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Unfortunate Emigrants

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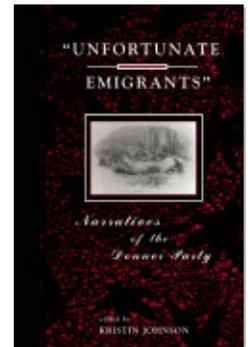
Published by Utah State University Press

Johnson, Kristin.

Unfortunate Emigrants.

Utah State University Press, 1996.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/9318.



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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of November 1846 a party of California-bound emigrants was trapped by early snow in the Sierra Nevada. Despite their own efforts to escape and the efforts of others to rescue them, by the following April nearly half the company had died of cold and starvation. Some of the emigrants had resorted to cannibalism to stay alive.

Though this last detail has become synonymous with the Donner party, it was merely the culmination of a long series of events in which both human weakness and the forces of nature played a role. The story has been told many times and in many ways over the past 150 years but, interestingly, has never been treated at length by historians. Certainly historians have written about the Donner party in brief articles or in longer works on other topics, but to date none of the books devoted solely to the Donner story has been written by a professional historian. Two important works in the literature of the Donner party by well-known scholars, Dale L. Morgan's *Overland in 1846* and Bernard DeVoto's *Year of Decision: 1846*, place the Donner party in the context of the westward movement. In the broader historical perspective, the disaster itself is of minor significance—it had little effect on subsequent events.

Yet, if the effect of the Donner party on history has been slight, its impact on people has been profound. Since 1847 the ill-fated wagon train has figured in hundreds of works, not only histories and articles but also novels, short stories, juvenile literature, poems, plays, films, documentaries, even an opera and a ballet. Though the lurid fact of cannibalism is the Donner party's best-known aspect, the story's wide appeal cannot be attributed to mere prurience, for most of these works gloss over the horrors. Instead, the motivating factor appears to lie in the human story: unlike many epics of the American West, the Donner saga is not centered on the exploits of a few exceptional men who sought adventure but on families, on ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary situation. It is a dreadful irony that hopes of prosperity, health, and a new life in California's fertile valleys led many only to misery, hunger, and death on her stony threshold.

Since the public's interest in the Donner party has not been matched by that of scholars, it has fallen to amateur historians to tell the tale. The first

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comprehensive account appeared in 1849 with the publication of J. Quinn Thornton's *Oregon and California in 1848*, a two-volume work which included a lengthy section on the Donner party. Thornton, a lawyer, had traveled for two weeks with members of the Donner party. After the tragedy, in the fall of 1847, he interviewed survivors in San Francisco. His account, though much flawed by melodramatic flourishes, literary embellishments, and the author's tendency to favor sensationalism over factual reporting, has nevertheless been the basis for many subsequent writings.

In 1879 a Truckee, California, newspaper editor and lawyer, C. F. McGlashan, published his *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra*. McGlashan, too, contacted survivors, but by his time most of those who had been adults in 1846 were dead; some of his informants had been young children at the time of the tragedy and could relate very little first-hand information. Using published accounts and his own voluminous correspondence with survivors and rescuers, McGlashan put together a classic work which has rarely if ever been out of print. McGlashan was a kindly man who became friends with his correspondents and, loathe to cause them pain, smoothed over the rough spots by adopting a notably sentimental approach. As a result, his account is weak in its balance, its organization, and its facts, particularly in the details of the events leading up to the final debacle in the Sierra Nevada.

One of McGlashan's correspondents was Eliza Donner Houghton, who had been three years old in 1846. In the 1880s she began collecting the materials used in her *The Expedition of the Donner Party and Its Tragic Fate*, eventually published in 1911. Despite its title, barely half of Houghton's account deals directly with the Donner party; the rest is her autobiography up to the time of her marriage. Houghton relied heavily on Thornton, but also used McGlashan and the recollections of her older sisters, along with other sources. Anecdotes and personal details add charm and pathos to her story, but in general her account is derivative and sometimes untrustworthy.

The most influential version of the Donner story has been *Ordeal by Hunger* by George R. Stewart. First published in 1936 and revised in 1960, this was the first attempt at a scholarly treatment of the Donner party and has come to be regarded as the definitive history. Though Stewart was undoubtedly a scholar, a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, he was not, strictly speaking, a historian. Much of his success can be attributed to his skill as a storyteller rather than to his historical expertise. *Ordeal by Hunger* is gripping, well-paced, and convincingly told; but the seamless construction which makes for good reading also obscures the many places where inference is presented as fact. A comparison of Stewart's book with his sources reveals that he often sacrificed accuracy for the sake of art.

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Ordeal by Hunger is largely responsible for the popular perception of the Donner party; however, Stewart's vision was not universally accepted. Utah historian Dale L. Morgan in particular disputed Stewart's interpretations of several issues in his own writings on different aspects of Western history. *The Humboldt: Highway of the West* (1943); *The Great Salt Lake* (1947); with J. Roderic Kornes, *West from Fort Bridger* (1951; rev. 1994); and *Overland in 1846* (1963) reveal Morgan's evolving perceptions of the tragedy. Dispersed as they were into these several works, however, Morgan's contributions to Donner scholarship did little to alter the public perception of the tragedy shaped by Stewart.

In the 1950s two minor works appeared, Walter M. Stookey's *Fatal Decision: The Tragic Story of the Donner Party* (1950) and Homer Croy's *Wheels West* (1955). Although both authors presented interesting original research, their books are inaccurate and amateurish; Croy's book is also heavily fictionalized. Neither contributes greatly to our understanding of the Donner story.

It was not until 1992 that Stewart's primacy in the field was directly challenged by Joseph A. King in *Winter of Entrapment: A New Look at the Donner Party*, a work which was more an attack upon Stewart than a history of the wagon train in question. King, with reason, criticizes many of Stewart's interpretations, asking important questions and making several good points. Nevertheless, King's objections are overstated and unbalanced, and though he accuses Stewart of prejudice, misinterpretation of sources, and poor research, King himself is guilty of precisely the same errors. The revised edition of 1994 corrected some problems and gave the work a badly needed reorganization, but *Winter of Entrapment* still leaves a great deal to be desired as a history of the Donner party.

Certainly professional status or graduate training do not guarantee a historian's competence, and just as certainly amateurs have written excellent histories. As it stands, however, none of the currently available histories of the Donner party was written by a trained historian, and each suffers from its author's lack of objectivity, unfamiliarity with standards of historical scholarship, literary inclinations, or a combination of these factors. These defects may not be apparent or important to some readers, but they pose grave problems for others. Perhaps the 1996 sesquicentennial of the tragedy will inspire a competent history; but until a balanced, scholarly synthesis of the documentary evidence appears, those with a more than casual interest in the Donner party will have to read the source materials themselves.

Fortunately for students of the Donner party, most of the primary documents are available in print. A few of these—newspaper articles, letters, and diaries dating from 1846–47—are included in secondary histories, but the majority can be found in a single work, Dale Morgan's monumental *Overland in 1846: Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail* (1963). Its two

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volumes include most of the early sources and portions of later ones, along with Morgan's invaluable notes. This work was reprinted in 1993.

Another source of primary documents is *Donner Miscellany: 41 Diaries and Documents*, edited by Carroll D. Hall and published in 1947 in a limited edition by the Book Club of California. Since its major documents are included in *Overland in 1846*, the general unavailability of the *Miscellany* is not as serious as it might appear; its minor documents are nevertheless of interest, providing brief but intriguing glimpses of the emigrants.

In 1921 a few early documents dealing with the efforts to rescue the trapped emigrants were published with other items from the Edward M. Kern Papers by Edward Eberstadt as *A Transcript of the Fort Sutter Papers*. This privately printed volume was published in a limited edition of twenty copies and is consequently very difficult to find; however, although the documents it contains shed light on the relief parties, their contribution to the history of the Donner party is slight.

These three works contain virtually all the firsthand sources of the Donner story dating from 1846-47. In the 1870s and 1880s C. F. McGlashan and H. H. Bancroft collected a number of memoirs and letters dealing with the Donner party, which are now held by the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. Other collections of Donner party materials are held by the California State Library, the Sutter's Fort Historical Museum, and the Huntington Library. Many of these documents have been used by secondary writers, but few have been published, except as excerpts.

There is, however, another body of important documents which are not readily available. Several accounts published in early books, newspapers, and magazines have been widely used by secondary writers, yet are all too often hard to find. They are held in the special collections of research libraries and do not circulate, or they are available as microforms, inconvenient to use and often issued in large and unindexed sets. Many of these documents have been excerpted in other works, but few are easily available in their entirety.

The present anthology grew out of my own frustration in trying to track down items in this latter category of sources. *“Unfortunate Emigrants”: Narratives of the Donner Party* is not intended as a substitute for a scholarly history; rather it augments the available collections of documents, providing the complete texts of previously unanthologized documents in one convenient volume and with additional information in the form of annotations. I have taken a textual approach, attempting to identify themes recurring in the literature and to correlate the documents with one another.

The texts included here are of several types, widely divergent in date, form, and approach. The interplay among some of these accounts is fascinating: certain survivors contributed information to early writers, whose works in turn influenced the later recollections of other participants. The

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motivations of the informants are also different—to inform, to shock, to justify—but all are to a degree self-serving. The discrepancies among the accounts suggest that the Donner experience may best be viewed not as a public event but as a personal tragedy—an experience so complex and so traumatic that survivors were hard pressed to make sense of it. Because of the contradictions among the sources, a complete and accurate retelling of the Donner story may prove impossible, but its historiography and folklore are a fertile ground for further research.

The documents also vary widely in their publication history and availability. Two of the documents, J. Quinn Thornton's history and Virginia Reed Murphy's memoir, are well known but are currently available only in unannotated forms which leave important details unclear. On the other hand, the memoirs of James F. Reed and William C. Graves are well known but surprisingly hard to come by in their entirety, having remained out of print for more than a century. William McCutchen's brief account has been overshadowed by Reed's longer one. The two articles by Frances H. McDougall are not particularly valuable in themselves, but they provide the framework necessary for understanding the Reed and McCutchen memoirs. The lengthy accounts of Eliza W. Farnham and Jacob Wright Harlan are less difficult to find than some of the others but are not as familiar to researchers as they might be. Though both documents are confused and present many problems of interpretation, they illuminate many aspects of Donner history and folklore.

Two authors, H. A. Wise and J. Ross Browne, represent popular reactions to the Donner story. Although neither writer intended his work as history, some of their statements taken out of context have influenced other writers. The publication of the relevant passages in their entirety allows for a more balanced interpretation.

Also included here are three sources which have not influenced the Donner story due to the fact that they are almost unknown in the literature. These documents, letters written by Lilburn W. Boggs and Mary Ann Graves in 1847 and a late memoir of Lovina Graves Cyrus written down by her granddaughter Edna Maybelle Sherwood, are of minor significance but add detail to our knowledge of the Donner party.

The anthology opens with material from J. Quinn Thornton's *Oregon and California in 1848*. This rather lengthy document introduces the characters and tells the complete story of the Donner party, providing a frame of reference for the subsequent texts, which are presented in chronological order.

The intent in reproducing these texts has been to make them both accurate and readable. Obvious typographical errors and uncharacteristic misspellings have been silently corrected, but stylistic usages are unchanged. Brief corrections or clarifications are given in brackets within the text wherever possible, notes being reserved for more extensive comments.