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We'll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846-1848
Richard E. Bennett

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Reviewed by William G. Hartley, Associate Professor of History at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at Brigham Young University.

This fascinating book is a new interpretation of a major LDS history event by a prize-winning historian. It is published by an LDS press but aimed at the serious history reader, LDS or non-LDS. The author recently joined the BYU Religious Education faculty after nearly twenty years heading the University of Manitoba’s Department of Archives and Special Collections. This book serves as a sequel to his noted Winter Quarters study, *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852: “And Should We Die.”*

Bennett’s *We’ll Find the Place* is one of a profusion of important history books generated by the Mormon pioneer sesquicentennials (1996–1997). Others include the *Iowa Mormon Trail* essays volume; edited diaries of Mary Richards, Patty Sessions, Louisa Pratt, and Thomas Bullock (1848); Carol Madsen’s edited Mormon Trail accounts in *Journey to Zion*; a *BYU Studies* anthology of articles, *Coming to Zion*; two reissues: *111 Days to Zion* and the Daughters of Utah Pioneers’ *Tales of a Triumphant People* (about settling sections of Great Salt Lake Valley); Norma Rickett’s Mormon Battalion study; and several day-by-day documentaries and outstanding photograph/art books.

Before 1996, we had 1847-Mormon-pioneer histories by Cecil McGavin, Preston Nibley, and Wallace Stegner; excellent biographies of Brigham Young by Leonard Arrington and of Heber C. Kimball by Stan Kimball; several collected and individual biographies of the 1847 participants; day-by-day chronologies; and Mormon Trail site guides. So, why another study? The dust jacket asserts that the Mormon exodus story has never been fully told—implying this book finally does it. Not true. This work is not, as Leonard Arrington writes in the foreword, “a definitive new history” (xi). Readers must read other books for “trails and details” and “chronologies and genealogies” (xiii), personal human interest stories, and 1847 pioneers’ biographies. Bennett’s focus is instead to help us see how religious belief infused the Saints’ home-seeking expedition to the unfamiliar West. He uses the participants’ views, not his own commentary, to show why the move West took place.

“While so much has been written,” Bennett explains, “the surprise is that so much of the story has never been told” (xiii). His underlying theme is that the Church was not just looking for a new home, it was in jeopardy: “The exodus of the Latter-day Saints was for the survival of the Church” (360).
Leaders and members had “no practical certainty that their journey would be successful” (359). If the search in the West failed, the Church could have broken up because the gathering was halting and disaffection was likely if uncertainties about the Church’s mission lingered (xiv).

Bennett sees seven components (360–65) as essential for the success of the exodus and the survival of the Church: (1) a mass departure westward (moving the vast majority); (2) a safe and productive place (Utah) and new sense of mission (fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy regarding the Lord’s house in the mountains); (3) a reconstruction of Church government (establishing the Twelve’s leadership and reconstituting the First Presidency); (4) an acceptance that the exodus with its Winter Quarters deaths and other hardships was a refiner’s fire and a chastening (causing no mass defections); (5) a people committed to temple covenants; (6) a printing press to publish news of the new gathering place (assuring Saints still coming that the Church was surviving); (7) a deeply believing people who were “wont to be led”—the miracle of the exodus was that so many followed their leaders out to an uncertain nowhere (xv). Discussions of these essentials comprise major segments of the book’s twelve chapters.

Because of its theses, this study cannot end like most histories do with July 1847 but must extend to October 1848. It deals with the 1846 Nauvoo departures, James J. Strang’s sheep stealing, the “Word and Will of the Lord” revelation, the 1847 Pioneer Company’s trek (selectively), the fall 1847 arrival of the big Emigrant Company, the return of Brigham Young and many original pioneers to Winter Quarters, the Saints’ second winter in Winter Quarters, the reconstitution of the First Presidency in December 1847, Kanesville’s role as a Mormon outfitting post, the financial “begging missions,” Salt Lake Valley developments until the summer harvest, and the First Presidency—led 1848 big migration to the Valley.

New insights include the Church’s precarious condition; the Saints’ discovery they were fulfilling Isaiah’s prophesy and establishing the Lord’s house in the tops of the mountains—replacing their thwarted mission to build Zion in Missouri; and the urgency Brigham faced to reestablish the First Presidency not only for effective governance but to counter rival claimants. Thus the book concludes with the climatic sustaining of the First Presidency in the October 1848 conference in Salt Lake City. Bennett has much to say about Strang’s challenge to the Twelve’s position. He shows that the “Word and Will of the Lord” was more than instruction about how to travel West; it was an investment of authority in the Twelve and a sign that the Church had a revelator like Joseph Smith had been. Bennett looks hard at the “prairie council meetings” (278 n. 61) to show why Brigham chastised the leaders of the Emigration Company. Bennett discusses how the Council of Fifty, plural marriage, the law of adoption, and rebaptisms fit into the migration mission (71, 82, 92, 242).
New for most readers is information about “begging missions”—the 100 to 125 men sent East and South in the winter of 1847–1848 to solicit donations to help the LDS refugees (300–333). Also distinctive, this book draws on records by non-LDS trail travelers.

The book’s bibliography reflects Bennett’s extensive research. He draws from little-used sources such as the voluminous Brigham Young papers and high council minutes at the LDS Church Archives and from select non-LDS sources. Overall, his research is thorough and up-to-date.

The author has a gift for insightful and readable narration. Readers should enjoy, too, his creative chapter and section titles and quotes that open each chapter. What we have is a historian sharing with us understanding and perspectives based on thorough research and thoughtful analysis.

I would end the review here, but we LDS historians are accused of being too kind when critiquing colleagues and friends, so duty compels me to identify some errors, documentation slips, overlooked sources, and omitted information.

Blacksmith Burr Frost is mistakenly called Aaron Burr (185), and Reuben Hedlock’s joint-stock scheme somehow became “Reuben and Hedlock’s” (311). In discussing the month of November 1847, the book refers to an “imminent extension of Iowa Territory” (282) and calls the log tabernacle one of the largest buildings in “Iowa Territory” (298 n. 35)—but Iowa had been a state since December 1846. Bennett refers to men who went on money missions “from the dusty plains of Iowa” (302), a description hardly suited to that great prairie region. The late Conway Sonne would wince to see the twenty-six trans-Atlantic sailing ships Saints used between 1849 and 1852 referred to as “schooners” (313), because none were. That Emma Smith “would not believe her husband ever practiced” plural marriage (321) conflicts with what Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery show in their Emma biography (292). Sam Brannan did not pass through the Great Salt Lake Valley (194) on his journey from the Sierras via Fort Hall to the Pioneer Company, so he could not have already “compared the arid shores of the Salt Lake” with California, as the book states (194).

We lack and need documentation for several statements: that the Saints used Murphy wagons (51); that July 15 was “their intended date of arrival” (179); that most of the men had been told to keep a written record of their journey (257); and that two to three thousand Saints living around Nauvoo never made it across the Mississippi (317).

A major flaw for me is that key player Brigham Young is assumed but never portrayed. We receive no analysis of Brigham’s personality or prior experience relevant to this leadership story, including his directorship of the Twelve during their 1830s quorum missions and his warm-up role at people moving—leading Saints from Missouri in 1838–39. Relatedly, it
needs to be told that the Nauvoo Covenant to help the poor move West was a repeat of the covenant Saints took before fleeing from Missouri, with Brigham’s guidance.

Bennett chooses to treat lightly trail routes and sites, preferring to steer “trail aficionados” (384) to Stan Kimball’s trail guides. Unfortunately, this book contains only a Salt Lake City plat map (239) and a blurry image of S. Augustus Mitchell’s 1846 map of territory west of the Mississippi (96–97). Readers deserve at least one good reference map showing trail routes and sites and such places mentioned in the narration as Garden Grove, Mt. Pis-gah, Miller’s Hollow, Kanesville, St. Joseph, St. Louis, Winter Quarters, Ponca, and Ft. Kearny (old and new).

We’ll Find the Place contains samples of what non-LDS people in the 1840s read about the West, but slights what Nauvoo-area Saints read about it in Nauvoo and St. Louis papers. Although Anson Call’s recording of the 1843 Rocky Mountain prophecy is debated, it is so well known that any review of westward thinking should deal with it. Similarly, in light of the book’s “high risk” theme, why is Jim Bridger’s legendary questioning if corn could grow in the Salt Lake Valley only hinted at in the narration but dealt with directly in an endnote (202 n. 77)? Newel Knight’s journal shows that Bishop George Miller’s decision to move the advance company to Ponca lands was not an act of rebellion but a pragmatic solution approved by a twelve-man high council that included spokesmen for Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball. The discussion of Indian politics at Pawnee village sites (124) deserves a paragraph explaining what the Miller/Young/Kimball companies learned while there one year earlier.

In the safe and successful wagon companies of 1847 and 1848, children felt excitement and adventure, the book says, but not the adults—they were weighed down with responsibilities and heartaches (263–65). Why overemphasize the hardships? We need not think that our Mormon Trail pioneers must be portrayed as frowny-faced “woe is me” people. They were not!

I hasten to assert that the above “imperfections,” with a few exceptions, are minor brushstroke slips on a vast panorama that is extremely well painted. This important book, containing as it does thorough research, insightful interpretations, skillful writing, and mastery of the vital role religious belief played in that epic migration, should become a standard work in LDS history, qualified to stand beside Bennett’s Winter Quarters masterpiece.