

Book Reviews

My Best for the Kingdom: History and Autobiography of John Lowe Butler, A Mormon Frontiersman, by William G. Hartley. Salt Lake City, UT: Aspen Books, 1993. xiii, 511 pp. Illustrations, maps, charts, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DANNY L. JORGENSEN, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

William Hartley narrates the life story of John Lowe Butler, an early Mormon convert hardened by the formative development of this new religion on the American frontier. He records the story in twenty-nine well-crafted chapters, and includes a fresh transcription of Butler's autobiography as the appendix. Hartley's skillful, painstaking investigation, exhaustively drawing on primary and secondary sources, results in a dense, very detailed, yet highly readable account of this heretofore little-known Mormon frontiersman.

Hartley's interpretation of Butler's life represents the "new Mormon history," a massive body of entirely professional scholarship that has accumulated over about the past twenty-five years. He employs this literature to round out and locate Butler's story, supplies new information about certain murky events, and supports other studies. His treatment of Butler and Mormonism is sympathetic, but it does not avoid sensitive topics and it is not apologetic. While other more critical interpretations are possible, Hartley's rendering is plausible and defensible. Focusing primarily on Butler and the Mormons, his account does not ponder their significance for larger, more general intellectual issues.

Beginning with Butler's marriage to Caroline Skeen in 1831, Hartley fills in their childhoods along the Kentucky-Tennessee border, picks up with their 1835 conversions, and follows them to the gathering of the six-year-old Mormon church in Missouri. Then he chronicles the Butlers' lives as the Mormons are driven from Missouri, establish a theocracy at Nauvoo, Illinois, and abandon it for the trek to the intermountain West following the 1844 martyrdom of the founding prophet. John Butler's involvement in certain events of this period — his Danite membership, principal role in the election fight at Gallatin that excited the civil war in Missouri, extensive missionizing among American Indians, policeman and bodyguard duties for Joseph Smith,

limited participation in the prophet's elite inner circle, and plural marriage, as well as activities with several maverick leaders of westward expeditions (James Emmett, George Miller, Lyman Wight)—make him especially interesting to historians of Mormonism.

The portion of Butler's biography devoted to the westward trek (chapters four through nineteen) is also the most pertinent to the history of Iowa and the Midwest. Hartley's description of Mormon missions to the Sioux in 1840 and 1840–41 and the activities of the Emmett expedition are an invaluable contribution to these poorly understood but significant events. The remainder of Hartley's account elaborates Butler's life as a Utah Mormon pioneer, including several local leadership roles, until his death in 1860 at fifty-two years of age.

Hartley's book is entertaining and valuable simply as a concrete story of everyday American life. The Butlers, as Mormons, were not, of course, typical Americans. Furthermore, as southerners, they were among a minority—a significant and somewhat neglected one—of early Mormon converts, most of whom were New Englanders. Hartley thereby furnishes a vivid picture of the daily experiences and existence of southern converts to the most distinctive and successful new religion produced by American culture. His telling of the Butlers' story also supplies a scholarly description of noteworthy events that are relevant to the Mormon experience in Iowa and the Midwest.

Baptism of Fire: The Republican Party in Iowa, 1838–1878, by Robert Cook. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994. xiii, 310 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOEL H. SILBEY, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

The Republican Party emerged in Iowa in the mid-1850s, as it did everywhere else, in response to the failure of the two old parties to resist aggressive southern challenges that seemed to threaten northern values, interests, and prejudices. Drawing on a wide range of protest already on the scene, it had some initial difficulties in bringing disparate groups together and in defining itself clearly among the many sources of its original support. The story of the party's early years, therefore, shows how a revolt of a number of unconnected groups (antislavery advocates, lifelong Democrats, Whigs, temperance reformers, and anti-Irish and anti-Catholic nativists) was ultimately welded into a united party behind an antisouthern ideology and transformed by war into a vehicle of emancipation and the further expansion of black rights. Economic outlooks and interests, ethnic and religious prejudices, responses to the strong modernizing tendencies present in the United States, humanitarianism, and powerful

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