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Samuel Claridge: Pioneering the Outposts of Zion

S. George Ellsworth

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In writing the biography of Samuel Claridge, S. George Ellsworth fulfilled a lifelong dream. As a teenaged boy living in Kansas City, he spent winter evenings taking dictation from his mother as she, with difficulty, read from yellowed, worn pages the autobiography that Samuel Claridge, Ellsworth’s grandfather, had left behind. It was this activity that aroused Ellsworth’s historical instincts and played a major role in his studying history at some of the nation’s best universities. Throughout a career that included writing his history of Utah that is used in the state’s public schools, editing the Journal of Western History, and writing articles for the Utah Historical Quarterly, Ellsworth still kept the spark of his dream aglow. After retiring from his long professorship at Utah State University, he began composing this literary labor of love, which was published in 1987.

A thorough perusal of the sources Ellsworth used in writing this book discloses the exhaustive nature of the research, the same kind of thoroughness that has characterized his scholarship now for almost five decades. In addition to Claridge’s unpublished autobiographical sketches, he must have read every diary of every person whose path crossed or paralleled that of Samuel Claridge in any way. The source documents range from published books (some of which are very old), to journal articles, monographs, and letters, as well as diaries, journals, and the scriptures. Just reading through the thirty-five single-spaced pages titled “Sources and Notes” is like taking a course in pioneer history. Ellsworth has even measured the size of the paper on which his sources wrote and describes what the manuscripts look like. He has also gleaned encyclopedic knowledge of the English towns, cathedrals, rivers, and streets that were
part of his grandfather’s early life. He gives intimate insights into Claridge’s missionary labors during this period. Indeed, Ellsworth’s research and storytelling abilities enable the reader almost to walk in Claridge’s shoes.

Perhaps the book’s greatest contributions are the insights it provides into the struggles of the Latter-day Saints in settling “the Muddy,” and Brigham Young’s admission after a firsthand inspection of this mission that he had been deceived by the reports of his advisors. His honesty in confessing that a mistake had been made, and his rescinding the colonization call, allowing those who wished to pull out, is a refreshing, not too often told episode of Mormon history. That Claridge’s faith in Brigham Young did not falter as he heard the prophet’s bold admission that he had erred is also sensitively narrated.

Another major contribution is the account of the working of the united order at the place and time it reached its zenith. Its successes as well as its failures are clearly delineated. Chronicled, too, are the advantages and disadvantages of this experiment in communal life. Ellsworth develops with delicacy and care the thesis that the lack of free agency was a major concern of those who resided in Orderville and became the major factor, together with concern for the lack of economic opportunity for the young people, for the order’s collapse. The peace and security Claridge experienced while serving his British mission, knowing that his large family was being well taken care of by the united order, is also faithfully told. Ellsworth also tactfully documents the fact that President John Taylor did not have the same enthusiasm and religious commitment for communal living as did Brigham Young. In fact, when “Brother Brigham” died, for all intents and purposes, the united order perished with him.

The reader of this book has reason to be glad that Orderville collapsed, or at least was seriously weakened with the death of the second Church president, because Samuel Claridge withdrew from it and once more became a pioneer—this time in Thatcher, Arizona. In keeping with his habit of painstaking documentation, Ellsworth has carefully researched the trail the Claridges traveled to reach their Arizona home. He seems to know every rock, every precipice, every watering hole, and every obstacle they might have encountered along the way. The reader is also able to visualize Claridge starting over at age fifty-five, acquiring land, constructing a new home, and finally achieving, after years of struggle, a certain economic security as he grows older. Perhaps the things he eventually acquired would not have been quite so impressive had he not had some financial help from his millionaire son-in-law, William...
McCune. Still the reader comes to believe that Claridge by force of will and faith would have somehow succeeded even without that aid.

Ellsworth chronicles the life and times of Claridge as a pioneer bishop in Thatcher without omitting any of the difficulties, challenges, and annoyances. Not forgotten either are the spiritual highs, the acts of service, and the whole-souled involvement with the people who made up his congregation. Ellsworth’s Samuel Claridge is a man whose life was dominated by conviction, love, service, and self-sacrifice—a man who seems to have lived free of jealousy, hate, anger, and with no lust for power or position. His days were spent “transforming virgin desert lands into productive farms, building comfortable homes in ordered villages, and becoming a true Latter-day Saint.” In many ways, he represents the ideal Mormon.

Good as this book is, it does have a few weaknesses. There are places where Ellsworth repeats exact quotations from Claridge’s writings more than once, for example, on page ninety-nine and again on 101: “I bought me some good land and a lot for a vineyard and made every calculation of making it my permanent home.” The author could have profited by having a good editor carefully read the manuscript before the book was published.

This reviewer would have preferred fewer long quotations and more of Ellsworth in the text. Furthermore, the two pages on which the author lists the entire inventory of property Claridge turned over to the united order I found rather dull and unimportant. I would have opted for placing such material in the endnotes. There are also a few cases where the author tantalizes the reader and then fails to produce. For instance on page 237 we read, “Bishop Claridge’s relations with Christopher Layton, Stake President, must have been generally cordial and supportive, though evidence suggests some tension.” I was ready for some examples of personality conflicts, theological disagreements, or arguments over a decision of a bishop’s court. Yet the only instance that is cited is a brief dispute over the Claridge children taking some trees from Layton land, and this was amicably settled. In the dozen years the two men served together in their important ecclesiastical assignments, no other “tension” seems to have occurred, which seems remarkable and could have been stressed even more.

In spite of a few flaws, this is a fine biography that represents one of the newer emphases in the writing of Mormon history: dealing with the lives of the common folk. I am confident that historians will yet write about other Mormons whose names threaten to become blown dust on the desert of the centuries. I hope
that some biographies are even written about those who did not become bishops and patriarchs, as did Claridge, but rather lived out their lives faithfully following the decision makers. We need, I believe, more of their histories, too.

On the first pages of his book, Ellsworth writes that Mormonism is both a look backward and a look forward. It looks back to the primitive Church and believes the latter-day organization is a restoration of that movement first formulated by the Master in the meridian of time. It looks forward to the second coming of Christ, and teaches that the Church’s mission is to prepare the world for that event. In looking back at the life and times of Samuel Claridge, this book shows us what the Church was like, how it operated, and what its goals were in pioneer times. S. George Ellsworth has painted for us, with no small amount of love, a clear picture of a man, his wives, and his posterity that motivates us to look forward to a future day when we might meet Samuel Claridge. Until then, we can be sure wherever he is that Claridge is living with humor, penning some poetry, talking with friends and family, and displaying faithfulness and dedication.