

REVIEWS

PHOTOGRAPHY AS HISTORY

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Through Camera Eyes. By Nelson B. Wadsworth. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975. 180 pp., \$10.95.

In *Through Camera Eyes*, Nelson Wadsworth attempts a history of early Mormon photography after the manner of the late Dr. Robert Taft's *Photography and the American Scene*, the definitive scholarly work on the social history of photography in America. Mr. Wadsworth follows basically the organizational scheme of Dr. Taft's classic and even includes as his first image a daguerreotype of Louis Daguerre nearly identical to that which appears in the frontispiece of Dr. Taft's work, both Daguerre photographs obviously having been taken the same day, although by different photographers.

Through Camera Eyes is a series of five short biographies of early Mormon photographers connected by a cursory narrative of Mormon history from 1839 to 1916, with a collection of 180 well-reproduced photographs, some never before published. The author also dedicates chapters to the evidence of Joseph Smith having been photographed, and to the photographing of the joining of the rails of the transcontinental railroad. A humorous incident, which occurred at the laying of the last rail of the transcontinental railroad, demonstrates Wadsworth's highly readable style:

A precision team of Union Pacific's best Irish tracklayers carried one of the last rails into place and spiked it down, except for the laurel tie. Then a gang of blue-jacketed Chinese coolies brought in the second rail. Someone in the crowd shouted to Savage: "Now's the time, Charlie! Take a shot!" To the Chinese workers, who had never seen a camera before, the word "shot" had only one meaning. They dropped the rail and fled into the nearby crowd. It was only after a long pause of laughter and some coaxing that the coolies were persuaded to return to finish their task.

In his preface, Mr. Wadsworth lists the following as his reasons for publishing his book: (1) to collect and analyze the surviving photographs of frontier photographers; (2) to show that photographs are among the most reliable sources of historical documentation; (3) to show the difference between historical photography, historical artwork, and historical writings (demonstrated by the search for the missing portrait of Joseph Smith); and (4) to present some of the surviving photographs of early Mormon history and discuss the lives of the men who took them. The author succeeds in presenting many surviving photographs and in discussing the lives of five early prominent Mormon photographers: Lucian R. Foster, Marsena Cannon, Charles W. Carter, Charles R. Savage, and George E. Anderson. Although C. R. Savage was the only one to achieve any degree of national fame, the others are clearly the most noteworthy among the photographers of early Church history.

The greatest failing of *Through Camera Eyes* is the author's unjustifiable attempt to connect Mormonism with the heroes of the day, a practice into which Mormon writers seem prone to fall, in an effort to legitimize the history through name dropping. For example, Wadsworth suggests that "In all likelihood [Lucian] Foster and [Mathew] Brady learned their skills from the same teacher, Professor Samuel F. B. Morse . . .," when, in reality, there is virtually no evidence that Foster was even interested in photography between 1841 and 1843, and no evidence, other than an unreliable statement of Joseph Smith III in 1910, that Lucian Foster practiced daguerreotypy until after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. Or, consider the author's statement on page 14: "It is strictly a matter of conjecture, but it is possible a portrait of Brigham Young was taken either by Foster or Mathew Brady about the time of the Bennett baptism. . . ." Although the author admits that it is conjecture, the total lack of evidence that Brigham Young was ever photographed by Mathew Brady misleads the reader and makes one wonder if he is witnessing the birth of another Mormon myth. Wadsworth's apparent need to draw unwarranted conclusions raises questions as to the scholarliness of his work. Plates 2 and 12, for instance, which are daguerreotypes of the Nauvoo Temple, are identified on pages 39 and 42 respectively, as the work of Lucian Foster. Yet, Foster cannot definitely be established as the photographer of either of the daguerreotypes of the Nauvoo Temple.

Nevertheless, despite the shortcomings, *Through Camera Eyes* is a first significant step in collecting and publishing early photographs having relevance to Mormons. The analysis of the early Joseph Smith portraits is intriguing, and the brief biographies of the early photographers, especially C. R. Savage and George E. Anderson, provide fascinating reading. George E. Anderson, who left for a mission to England in April 1907, did not return to his home in Springville, Utah, until 1914, to the dismay of his wife, Olive. During that period, Anderson served three years as a missionary, passing the remaining time in the eastern United States compulsively photographing Church historical sites. His obsession resulted in a most important contribution to the photo-documentation of Mormon history. Although Wadsworth's book cannot be considered the definitive scholarly work in the area, the selection of photographs is excellent, the format is pleasing, and the biographical information provides enjoyable reading. The book is worth its price for the photographs alone.