

The Mormon Handcart Migration: "Neither Tongue nor pen can Never Tell the Sorrow"

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Recommended Citation

Montagna, Douglas S. Professor (2020) "The Mormon Handcart Migration: "Neither Tongue nor pen can Never Tell the Sorrow";" *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.1.07

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss1/7>

Review

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Winter 2020

Moulton, Candy. *The Mormon Handcart Migration: “Neither Tongue nor pen can Never Tell the Sorrow.”* University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. \$29.95 ISBN 9780806162614.

Candy Moulton’s *The Mormon Handcart Migration: “Tounge nor Pen Can never tell the Sorrow”* tells the story of determined and courageous pioneers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (hereafter referred to as the Church or church members) migrating across the Great Plains and the mountains in the late 1850s to reach their destination of Salt Lake City pulling and pushing their supplies on handcarts. Approximately 3,000 people made the journey, with between 250 and 300 losing their lives along the way, one of the greatest losses of lives in the entire settlement of the west. While this book is not the first to tell this story, Moulton’s account is especially compelling and heartrending. Relying on a trove of first accounts from the actual pioneers, Moulton focuses her book on the experiences and thoughts of the pioneers.

The book begins with an explanation of why the leadership of the Church encouraged converts to migrate to Salt Lake City pushing and pulling handcarts over the plains and hills and mountains. Having been driven out of New York State and the Midwest, the church members who followed Brigham Young sought out a home in the mountains of Utah and began moving there in the 1840s, hoping to be so far away from other settlers that they would be left alone and free to build their community as they saw fit. Young and the leadership wanted as many converts as possible to move to Salt Lake City. The typical way to move out west at that time was by wagons pulled by teams of horses, oxen, or mules. That mode of transportation, however, proved too expensive for many of the pioneers and the Perpetual Emigration Fund, a fund set up by the Church to help subsidize the costs of the journeys. Young proposed having the converts “foot it” across the continent, transporting their supplies in handcarts that three or four people would push and pull (9). The converts would travel to Iowa City or Florence, Nebraska on boats and trains, and then get fitted with handcarts to make the remaining part of the trip, which was

approximately 1200 miles from Iowa City to Salt Lake City. Beginning in 1856, they began to execute this plan.

Many of the pioneers who made the trek were immigrants from the British Isles and Scandinavia. Moulton tells the stories of some of the individual pioneers in England, including the persecution they experienced in England as well as their decisions and plans to make it to Salt Lake City. Encouraged to make the journey by the Church's missionaries in England and Scandinavia, the first part of their journey was the voyage across the Atlantic to America, and as she recounts from the sources, that was not easy because of overcrowding and illness. Once they made it to the eastern seaboard cities like New York and Boston, they traveled to Iowa City and in some cases Florence, Nebraska, where they were fitted with handcarts to make the final and most difficult part of the trip. They were organized into companies of anywhere between 250 and 600 people, further broken up into hundreds, with experienced pioneers serving as leaders. Ten of these companies made the trek between 1856 and 1860; the people making the migration were of all ages and both men and women. Many traveled in family units or at least parts of families. Ideally, four people would pull and/or push one cart, and that cart would carry up to four hundred pounds of supplies, mostly food but also some clothes, tools, tents, and other necessities for their voyage. There were a few wagons pulled by animals and some milk cows and beef cattle that also went along with each company. They hoped to leave in the spring or early summer and travel ten to twenty miles per day, expecting the trip to take several months and be completed before the snowstorms and freezing weather set in, which often arrived in the early part of autumn in Wyoming and Utah.

Beginning in her fourth chapter, Moulton describes the actual handcart journeys, using the words of the pioneers to tell their stories. The trips were difficult from the start, more physically demanding than anything most of them—or most other humans—had ever done. A shortage of food was their most common problem. The companies that had by far the greatest difficulties were the Willie and Martin Companies that left in July of 1856 from Iowa City, far too late in the year to reasonably expect to make it before freezing temperatures and snowstorms set in. They encountered October snowstorms while making their way through Wyoming and ran out of food. The Martin Company lost between 135 and 150 members out of an original 646, and the Willie Company lost somewhere between 66 and 77 members out of an original 503, the deaths mostly from starvation and frostbite. Rescue expeditions sent out from Salt Lake City to

bring food and warm clothes likely saved hundreds of lives. Five more handcart companies made their way out to Utah between 1857 and 1860, with no companies traveling in 1858. While there was suffering and deaths on these later treks, they avoided the disasters of the Willie and Martin Companies mainly because they left earlier and from Florence, Nebraska rather than Iowa City, considerably shortening their journeys.

The handcart migrations have become an important part of the lore of the Church, and in 1997 they reenacted the experiences to celebrate the sesquicentennial. Moulton, whose ancestors came over from England and made the journey to Utah pushing and pulling a handcart, participated in the reenactment, although as a journalist and not a member of the Church. The adventure, however, changed her perspective from that of an objective journalist covering the reenactment to becoming "a part of it." Moulton adds: "I had made every effort to remain aloof and impartial, but I lost my objectivity along the way during the three months of travel. I was no longer covering a news story: I was part of it and reporting on an experience (195)." This gave her a personal connection that is evident in almost every page of this fascinating story.

While this book is superb for what it does, there are a few things a reader may expect from a book published by a university press that it does not do. Readers looking to know how Moulton's book compares to other accounts of this story and where it stands in the historiography of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints tradition will not find that in her book. She does, however briefly, contextualize the handcart migration in their history. Not only does she explain the origins of this migration, but she also describes some of the momentous events in the Church's history that went on during the years of the handcart migration (the Mountain Meadow Massacre and the Mormon Rebellion) and how they affected the migrations. Moulton is critical of the leadership responsible for the handcart journeys, often using the words of the pioneers against them. She points out how the accounts in the denominational press understated the scope of the tragedies and suffering compared to the accounts in the gentile press (129). The rescue caravans sent out in the Fall of 1856 to save the stranded pioneers could have been dispatched and moved with greater efficiency and likely saved more lives. At least some rescuers were diverted from rescuing the migrants to make sure luxury items and a steam engine belonging to Brigham Young made it to Salt Lake City. On pages 184 and 185, she quotes John Chislett, one of the pioneers, who criticized Brigham Young for the problems: "Whether Brigham was influenced in his desire to get the poor out of Europe

more rapidly to Utah by his sympathy with their condition, by his well-known love of power, his glory in numbers, or his love of wealth...is best known to himself...But the sad results of his handcart scheme will call for a day of reckoning in the future he cannot evade.”

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