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*Sex and Death on the Western Emigrant Trail:
The Biology of Three American Tragedies*
By Donald K. Grayson

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018

Reviewed by Melvin L. Bashore

Who would be more likely to survive in a wilderness setting, beset by starvation and extreme cold? Women or men? Single individuals or families? Would age make a difference? In *Sex and Death on the Western Emigrant Trail*, Donald Grayson looks at who died and who lived in three mid-nineteenth-century emigrant groups. An emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, Grayson began looking at patterns of death in the Donner Party, publishing his findings in 1990 and 1993.¹ Curious if those same patterns of death were manifest in another emigrant group, Grayson began looking at the 1856 Willie handcart company. Grayson acknowledges my help with his research at the Church Historical Department in the mid-1990s, and he published his findings about mortality in the Willie handcart company in the *Journal of Anthropological Research* in 1996.²

In *Sex and Death on the Western Emigrant Trail*, Grayson re-examines his earlier analyses, adds new ones, and in some instances, reaches different conclusions than his earlier studies. He also looks at death in the Martin handcart company, an entirely new analysis for him. While his earlier publications were written in technical form, in this book, the statistical analyses are woven into the fabric of the story of the tragic disasters. This makes *Sex and Death* suitably readable for anyone curious

1. Donald K. Grayson, "Donner Party Deaths: A Demographic Assessment," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 46, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 223–42; Donald K. Grayson, "Differential Mortality and the Donner Party Disaster," *Evolutionary Anthropology* 2, no. 5 (1993): 151–59.

2. Donald K. Grayson, "Human Mortality in a Natural Disaster: The Willie Handcart Company," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 185–206.

about the differences in death and survivorship among groups entrapped in situations like those faced by the unfortunate members of the Donner Party and Willie and Martin handcart companies.

In the first introductory chapter, Grayson gives a brief overview of the contents of the book. He also addresses his use of the word *sex* in the title of the book. For many, if not most, the word *sex* implies intimacy. I admit that when first asked to write this review, I was given only the title of the book, not the author's name. I wondered why a book would seemingly focus on lovemaking and death on the trail. I'm confident that the majority of people who read the title will think similarly. So why didn't Grayson substitute the word *gender* for *sex* in his title? Grayson explains: "Gender refers to behaviors considered appropriate to males and females in a given society . . . [while] sex refers to the biological status—whether male or female—of the people involved" (4). In other words, Grayson's book title could be read as "Men and Women and Death on the Western Emigrant Trail."

The second chapter contains a general overview of those overland companies that traveled to California and Oregon before the Donner Party sallied forth in 1846. Those familiar with the history of these groups and individuals—such as the 1841 Bidwell-Bartleson party or Lansford Hastings (author of a trail guide in whose footsteps the Donner Party followed) will find Grayson's summary accounts appealing and well written. They will not be bored with their recitation. Although Grayson attests to being only an amateur historian, he writes with clarity and energy, and at times, despite the painful subject, with wit. His retelling of the history of the Donner Party paints a vivid picture of that sad situation, when in order to live, people resorted to cannibalism. Of the eighty-seven people in the party, thirty-five died after the group established its winter encampment. The characteristics of the people in the Donner Party form the heart of his analysis of who lived and died.

In chapter 3, Grayson takes a different course. He looks at what is known about human biology and why people might live or die in situations of extreme cold coupled with starvation. He draws on various scientific studies that could be used to predict who might survive—or not—in harsh, frigid conditions. What is learned is (1) the youngest and oldest have the highest mortality, (2) men have a higher mortality than women, and (3) more people survive who travel in larger groups rather than in smaller kin or family groups.

The next three chapters look at the three emigrant groups in detail to see if these biological and scientific predictors of death hold true for

the deaths that occurred in the Donner Party and the Willie and Martin handcart companies. In general, they do. Grayson shows that sex, age, and family structure all factor into who lived and died in very predictable patterns for all three emigrant groups. Readers will be fascinated by the detail with which Grayson examines every nuance of survivorship. For example, in the Donner Party, men died at almost twice the rate of women. In regard to the relationship between age and days to death (counting from the day that the first person in the company died) among men, the youngest survived the longest and the oldest died first. Grayson offers plausible explanations for all the various aspects of mortality rates.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will, of course, be most interested in Grayson's findings about the handcart companies. The composition of the handcart companies differed in significant ways from the Donner Party. While the latter group comprised single men and families, the demographics of the handcart companies were more diverse, with a surprisingly large number of elderly people and women. They were also very poor, whereas some families in the Donner Party were fairly well-off. Members of the handcart companies—both old and young, male and female—ventured forth across the plains for religious and economic reasons.

Principally because they were exposed to the cold for a longer time than the handcart groups, 46 percent of Donner Party members died. By comparison, of the 442 members of the Willie company who continued west of Florence, Nebraska, 16.1 percent died. But the death rate of men was significantly higher in the Willie company: “the ratio of male to female mortality in the Willie Company is even higher than it is in the Donner Party: 3.0” (152).

Every aspect of the demographics in the handcart companies is examined: single women, single men, single mothers with children, single fathers with children, both parents with children, parents without children, siblings, and so forth. One interesting finding is that single-mother families suffered the lowest mortality rate of any other demographic in the Willie company: only 7 percent. Why? These women traveled without more vulnerable-to-dying older men, were given the assistance of younger men who had been appointed to help them, and had fewer younger children than the traveling groups that had both a mother and a father.

All historians must struggle with the question of blame for the handcart disaster. Grayson faults Brigham Young for not owning up to being at least partially responsible for what happened but commends him for

his decisive actions in launching the rescue effort. In the main, I find Grayson's recounting of the history of the Willie and Martin companies to be fair and balanced, although some of his criticisms of Young may cause some readers to squirm.

I might quibble with one observation that Grayson made about the relative difference between energy expenditure and food supplies of the two handcart companies. He writes, "Even though the Martin Company was on its own and exposed to severe cold longer than the Willie Company, their energy expenditure during some of those days was reduced by the two extended periods they spent in camp. These occurred between October 23 and 29, while camped along the Platte River, and between November 4 and 9, while at Martin's Cove. Equally important is the fact that while Willie's group ran out of food, Martin's company did not" (184–85).

While at the Bessemer Bend camp on the Platte River (October 23–29), the Martin company held a meeting to decide what they should do with their scant remaining flour. They had enough for one day—a portion of eight ounces for adults and four ounces for children. They decided to try to make that small amount last for three days. They supplemented it by boiling the bones of oxen and cattle that they killed. Three express riders from George D. Grant's small relief company, then sequestered at Devil's Gate, were sent ahead to try and find the Martin company. When they found them on October 28, children were eating bark from willows. Years later, Josiah Rogerson, a fifteen-year-old member of the Martin company, remembered that six to eight people died every day. The Martin company may have had enough food when they left the Bessemer Bend camp on October 29 to subsist on short rations. They had to push their handcarts about thirty miles before they met up with Grant's relief company at Greasewood Creek. They ate the last of their meager flour rations on October 31. It took them that entire day to get to Grant's wagons. Unfortunately Grant was low on provisions, so they had to survive on diminished rations the whole time they were at Devil's Gate and in Martin's Cove. I guess it could technically be said, as Grayson argues, that the Martin company was never out of food, but the deficient food situation certainly merits mention.³ It may also partly explain why the Martin company was so weak from the effects of cold

3. See Andrew D. Olsen, *The Price We Paid: The Extraordinary Story of the Willie and Martin Handcart Company* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 316–402.

and starvation at the Platte River and Martin's Cove that sixteen to eighteen people died and were buried in a grave eight days after leaving the Cove—possibly one of the largest mass graves in overland emigration history.⁴

In the book's last chapter, the author discusses the question of if men and women learn their gendered behaviors or if there is a biological factor behind gender differences. For instance, is there a cultural or a biological reason for why men are hunters and women are gatherers? Humans are certainly cultural beings, but when people are starving and freezing in the wilderness, Grayson argues, the results are governed by human biology, and "the results are remarkably predictable" (212).

Sex and Death offers a fresh way of looking at these tragic emigrant trail disasters. Many readers will certainly wonder what the outcome might have been had not the two handcart companies received timely rescue. Would these two religious companies have resorted to eating their comrades to stay alive? It's hard not to ponder this question when reading *Sex and Death*.

Melvin L. Bashore retired after thirty-seven years with the Church Historical Department. He created the Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel database on <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/overlandtravel/>. Before retiring in 2013, he served several years on the Church history board of *BYU Studies Quarterly*. He has published numerous articles on trail history, including "Mortality on the Mormon Trail, 1847–68," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2014), 109–23, coauthored with H. Dennis Tolley.

4. J. J., "Some Reminiscences," *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 22, 1878.