Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847-1896 David L. Bigler

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Reviewed by Paul H. Peterson

It can never be said that Will Bagley, editor of a distinguished series on the American West, and David L. Bigler, author of *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847–1896*, are guilty of false advertising. In Bagley’s preface to *Forgotten Kingdom*, he tells us (or warns us—in the case of Latter-day Saint readers) that Bigler is writing from an American rather than an LDS perspective. Bagley claims that the book is original (likely referring to some of Bigler’s eye-popping conclusions) and that it will challenge the cherished beliefs of some readers (likely referring to LDS readers).

In his introduction, Bigler further elaborates on these claims. Unfairly, he implies that Mormons in the West have ended up being the proverbial quintessential Americans, while the true patriots, the gentile appointees and their friends, who busted their backsides to inculcate American principles in a people hopelessly mired in an anti-Union theocracy, have largely been forgotten. In rectifying this injustice, Bigler hopes to help Gentiles who have recently moved to Mormon country better understand how Latter-day Saints, admittedly decent and hardworking but sometimes suspicious and exclusive, came to be what they are. Claiming more than he should, Bigler notes that his is the only volume around “that looks at the theocratic period . . . as a whole in such a balanced way that a newcomer from Peoria . . . might better understand the state [of Utah] and how it became the way it is” (18).

Bigler carries out his task with efficiency. Assuming a chronological, confrontational mode (potentially an appropriate approach given the tension of the era), Bigler outlines how Mormons and Gentiles in the late nineteenth century went head to head on political control, on polygamy, on attitudes and practices concerning Native Americans, on education, and on economic matters. Interspersed along the way are occasional chapters that do not emphasize confrontation but rather outline particulars of controversial events or periods in the Mormon past, such as the handcart disasters, the Mormon Reformation, and the Mountain Meadows massacre. In these chapters, Bigler focuses on the blind faith, zealotry, and penchant for violence among some Church members that ultimately led to both hardship and bloodshed.

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Consistent with prefatory and introductory promises, Gentiles fare well in this book. While Bigler admits that some of these Gentiles were more clumsy than others, he claims all of them were guided by pure intentions. Patrick Conner, for example, despite his questionable actions in the Bear River Massacre, comes off as a knight in shining armor, and even Judge McKeans, for all of his runaway zealotry, is shown as having more good moments than bad ones.

Bigler is the past president of the Oregon-California Trails Association and a former member of the Utah Board of State History. His immersion in things western and Mormon is apparent in every chapter. He has clearly paid his dues to master the secondary literature of the period and in some cases has done much spadework in primary sources. His familiarity with relevant government documents is obvious.

Bigler also writes with verve and skill. His is a lively and smart prose. And his knowledge of trails and terrain is evident. Battles, encampments, and journeys—all are wonderfully contextualized in a geographical setting that only one who is intimately acquainted with the land could provide. I enjoyed reading the book.

But I do hope Bigler’s book is not the only volume readers peruse, and I hope they bear in mind that all historians have certain angles of vision and that Bigler’s angle of vision is not the only one in town. Among other volumes I hope they look at are Leonard Arrington’s biography of Brigham Young and Davis Bitton’s recent release on George Q. Cannon. I hope they read another survey on the history of Utah such as Thomas Alexander’s Utah, the Right Place or Dean May’s Utah: A People’s History, which are also good sources that appeal to a broad audience. And all four of these works, from my perspective, capture the salient truth that, although Gentiles and Mormons were undeniably headed on a collision course that could end only with Mormon accommodation, many in both groups were well intentioned.

I readily concede that it would have been challenging to be a Gentile in territorial Utah. I can understand how some Gentiles had difficulty with marked ballots, the sweeping powers of Mormon-dominated probate courts, or Brigham Young’s economic boycott of gentile merchants. I, too, would have been chagrined when justice was not meted out appropriate to certain acts of violence. And I suppose I could have been exasperated at how Mormons for years were able to frustrate federal laws forbidding the practicing of plural marriage.

Bigler clearly understands such challenges and deftly conveys them to his readers. And perhaps, as Bigler maintains, some gentile appointees have not received their just dues for trying to do their job. So far, well and good. But in his effort to honor the forgotten patriots, the character and the motives of the Latter-day Saints and especially of their leaders (hopeful of
escaping harassment and anxious to create Zion in an isolated mountain fortress that Gentiles happened upon sooner than any of them expected) take an unjustifiable drubbing.

This lack of balance, in my opinion, is due to Bigler’s methodology. My overriding reservation with his methodology is at once both a compliment and a concern. Not only is Bigler a knowledgeable historian, he is also a fine thinker who can sometimes see relationships among seemingly disparate events. Sometimes a person’s strength, however, if carried to an extreme, can become a liability, especially if one is assuming a worst-case scenario. In several instances, Bigler goes beyond his evidence in either forming conclusions or engaging in unnecessary innuendos. Let me give some examples.

Bigler is critical of Brigham Young’s professed Indian policy of “feed rather than fight,” concluding that this rubric often translated or transmuted into the sentiment that the natives must either cooperate or be exterminated (65). Certainly there were tragic occasions where Native Americans and Latter-day Saints fought and killed each other. But gentile Indian policy was hardly any more successful. By providing so little comparative information, Bigler leaves readers with the impression that Brigham Young’s policy was singularly distinguished by a lack of both sense and sensitivity. Contrary to what most readers will probably conclude, the consensus among historians is that Mormons pursued a more benevolent policy than many other Whites. By settling on land claimed or frequented by Native Americans, both the Gentiles and the Saints encountered inevitable conflict.

The author also levels some real stingers at Brigham Young. For one, Bigler charges that, in order to fulfill a prophecy made ten years earlier, Brigham staged Rockwell’s dramatic arrival on July 24, 1857, and subsequent announcement about a coming army (145). A more serious charge has to do with Bigler’s claim that recently surfaced information indicates that Brigham Young played a more than indirect role at Mountain Meadows by telling Dimick Huntington to inform certain tribal leaders that the cattle of the emigrant train were theirs for the taking (167–68). I feel the evidence presented does not sustain either conclusion.

Bigler also throws out occasional unwarranted “teasers,” suggesting that while evidence is scanty Mormon influence could well have been a factor in certain inglorious happenings. For example, in his last chapter, he subtly implies to readers that the “protective” ghost shirts worn by Native Americans during the Ghost Dance Millennial movement may have Mormon roots (345). This notion, of course, has circulated for many years but was effectively challenged by historian Lawrence Coates (whom Bigler cites on page 345) fifteen years ago. In view of such tenuous evidence (aside from its questionable relevance), one wonders why Bigler chose to include a
section called "The Last Fight of the Sioux" in a chapter ostensibly dealing with the Americanization of Utah. Bigler concludes this particular section with the plaintive declaration of a wounded Sioux woman that her bulletproof ghost shirt did not really work. Interesting? Yes. Tragic? Of course. But what is the point of it all?

I conclude on a lighter note. In his informative epilogue, Bigler notes that Mormon exclusiveness continues to this day. He adds that many Church members are blissfully ignorant of this reality. Hopefully neither exclusivity nor ignorance will prove persistent. Bigler graciously concedes that present-day Church members have inherited a number of ideals from their forebears that are laudatory, such as honesty, thrift, and self-reliance. But one carry-over quality he does not mention is devotion to an organization that not only shapes one's life for good (my bias as a Mormon) but exacts a huge commitment in time. One can only hope that in future years more Latter-day Saints, amid their heavy family responsibilities and Church-related activities, will make the time to develop meaningful relationships with people of all persuasions. Likewise, one hopes that people of Bigler's persuasion will make the effort to see both sides of the fence with equanimity. Walls of misunderstanding, suspicion, and exclusivity have stood long enough.

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