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The Field Is White: Harvest in the Three Counties of England

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From the outset, authors Carol Wilkinson and Cynthia Doxey Green are clear regarding the purpose of this book: to respond to the request of a member of the Cheltenham stake presidency in Great Britain to find out “more about the missionary work of Wilford Woodruff in the early 1840s” and to “provide clarification of the number of baptisms that took place during this time period” in the Three Counties area (comprising Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, and Worcestershire Counties) in England (ix). The authors readily admit that while much has been said and written regarding Elder Woodruff’s contributions as an apostle-missionary in this area, “some people have questioned the actual number of baptisms” (ix).

At first glance, the scope of this book appears to be too narrow to warrant the interest of the scholar whose research focus is nineteenth-century British Church history and/or missiology, much less the layperson with similar interests. However, my assessment is this: what makes this volume an invaluable contribution to the corpus of scholarly literature on LDS Church history and missiology in general, and to scholarship on nineteenth-century Great Britain specifically, is the authors’ unparalleled research methodology, which they describe and analyze in detail. Now, such a narrowly focused study would have to be distinctively noteworthy to warrant an entire volume (much less a book review), but Wilkinson and Green have delivered such a gift—at least to the scholarly community. I, therefore, begin with the assertion that while the authors adequately respond to the query regarding the actual number of baptisms in the Three Counties area during Wilford Woodruff’s mission to Great Britain, the central focus and theme of this work leans more toward their research methodology and less toward the history. This book may, therefore, possess less appeal for the casual reader...
or lay historian. Having said that, I maintain that because of the book’s strength in its description and analysis of its research methodology, it is an important addition to the body of literature.

Wilkinson and Green’s explanation of how they gathered their data into two different databases is thorough enough that interested scholars or historians could easily duplicate the process in future studies. Essentially, the authors acquired details such as the name, gender, age, and baptismal date of converts in the Three Counties area from two different source categories: First, they gathered data from the extensive personal journals of Wilford Woodruff and the journals of other members and missionaries that lived and served in this area. They titled this collection of information “journal database.” To verify the convert baptisms in the area, the authors additionally gathered similar information from extant (although incomplete) Church records—primarily branch records—as well as other online sources such as the Mormon Migration Index, Mormon Pioneer Overland Trails, etc. This collection is entitled their “branch database.” Their data gathering and analysis are singularly and exceptionally thorough—leaving no stone unturned. Chapters 5, 6, and the appendix comprise clear and detailed descriptions of the information contained in these databases, how that information was obtained and from which sources, and the relationship between the two distinct databases. Having been absorbed in similar research pursuits myself over the last fifteen years, I am not only convinced their research methods are sound, but I also believe they are superior to those in any other study I have encountered to this point and should be emulated by scholars engaged in similar studies in the future. In other words, Wilkinson and Green set the standard for future missiological or historical studies of this kind.

The weaknesses of this volume are twofold. Chapters 1 and 2 succinctly summarize the early history of LDS faith, segueing into the genesis of missionary work and the organization of the Church in England, first in Lancashire in 1837 and later in the Three Counties area in the early 1840s. The first weakness of this section is that it offers little, if any, new information on this overly researched aspect of LDS Church and mission history. Even chapter 3, “Wilford Woodruff’s Mission to the Three Counties,” follows the same outline and contains much of the same information as Green’s own prior publication, “Wilford Woodruff: Missionary in Herefordshire,” including the references to other scholars’ work in the footnotes.

The second weakness, in my opinion, is this: In chapter 4 and more particularly in chapter 5—“The Missionaries and Their Labors” and “The Harvest of Converts,” respectively—it is apparent from the authors’ descriptions of the massive amount of data they collected and analyzed that they have access to many primary-source accounts of numerous missionaries and converts, and I continually found myself desiring that they had included more of that material. In fact, doing so would have helped solve what I consider the book’s first weakness; by providing historical details of interest from heretofore unpublished accounts, the authors would have added color and depth to the study. Instead, I was met with phrases like “Diaries and journals are available for several of these local missionaries, including . . . ,” followed by the names of only four men and examples from only two of their journals (67–68). Another paragraph that left me hanging began, “Many of the early missionaries from the Three Counties had been baptized only days or weeks before they went out to preach the gospel. Many were experienced preachers for the United Brethren, but they were still young in their understanding of the restored gospel” (70). While this information seems to come from the diaries and journals Wilkinson and Green discovered, no references to those primary sources are included or noted. In the authors’ defense, inclusion of those kind of primary-source accounts is beyond the stated scope of this book, which is to simply provide an accurate number of convert baptisms in the Three Counties during the missionary service of Wilford Woodruff. And the volume is not completely bereft of examples from primary sources; in fact, there are many, but the social historian in me yearned for more, especially considering the text’s many allusions to the large volume of primary source material the authors apparently had in their possession.

An additional contribution of this work that I believe will have a lasting impact is Wilkinson and Green’s identification and photographs of Church historic sites in the Three Counties area. Using public records and information they had gathered in their databases, the authors were able to locate and photograph many buildings and other sites where Wilford Woodruff and his converts-turned-missionaries preached and met in the early 1840s. High-quality images of these several locations are dispersed throughout the volume and, for those interested in the beginnings of the Church in this area, are worth the purchase price alone. Most of these sites were heretofore unknown or yet undiscovered.

locations of extreme significance to the history of the LDS Church and its missionary labors in this area, thus making these findings an original and significant contribution to the corpus of scholarly literature of this time and place.

Ronald E. Bartholomew received a BA and MA from BYU and a PhD in sociology of education from the University of Buckingham in London, England. He has published scholarly articles in academic journals in the United States and Europe and has written several chapters in various published volumes. His research interests include nineteenth-century missionary work in Victorian England (nonurban areas) as well as assorted topics in ancient scripture and Church history. As a missiologist, he was instrumental in changing the LDS Church’s international classification from “Marginal Christians” to the more accepted “Independent Christians,” and he was the first Mormon scholar to present his research at the Ecumenical American Society of Missiologists Conference in 2014 and, with a group of colleagues, at the International Association for Mission Studies Conference in Seoul Korea in 2016.