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# Before Zion: An Account of the Seventh Handcart Company, by Allen C. Christensen

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*Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, edited by John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Provo, Utah: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006)

This volume, edited by John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris, is a collection of seventeen essays originally published in *BYU Studies*, *FARMS Review*, and other publications. The volume was published in commemoration of Oliver Cowdery's two-hundredth birthday. The contributing scholars seek to detail the highs and lows of one of Mormonism's most important early leaders. Editors Welch and Morris have compiled a well-rounded biography of the man and his life.

Cowdery's many contributions to the Restoration are the focal point of this compilation. Richard Lloyd Anderson begins with a brief overview of Cowdery's life; Larry E. Morris covers Cowdery's Vermont years; John W. Welch and Royal Skousen each treat aspects of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and Brian Q. Cannon and others cover the restoration of the priesthood. This volume reminds readers how integral Cowdery was to the major events of the Restoration. As Joseph Smith's scribe and assistant, Cowdery was present when the Prophet received many of the great early revelations. He also received both the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods with Joseph, and transcribed nearly the whole Book of Mormon, as dictated by the Prophet. Along with Martin Harris and David Whitmer, Cowdery was privileged to view the gold plates and declare his witness of the record's truthfulness. Cowdery was later called to be one of the Church's first missionaries.

Although some controversy surrounds Cowdery's life and character, this compilation does not shy away from the debate. Larry E. Morris's essay

on the private character of Cowdery gives well-researched insight into the controversy. By relying on contemporary journals and correspondence, several of the authors, along with Morris, dispel many of the rumors surrounding Cowdery's past.

The volume also explores Cowdery's falling away from the Church. With the help of correspondence between Cowdery and his brother-in-law Phineas Young, the authors confirm that although Cowdery left the Church, he never denied his testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Along with Cowdery's much-discussed falling away, Scott H. Faulring and others explore a lesser-known episode in Cowdery's life, but one that deserves greater attention—his reconciliation with the Church.

*Oliver Cowdery* is an important work for any student of early Mormon history. The insights of the contributors, along with the plain evidence into the actual events of his life, make this work one of the most informative accounts on the life and deeds of Oliver Cowdery.

—Reid L. Neilson and Paul Olson

*Before Zion: An Account of the Seventh Handcart Company*, by Allen C. Christensen (Springville, Utah: Council Press, 2004)

This book is Dr. Allen C. Christensen's contribution to the various histories of the ten handcart companies. He is the director of the Benson Agriculture and Food Institute at Brigham Young University and a descendant of some of the members of the Seventh Handcart Company.

The author points out in the first few sentences of the introduction that the Seventh Handcart Company is not as well known as other handcart companies, in part because "there is a paucity of written documentation on

their journey” (3). However, he does tell their story competently, and he uses some sources that are not generally available.

The book begins with a substantial amount of background information. The specific story of the company does not begin until page 68. Up to that point in the narrative, the author gives a general overview of the conditions in Europe and Scandinavia as the gospel was being spread prior to the company’s departure. The overview includes comments regarding members of the Seventh Company along with many other associated individuals. This initial background information is thorough and well footnoted.

The book presents the handcart trek in chronological order, making it is easy to follow the story of the Saints’ challenges as they struggled across the country. However, the book does contain some digressive supplemental material. For example, the author includes the story of Mark B. Garff’s work as a mission president in Europe at the start of World War II. President Garff’s story is fascinating but not relevant to the handcart history and takes up multiple pages. Likewise, the last chapter of the book is supplemental material regarding the Utah War that does not touch on the Seventh Company’s trek.

Still, scholars who are interested in the many handcart companies (most of which were quite safe and successful), as well as readers from the large body of descendants of those in the Seventh Handcart Company, will find this background information and ensuing history satisfying.

—Paul D. Lyman

*Forty Ways to Look at Brigham Young: A New Approach to a Remarkable Man*, by Chad M. Orton and William W. Slaughter (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008)

Chad M. Orton, a Church archivist, and William W. Slaughter, a Church photo historian and senior reference specialist, have both published extensively, their past works including *Joseph Smith’s America* (Orton) and *Trail of Hope: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Slaughter). In their new biography, they challenge the slanderous news articles targeted at Brigham Young in his day and seek to illuminate the true character of the man who “often remains hidden in the shadows of the hats” he wore, such as prophet, family patriarch, and colonizer (xiii).

Rather than being organized chronologically, the book is divided into forty chapters that focus on Brigham Young’s traits and accomplishments, painting him as a man of faith, tenacity, vision, and compassion—despite his being “a hard-spoken New Yorker” (150). Chapters like “Brigham as Renaissance Man” highlight his extraordinary talent, while other chapters like “Trust and Loyalty: Two Strengths and a Weakness” reveal his human capacity to falter. Some chapters provide historical context, such as a life chronology, a list of contemporary world and Church leaders, and a list of his wives, his marriage dates, his children, and family birthdates.

The authors do not skim over the libel directed at Brigham Young in a chapter called “America’s Bogeyman,” and at the book’s conclusion, the authors include both positive and negative notices written at his death. The *New York Tribune* editorialized: “Even his dupes will find out some day that their prophet was really nothing, but a cunning, clever old rascal, . . . and they will wonder how he could have left them without so much as a parting wink, to show that he had enjoyed the joke” (264).