



7-1-1975

Dear Ellen: Two Mormon Women and Their Letters S. George Ellsworth; *Letters of Long Ago* Agnes Just Reid

Thomas G. Alexander

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alexander, Thomas G. (1975) "*Dear Ellen: Two Mormon Women and Their Letters* S. George Ellsworth; *Letters of Long Ago* Agnes Just Reid," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol15/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

S. George Ellsworth, editor. *Dear Ellen: Two Mormon Women and Their Letters*. Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1974. 92 pp. \$12.00.

Agnes Just Reid. *Letters of Long Ago*. Brigham D. Madsen, editor. Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1974. 93 pp. \$9.50.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander, Professor of History and Associate Director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University.

Any reader is pleased to find more in a book than he bargained for, and this reviewer was pleasantly surprised that the *Dear Ellen* volume consisted of more than the edited letters of two Mormon women. Opening with a biographical sketch of Ellen Spencer Clawson and Ellen Pratt McGary, Professor Ellsworth tells of their early life in Nauvoo, their exodus to Winter Quarters and to Utah, and their separate lives in Salt Lake City and San Bernardino.

This sketch leads to the heart of the book which is a series of letters exchanged between the two women in 1856 and 1857. Offering perspectives on conditions in Salt Lake City and San Bernardino, the letters tell of the lives of women representing two social classes and two perspectives from within the Mormon community. Far from the center of Mormondom and daughter of a lower class family, Ellen Pratt endured two uneven marriages and divorces and a life which took her from California to various towns in Utah. Ellen Spencer, on the other hand, as the wife of Hyrum B. Clawson, a socially prominent businessman, ecclesiastical leader, and polygamist, saw Mormon society from the top. By focusing on social and family concerns, the letters tell much of life in the two Mormon communities.

The third section of this book consists of biographical sketches of the lives of the two women and their families until the deaths of the central figures.

Though the book focuses on the letters exchanged between the two women, the strength of the volume lies in the commentary found in the first and third sections. Here Professor Ellsworth has put the lives of the participants in perspective. One learns of Ellen Pratt's flirtation with Spiritualism, of the failure of her two marriages, and of life in Beaver during the 1870s and 1880s. He learns that Ellen Clawson's life centered on her family, the theatrical and business pursuits of her husband, and the concerns of a polygamous wife.

Though seemingly in the same form as the nineteenth century *Dear Ellen* letters, Professor Madsen's *Letters of Long Ago*, were, in fact, written in the early 1920s by Agnes Just Reid. Completed before the development of present oral history techniques, Mrs. Reid based the letters on the reminiscences of her mother, Emma Thompson Just, an early settler of the Blackfoot River Valley of southeastern Idaho.

Written in the form of letters to Emma's father, George Thompson, a Mormon convert who had returned to England after the bitter disappointment and horrors of the Morrisite War of 1862, the narrative tells of life near Fort Hall Reservation in the 1870s and 1880s. Married at the age of fifteen to George Bennett, one of the soldiers who helped escort the Morrisite refugees to Idaho, Emma was abandoned after several years of moving throughout the Mountain West. She returned to the Blackfoot River country in 1869, married Nels Just shortly thereafter, and began the life described in the letters.

The narrative conveys impressions of life and incidents on the Idaho frontier and includes such matters as relations with the Indians, the struggle for sufficient irrigation water, and the coming of the railroad. Haunted by extreme loneliness, Emma Just gave birth to ten children, feared for her life and theirs during the difficulties with the Nez Perce and Bannocks in the late 1870s and endured an unhappy life with a man she did not love. The letters end in 1891 when George Thompson decided to return to Idaho.

One particularly interesting passage tells of her return to Salt Lake City to testify in the trial of Robert Burton, accused of the murder of Joseph Morris and others. The trial resulted in Burton's acquittal because many of the witnesses, including Mrs. Just, could not identify him and were hazy about details of the events which had taken place nearly two decades before.

In general, the editorial work in both the Ellen and Emma volumes is well done. The letters are put in perspective through introductions, postscripts, and notes, and the identifications of those persons and places identified are adequate. Fortunately, a map supplied with the Reid letters helps to locate many of the places mentioned, but in the Ellen volume, a number of places are not identified.

It is usually impossible for the editor of any volume to identify all of the persons and places mentioned. Some simply defy identification because they cannot otherwise be located. In some cases, however, the failure to identify seems to have come because the unidentified person or place was not part of the central interest of the editor. In the Reid volume, for instance, an entire letter is devoted to the experiences of the Just family with an unidentified Captain Baker. The letter, however, gives enough information that a perusal of Francis

B. Heitman's *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington: GPO, 1903), makes it possible to identify the captain with a high degree of probability as Stephen Baker of Michigan, who served as a private, corporal, and sergeant during the Civil War and advanced to lieutenant and then to captain by June 1874.

One caveat should be raised about the Reid volume. Since, like many oral histories, it purports to relate emotional states and events thirty to fifty years removed in time, it must be used with caution. Did Emma Just, for instance, really have the continual death wishes portrayed in the volume, or is this a projection of her state of mind as an invalid septuagenarian at the time of the interview? Though many of the reminiscences can be compared with contemporary sources and thus add insight into the events, social historians particularly must be careful in using such material in the absence of contemporary evidence as an indication of the attitudes of a pioneer during the 1870s and 1880s.

Withal, the editors are to be complimented on the fine work they have done. Professor Ellsworth's volume adds considerable insight into the life and attitudes of nineteenth century Mormon women and Professor Madsen helps us to understand life on the Idaho frontier. In addition, the Tanner Trust Fund and the series editors should be congratulated for providing volumes of this quality.