

Chapter 6

Mormonism on the Frontier: The Saints of the Great Basin

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The time-period between the Mormon emigration from Nauvoo to the Great Basin and the subsequent colonization of Utah and surrounding states is a long and complex one. This is a period which can be described as a “heroic period” in Mormon history because of the intense suffering and sacrifice of the Mormon migration and the subsequent kingdom-building which occurred in the early years of the Utah territory.

Many of the early works concerning the Church in territorial Utah, while full of detailed information, have lacked impartiality and professional analysis.¹ Often polemical in nature, the works generally focused on Mormon triumphs and generally ignored failures. Because of the “us versus them” approach in the majority of these works, the lack of scholarly analysis and impartiality was inevitable.

In sharp contrast to the earlier works was Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints: 1830-1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958). Arrington’s book, which strove for objectivity and approached the Mormon experience from a complex socioeconomic model, subjected this period to painstaking analysis. While the eventual professionalization of Mormon historiography was inevitable, Arrington’s foundational work acted as a catalyst for what eventually became known as the New Mormon History. Arrington’s example has encouraged other scholars to approach practically every aspect of Mormon and Utah history as it has related to the Latter-day Saints.

Complex and sometimes uncomfortable issues, such as Mormon economics, political domination, race relations, plural marriage, doctrinal development, and conflicts with the federal government have been tackled and discussed to the enjoyment of some readers and the discomfort of others. While these various historiographical works have not always been readily accepted, they have, nonetheless, opened up new ways of thinking and have encouraged new dialogue about one of the most significant periods in Latter-day Saint history. This historiographical essay will discuss significant works and themes about the Mormon migration and territorial Utah. It will also suggest areas which need further discussion.

General Works

With the great Mormon migration and territorial Utah period encompassing almost a third of the Latter-day Saints’ history, it is not surprising that practically every gen-

1. A good example of a work which provides an abundant amount of information but is hampered by an obvious bias and defensive posture is Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1892). Ernest H. Taves, *This Is the Place: Brigham Young and the New Zion* (Buffalo, NY: