Saints across Iowa and into present-day South Dakota to preach to

the Indians and to find a place of refuge. In an effort to maintain ties with the group, Brigham Young sent Butler and his family to join the expedition. Even so, Butler suffered criticism because of his association with Emmett, complaining of other Saints who “looked down upon us in Emmett’s Company” (224–25).

Hartley writes that “Emmett’s controversial venture is not unknown, but what has been written is based on limited research. A consensus among historians is that James Emmett was a ‘renegade,’ his expedition an act of disobedience, and his followers ‘misled’” (137). Finding this assessment too simplistic, Hartley devotes a full four chapters to unraveling the complexities of the Emmett venture. Based on his extensive research, Hartley paints a much more balanced picture of Emmett and the company, examining in detail the motives of those who joined his expedition. Hartley points out that the Emmett company’s rationale for entering the wilderness and many of their communal economic practices were later adopted by the main body of the Saints in their trek westward.

In two additional chapters, Hartley provides the reader with a careful examination of the George Miller company’s winter encampment among the Ponca. At the direction of Brigham Young, Miller led an advance company up the north side of the Platte River to the site of a Pawnee village raided and burned by Sioux. Ponca Indians visiting the site persuaded Miller and the company that they would be safer to travel north and winter at a Ponca village on the Niobrara River in present-day northern Nebraska.

Hartley takes exception to the long-held notion

that the Ponca decision was an act of rebellion against Church leadership and that Miller went north in order to “gratify his roving disposition.” Such judgments about Miller at the time stemmed from some Church leaders’ fears that Miller was “running wild through the Council of Emmett.” (215)

Again, Hartley’s research clarifies misunderstanding and provides a much more objective account of Miller’s activities and the decision to move to the Ponca camp.

Hartley rejects the suggestion that Emmett’s and Miller’s ultimate apostasies makes their motives in these early migration activities suspect, and he bases his reevaluation of the principle participants in these lesser-known episodes of Mormon history

on solid archival research. In each case, the impact of the events on the life of John Lowe Butler is carefully chronicled.

In addition to his efforts to bring a balanced image to the events surrounding Emmett and Miller, Hartley uses Butler's autobiography to propose a fresh perspective on the activities of the Danites in the 1838 Missouri conflict. Devoting a chapter to examining the negative image attached to the Danites—and, by extension, to the Church—he offers an explanation for their acts within the context of standard nineteenth-century war tactics. He then uses this framework in subsequent chapters to analyze John Butler's participation in pivotal Missouri events.

Hartley argues that

the secret, oath-bound, militaristic Danite activities are understandable only if it is recognized that Latter-day Saints by mid-1838 had adopted a wartime mentality. They felt they were being pushed into war, and, fearing attack, they determined to defend themselves. Most of the seemingly sinister Danite practices . . . are hardly strange if seen as military preparations for war situations. (49)

To some who are critical of Mormon policies in Missouri and elsewhere, this view may seem to be just apologia, but it will not be easily dismissed. Whether Hartley has moved the Danite debate away from polemical excess or just added fuel to the fire remains to be seen.

While sympathetic to Butler, Hartley cannot be accused of producing a hagiography. The brief five-and-a-half-page closing assessment of Butler's life seems somewhat clinical and detached, almost as if Hartley felt he had overstated Butler's considerable achievements in the main text. Also, Hartley tends to assume that the reader is familiar with LDS terminology or theology. Although he often points the reader to an endnote source for further clarification of such terms, an appendix with a small glossary could have been a partial solution to the remaining problem.

In addition to Hartley's analysis of the historical events of Butler's life, the reader is provided with a fine sense of John Lowe Butler's character and experiences. Indeed, the reader knows John Butler at the conclusion of the book, identifying with his search for spiritual meaning and his struggle against debilitating illness, anguishing over his personal and family privation and his

death from a “life worn out early” (347). Bill Hartley is to be commended for producing a history that not only adds to an understanding of important aspects of Mormon history, but also takes the reader on an emotionally satisfying journey. Getting to know John Lowe Butler is time well spent.