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## *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons Dean C. Jessee*

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Dean C. Jessee, ed. *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons*. Salt Lake City: Desert Book Company, 1974. xlv plus 375 pp. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Stanford J. Layton, coordinator of Publications and Research, Utah State Historical Society.

Writing to his son Willard in July 1877, Brigham Young expressed pleasure that no history was being made at that particular moment in Zion, since "history, as usually written, is principally filled with the wars, the troubles, and misfortunes of mankind. . . ." The observation is particularly interesting in relationship to this book of letters to his sons, since nothing better suggests just how completely the historical community has managed to burst the constraints of its nineteenth-century preoccupation with the tragic and the colossal than this hand-

some volume. These letters are generally low key, mild, concerned with family things, singularly devoid of those block-busting Brigham Young jeremiads which colored his public speeches, and generously laden with those precious details of everyday life that comprise the essence of historical understanding. It is appropriate that such a work be the inaugural volume in the new Mormon Heritage Series under the general editorship of LDS Church Historian Leonard Arrington, for no one has done more than he, in his many distinguished works, to coax such enriching detail to the surface of Utah and Mormon history.

The ninety-five letters in this volume were chosen to comprise a genre; those dealing exclusively with business or community matters were not included. This is not to say that such extrinsic material is entirely absent. Indeed, immediately after his comment that no history was being made, Brigham, apparently unaware of the irony, mentioned that twenty-three indictments had been handed down the previous evening by the grand jury investigating the Morrisite tragedy of 1862. His comments in that regard are brief but revealing. Here and there the reader also catches glimpses of such significant historical matters as the Godbeite apostasy, the mining activity of Patrick Connor, and corruption among appointed territorial officials. But the focus is strictly on the filial, and that is how the book must be approached. The letters are didactic—even evangelical at times—as the concerned and loving father coaches, cajoles, chastizes, encourages, and enjoins his attentive and admiring sons.

Though all the letters share a common tone, they do not become commonplace in the reading. This may be due less to the nature of the letters than to the acumen and careful scholarship of Dean C. Jessee. He has given each letter a meaningful historical context by setting it against a biographical sketch of the son to whom it was written and by explaining where that particular son was at the time and what had been the nature of his latest communication to his father. The result is actually a dialogue, and from it an entirely new appreciation of the Brigham Young family is possible. The dynamic and enigmatic John W., the charismatic Willard, the artistic Joseph Don Carlos, the cultured Alfales, the ungifted Oscar, the tragic Phineas, and the eminently lovable Brigham, Jr.,—these and the rest of the seventeen sons who grew to maturity begin to

assume their historical identity. It is a heady trip for the historian, raising as many questions as it answers, particularly in regard to the sharply restricted scope of the Young influence in religious and political matters after Brigham's death. This dimension of the book notwithstanding, the reader's greatest reward will be the additional insight he gains into Brigham Young himself—sometimes a very complex man, sometimes remarkably simple, always interesting, and still eluding a capable biographer.

Three or four pages in the review copy of the book were irregularly inked, but there is no reason to suppose that this slight blemish persisted in other copies. Having Brigham Young's letters set with a ragged right margin adds a nice touch and serves to eliminate the intimidating effect produced by using smaller type for lengthy direct quotes. Jack Adamson's foreword is a literary delight. Dean Jessee's editorial work is especially well done—the introduction, the explanatory footnotes, the extensive biographical appendix and related back matter, and above all, the commentary on the sons and excerpts from their letters and diaries. He has set a most worthy standard of excellence for the entire series.