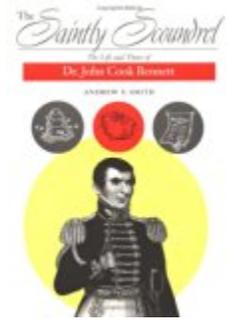


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew F. Smith. *The Sainly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xiii + 271 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02282-1.

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## Religion, Education, and Boosterism in the Midwest

John C. Bennett (1804-1867) lived the life of an opportunistic booster in the northern United States, most notably in connection with education and Mormonism in the Midwest. Andrew F. Smith has written the first full-length biography of this little-known and intriguing historical figure. Smith's extensive research is commendable and the resulting book is straightforward in its presentation, but a paucity of historical analysis lessens the value of the book to historians.

The possessor of great ability, Bennett quickly rose to positions of responsibility and authority. His lack of loyalty to anything larger than himself, however, and his willingness to engage in duplicitous and shady practices meant that Bennett moved often and was forever involved in controversy. Reared in southeastern Ohio, Bennett worked briefly as a doctor and Methodist minister before he successfully lobbied the Indiana state legislature for a charter for Christian College, of New Albany, Indiana. Bennett ran Christian College in an unusual fashion because attendance was not required; students had only to pass an examination and pay for their diploma. Bennett vended diplomas from this paper "college" to anyone who would pay. After criticism from other, more reputable, educators, Bennett went on to involvement with another fledgling institution, Willoughby University, of Ohio, in 1834. In 1835 the trustees dismissed Bennett for allegedly selling Christian College diplomas while working for Willoughby University.

For the next few years, Bennett worked as a doctor

and engaged in other short-lived educational ventures in a variety of locations before he moved in 1840 to the Mormon city of Nauvoo, Illinois. Bennett boarded in Nauvoo with Joseph Smith, the Mormon leader, and, improbably, Bennett quickly became a close associate of Smith. Bennett again acquired a collegiate charter and founded the University of the City of Nauvoo, of which he became the chancellor. Bennett also established a Masonic Lodge in Nauvoo, served as mayor of Nauvoo, and became head of the Nauvoo Legion, the largest militia unit in the United States. By 1842, however, Smith pushed Bennett out of his lofty positions. In response, Bennett attacked Smith and Mormonism in a hastily-written book and started on the lecture circuit, promising to reveal the secrets about the sexual practices of the Mormons. His criticism, however, did not preclude his later involvement with Mormons. During the power struggles that followed the murder of Joseph Smith, Bennett took a leadership position in a splinter group of Mormons headed by James Strang, until Strang forced Bennett from power a year later. From that point, Bennett lived primarily as a successful and controversial breeder of poultry.

Andrew F. Smith has employed a wide variety of sources, especially newspaper sources, from dozens of locations where Bennett lived and worked. Because Bennett relied heavily on the printed word to promote and defend himself and his ideas, his medical treatises, anti-Mormon publications, and letters to editors, among other documents, all help to reconstruct his life. Yet some shortcomings reduce the utility of the book for historians.

The book does not contain a thesis about the meaning of Bennett's life. Smith, who has published historical scholarship on the tomato, came to his interest in Bennett after reading that Bennett advocated the healthful qualities of tomatoes during a time when many people considered tomatoes poisonous. Curious about Bennett, Smith then researched Bennett's life. The result of his efforts is a detailed biography that contains little historical interpretation of Bennett and his world. Six pages of "Retrospect" do not sufficiently analyze Bennett's life and significance. Further, although Smith acknowledges other scholarship about Bennett, he does not place his own work within that historiographical context and explain how his contributions go beyond the existing literature.

Smith's presentation of Bennett's life offers possibilities for historical interpretation. For example, Bennett thrived in the Midwest because of regionally specific conditions, such as the willingness of Midwestern state legislators to charter colleges. Also, his years spent in Nauvoo illumine aspects of Mormon history and the life of Joseph Smith. For the most part, these opportunities go unexplored. Nonetheless, Smith has pointed historians to a historically significant individual whose life hints at the structure of antebellum Midwestern society.

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