Church History in Black and White: George Edward Anderson's Photographic Mission to Latter-day Saint Historical Sites: 1907 Diary, 1907-8 Photographs by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, T. Jeffrey Cottle, and Ted D. Stoddard

Nelson B. Wadsworth

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol36/iss1/19

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Reviewed by Nelson B. Wadsworth, Professor Emeritus of Communications at Utah State University.

A photo essay on the birth of Mormonism, produced in 1907–8, is the crowning achievement of one of the LDS Church’s most artistic photographers, George Edward Anderson, an obscure village photographer from Springville, Utah (1860–1928). *Church History in Black and White* brings together for the first time the words and pictures of the photographer’s year-long odyssey to document Church historical sites in the eastern United States. Anderson’s work has been rediscovered by photographers, artists, and scholars in recent years, and I am delighted to see another publication of these magnificent photographs.

Anderson had an uncanny obsession to tell stories with his camera. He was a photojournalist ahead of his time. Before the turn of the century, he had documented construction of the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad through Utah, the lives of miners in Carbon and Emery counties, and the Scofield Mine Disaster of 1900. In his travels with a portable gallery throughout rural central Utah, he documented the lifestyles of his beloved Mormon people. But the most ambitious project of all began when he was called on a mission to England in 1907. On his way east, he decided to make nearly a year of detours to document the roots and historical sites of his church in Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania and Vermont. These photographic detours were not part of an official Church mission, although some ecclesiastical leaders did give their blessings and verbal permissions for the stops along the way.

Holzapfel, Cottle, and Stoddard have taken the 1907 diary of Anderson’s photographic trip, edited it into a more readable form, and published it along with a collection of pictures Anderson took.
Review of *Church History in Black and White* 193

along the way. The editors have done an incredible job of deciphering Anderson’s often indecipherable writing. Anderson’s journal is at once the chief weakness. His pictures say much more than his words—his prosaic observations, weather reports, and recitation of trivial things, as they deal directly with his documentary photography, may be apropos, but they do make for a hard, often-times tedious read. We learn what he had for breakfast and how many steps (254 of them) led down to American Falls, but virtually nothing about what went through his mind or the emotions that filled him as he made his pictures of these historical scenes sacred to Latter-day Saints. And he only alludes to his photographic technique and art, rarely giving specific details or revealing his personal philosophy of documentary photography. One gets the idea he was writing short, cryptic notes to himself without any thought to future public consumption.

I was a little disappointed in the reproduction of Anderson’s photographs. The editors were not able to reproduce from the original glass negatives, relying instead on facsimiles supplied to them by the LDS Church Archives. As a result, the halftones suffer and do not reflect Anderson’s ideal. After all, he was a meticulous craftsman who had somewhat mastered the science of photographic exposure long before Ansel Adams had developed his famous zone system of photography.

John Collett, the teenage Englishman who accompanied Anderson on his photo excursions through New England from 1911 to 1914, once told me the photographer made all of his exposures “by experience and counting.” That is, he had no meters or exposure guides to help him calculate his aperture and time. Instead, he relied on the instincts of thirty years of picture taking to set his aperture and count the time of his exposure to get the best possible range of tones in the resulting negative. Sometimes, if the negative was too thin (underexposed), he resorted to chemical intensification in the darkroom to increase the contrast. If the highlights were too thick (overexposed), he used chemical reduction and/or masks and “dodging” to hold back the light in the shadow details while the highlights got proper exposure.

What a shame, then, that the photographs could not have been printed as Anderson himself would have printed them and
then been reproduced in modern duotone, as were the photos on the dust jacket. Then, the richness of Anderson’s detail would give the photographs the pure artistic impact they deserve. But alas, circumstances of access, publishers’ limitations, and budgetary constraints sometimes drive such decisions and create something less than ideal. I should point out this is a photographer/printer’s frustration and should not detract from the merits of the book.

Some small editing errors, which inevitably creep into most books, occasionally occur in this one. For example, the railing on the tower of the Kirtland Temple is wood, not iron (caption 145); the federal style is an early nineteenth-century style, rather than an early twentieth-century one (caption 146); and two photographs (top 169, 170) identified as taken in August, are, judging from the look of the budding or leafless trees, the newly plowed field, and the warmly dressed boy, probably taken in early spring; compare the full foliage on the trees in same scene (bottom 169), also identified as taken in August.

Despite these frustrations, I am still thrilled with this book. For the first time, Anderson’s “photographic mission” is published all together in one place, taking the reader back to the way life was at the historical sites in 1907-8. The emotions Anderson’s pictures evoke come primarily from the aesthetics of his art—from the pleasing compositions that were instinctive to him, and from the broad range of tones and detail. His large format camera was steadied on a tripod; his lenses were sharp, set at narrow apertures for broad depth of field; and his exposures were relatively long. He carefully positioned his human subjects, instructing them in body language. They were to “hold still” and not to show any signs of emotion—no laughing, no crying, most of them not even smiling, just vacantly gazing out of Anderson’s camera frame into our time.

*Church History in Black and White* is visually intriguing and intellectually stimulating, helping Latter-day Saints better understand their roots. Equally important, the volume is a major contribution to the understanding that photography can be an expression of art at any time in the Mormon experience of life.