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Faithful and Fearless: Major Howard Egan, Early Mormonism and the Pioneering of the American West

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*Faithful and Fearless: Major Howard Egan,
Early Mormonism and the Pioneering of the American West*
By William G. Hartley

Holladay, Utah: Howard Egan Foundation;
Provo, Utah: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 2017

Reviewed by Brett D. Dowdle

As he did with his earlier biographies—*My Best for the Kingdom: History and Autobiography of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman* and *Stand by My Servant Joseph: The Story of the Joseph Knight Family and the Restoration*—the late William G. Hartley reminds us of the value and importance of studying the lives of ordinary Latter-day Saints without ecclesiastical position in *Faithful and Fearless: Major Howard Egan, Early Mormonism and the Pioneering of the American West*. Similar to the stories of both Butler and the Knight family, Hartley shows that, when examined closely, Egan's life was far from ordinary.

Born an Irish Catholic and later joining the Latter-day Saint faith, Egan eventually witnessed and recorded many of the most important events of early Church history and the history of the American West, leaving a record that detailed and bridged these two contiguous but different worlds. As a Latter-day Saint from 1842 until the time of his death, Egan participated in the events of Nauvoo, Illinois; the pioneer trek west; and the Latter-day Saint settlement of Utah. In many ways, the Irishman's life is also a portrait of the American westward experience: he participated in pioneering, gold mining, farming and ranching, frontier violence, and even vigilante justice. To explain both the history of the Latter-day Saints and the American West, Hartley draws upon a rich array of source materials, including Egan's illustrative diaries.

Among Hartley's important contributions to the field of Latter-day Saint biography is his example of combining both genealogical and historical research to illuminate the lives of individuals like Howard Egan. Nowhere is this more evident than in the early chapters of this biography. Despite Egan's mostly undocumented early years, Hartley draws upon both genealogical sources and the broader historical context to provide insights into the subject's life. The biography thus helps readers

understand what life might have been like for Egan as a Catholic immigrant in the Americas, as an orphan in his teens, and as a sailor on merchant vessels in the Atlantic. Although at times this means the narrative leaves Egan or speculates on his activities, it prevents the narrative from beginning with Egan's conversion in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1842, when he was nearly twenty-seven years old.

Drawing upon Egan's own words throughout the book, Hartley demonstrates Egan's importance as a diarist and chronicler of the American West. Egan's diaries of the westward migration and the California Gold Rush make him an important source for understanding two of the most important events in nineteenth-century America. Unfortunately, the historical record has preserved little of the voices of those closest to Egan, meaning the narrative often lacks the voices of his wives. (Egan participated in the Latter-day Saint practice of plural marriage and had four wives.) However, Hartley attempts to compensate for this by inviting readers to consider what the feelings and opinions of the women in Egan's life—Tamson, Catherine, Nancy, and Mary Ann—might have been during key moments of their lives.

In this book, Hartley deftly deals with controversial topics such as polygamy, violence, and divorce. Although the source materials are limited, Hartley insightfully details some of the challenges that business ventures, missions, and plural marriages created for Egan's family life. But no event in Egan's biography is more challenging or significant than his murder of James Monroe and his subsequent trial. Monroe had fathered a child with Egan's first wife, Tamson, during one of Egan's prolonged absences on Church business. Hartley deftly handles Monroe's murder and Egan's subsequent trial and acquittal in two chapters, which give depth to and perspective on each of the individuals involved. Hartley neither exonerates nor entirely condemns any of those involved in the affair, demonstrating that each came from a difficult position. At the same time he does not shy away from the fact that the murder created lasting guilt and irreversible consequences for Egan's life—including all three of his plural wives divorcing him.

Perhaps more important than his analysis of the consequences for the individuals involved, Hartley uses the event to provide keen insights into the social and political milieu of early territorial Utah. The murder trial, for example, demonstrated the significant disconnect between Utah and the federal government in the early 1850s. While federal officials pressed for a conviction, Church officials defended Egan's actions, arguing he was acting in defense of his family's honor and virtue. Ultimately,

Egan was acquitted on a technicality. Although Egan's trial was largely anomalous, Hartley uses it to further our understanding of the fact that Utah was a territory torn between two sovereignties. Further, Hartley uses the episode to highlight the larger story of violence and vigilantism in the early American West.

Beyond its exploration and insights into the life of Howard Egan, *Faithful and Fearless* is a model of what can be done with the Latter-day Saint genealogical impulse. The vast collection of diaries, autobiographies, and correspondence from early Latter-day Saints provides rich opportunities to highlight the lives of those who are largely forgotten, demonstrating that their lives were far from insignificant. Furthermore, Hartley shows the value of dealing with the tragedies and problems of their lives rather than highlighting merely the best in them and ignoring the worst. This willingness illuminates the world in which they lived and helps us avoid the tendency to paint caricatures rather than accurate portraits. At the same time, Hartley refuses to allow a single portion of Egan's narrative to color the entirety of his life. The result is an impressive and substantive biography that reveals the depth and nuance of an ordinary Latter-day Saint.

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