Alison Comish Thorne is literally one of Utah’s finest treasures. In the tradition of Esther Peterson, Alice Louise Reynolds, Ione S. Bennion, Lucybeth Cardon Rampton, Juanita Brooks, and many other liberal Utah women, Alison is a bundle of enthusiasm who has never lacked for causes. She decided to write her memoirs as a statement about how individuals can and do make a difference. Her story also chronicles how difficult it is to make positive change in a conservative culture that mixes religion, values, and politics. Another major contribution of this volume is Alison’s view of education in the twentieth century, especially at land-grant colleges. Her professional educational career led her to many places, where she crossed paths with some of the finest minds in economics and sociology. In this memoir she successfully weaves local issues into national trends and creates a fantastically clear view of her expansive world. As the wife of a world-famous agronomist; a mother of five children, three of whom are also academics, a social activist and a scholar, Alison is delightfully ahead of her time.

The daughter of a Utah State University graduate who became a professor at Oregon State University when it was presided over by a former Utah State University president, William Jasper Kerr, Alison has spent her entire life in a university environment. From Corvallis, Oregon, she moved to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, at a time when academic freedom was fiercely debated at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints–owned campus. Anxious to continue her education, she moved to Ames, Iowa, and obtained a master’s degree at Iowa State University. She then moved on to the University of Chicago for special training before completing a Ph.D. At Chicago, she enjoyed the numerous famous intellectuals who taught and visited the campus. Alison also enjoyed teaching Sunday school with a young English graduate student from the Ogden, Utah, area, Fawn McKay. After a sojourn in Chicago, she returned to Ames and finished her Ph.D. in economics. She is the first female awarded a doctorate in economics at Iowa State University.
She then married a fellow graduate student, Wynne Thorne, whom she had met at church. As they embarked on professional careers shortly before World War II, they discovered that most universities had nepotism laws that forbade both spouses being employed by the same university. So, although she had Ph.D. in hand, Alison did not really work in her discipline for over a quarter of a century. Although the Thornes eventually taught at Texas A&M, Wisconsin, and finally Utah State University, Alison did not teach regularly until the late 1960s. While raising five children, she had enough to do, but her head never left academia and her heart never abandoned liberal efforts toward inclusiveness.

She became a champion for the oppressed and downtrodden. With her friends from university women’s groups, she sought to right wrongs. When they saw or felt injustice, they responded with action. She and her great friend Ione Bennion, who lost her job as dean of women at Utah State because of nepotism, fought battles in behalf of unwed mothers, the disabled, and the elderly.

The story of Alison Thorne is a chronicle of how she chose to serve. She certainly was determined to do so, and her home, university, community, and church became better because of her commitment. As an advocate of civil rights, an opponent of the Vietnam War, an avid supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment, and an elected school board member, Alison remained consistent to her ideals and values. Her activities in these movements put her at odds with the church of her youth, and her disillusionment provides another example of why talented and brilliant individuals sometimes feel their voices are dismissed for political reasons. Alison boldly and passionately explains her journey away from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While her husband served the university and his profession, she carved her own destiny through empathy and compassion. They became a dynamic team who graced Cache Valley, Utah, for over six decades.

I have known Alison for over forty years and have learned much from her. She is constantly suggesting methods and ways to improve education. We serve on a committee set up by Ione Bennion, before her death, that encourages teachers to incorporate democratic principles in the curriculum. Alison sits on the front row of every session and takes voluminous notes and then questions the presenter with a certainty of conviction. While nearing ninety years of age, her quick walking pace, trademark short-trimmed hair, and razor-sharp mind serve her well. Her children’s lives are a testament to the depth of her convictions. There is much to say for doing good and creating conscience.
The words of her autobiography provide a wonderful journey through the twentieth century. Many years ago, Alison, Alta Fife (the folklorist and widow of Austin Fife), and Ione Bennion attended nearly every Utah State University cultural function as a trio. In honor of Austin, I referred to them as the “true” three Nephites, those Book of Mormon disciples who would live forever. Alison is the last of the three who is still with us, but they all live because of their many contributions. This autobiography ensures a place for Alison and her friends in the history of a university and a community and also adds significantly to understanding the women who made higher education work in a land-grant setting. There is no end to service.