



9-1-2006

Hyrum Smith: A Life of Integrity by Jeffrey S. O'Driscoll

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Recommended Citation

Bennett, C. Gary (2006) "*Hyrum Smith: A Life of Integrity* by Jeffrey S. O'Driscoll," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 45 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol45/iss3/11>

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Jeffrey S. O'Driscoll. *Hyrum Smith: A Life of Integrity*.

Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003

Reviewed by C. Gary Bennett

There can be no question that Hyrum Smith is on the “short list” of the most influential leaders in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As Joseph Smith’s faithful elder brother, Associate President of the Church, Patriarch, Apostle, and co-martyr; as the progenitor of two future Church Presidents, Church Patriarchs, Apostles, other Church leaders, and literally thousands of posterity, his life story deserves a better telling than heretofore. Jeffrey O’Driscoll has taken a significant step forward in filling this need.

I found this biography to be thorough and the research, with heavy emphasis placed on primary sources, to be impressive. It became clear that the author had access to both the Church resources and family resources including Hyrum’s journals, letters, and other related materials (“Bibliography,” 405–24). Content that readers might find especially interesting includes Hyrum as one of the eight special witnesses of the Book of Mormon (295); the early experience of Hyrum as a Mason (261–63); the blessing at the time he was called into the presidency of the High Priesthood in 1835, that “if it please thee, and thou desirest thou shalt have the power voluntarily to lay down thy life to glorify God” (112); and the fact that it was Hyrum, not Joseph, who asked John Taylor to sing “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief” (362 n. 91). It is clear, too, that as the title of the book declares, O’Driscoll most desires to show Hyrum as a man of integrity. Of course, the scriptural witness of Hyrum’s integrity (D&C 124:15) and Joseph’s own affirmation of it (10–11) are fundamental support for O’Driscoll’s title, but the book also shows that the word of friends and even enemies confirm the biography’s central thesis. The illustrations, maps, and brief chronology of Hyrum’s life in the appendix are helpful in offering a clearer view of him and his work. In his acknowledgments the author states, “Hyrum deserves better than the aggregate of my researching and writing skills” and that it

would be “naïve to consider” this biography as “definitive” (xix). Yet there is much of value here.

The reader comes away from this work knowing much *about* Hyrum but still not really *knowing* the man. Great biography is not merely telling; it must get inside the mind and the heart. This may not have been fully possible because, as O’Driscoll admits, Hyrum’s journals are “frustratingly brief” (61). Joseph Smith also articulated a major challenge in early LDS historiography and biography:

Since I have been engaged in laying the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I have been prevented in various ways from continuing my journal and history in a manner satisfactory to myself or in justice to the cause. Long imprisonments, vexatious and long-continued law-suits, the treachery of some of my clerks, the death of others, and the poverty of myself and brethren from continued plunder and driving, have prevented my handing down to posterity a connected memorandum of events desirable to all lovers of truth; yet I have continued to keep up a journal in the best manner my circumstances would allow.¹

With all that is said in this book, some significant things remained unsaid. O’Driscoll says little about Hyrum and the succession question. He touches only briefly upon Hyrum’s struggle over plural marriage. He reveals little of Hyrum as a husband or father. Another appendix on Hyrum’s pedigree and posterity would have been helpful.

These missing elements notwithstanding, this book will be a valuable, productive, and enlightening experience for those wishing to know more about Hyrum Smith.

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1. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:470.