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Wit & Whimsy in Mormon History Davis Bitton

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Bitton, Davis. *Wit & Whimsy in Mormon History*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974. 72 pp. \$1.95.

Reviewed by Dennis L. Lythgoe, associate professor of history at Massachusetts State College at Bridgewater.

Davis Bitton does not pretend to present a complete volume of Mormon humor. Rather, he has compiled a small collection of passages that he especially liked, "curious situations," not necessarily "humorous in a strict sense," drawn either from early Utah newspapers or from material in the Church Historical Department. The concept is refreshing, and some of the selections are choice, even hilarious. Most memorable is the extract from Perrigrine Sessions' Diary of 1853 about Sarah Kirkman rattling a chain at night to frighten her husband into believing he was being punished for failing to say his prayers. Almost as amusing is an account taken from an 1880 *Juvenile Instructor* describing playful boys teasing a sleeping member in church. Priddy Meeks' colorful 1850 advice on dress standards could bring needed perspective to modern-day zealots. And the *Deseret News*' detailed, practical explanation of the Word of Wisdom is a gem.

However, the rest of the collection is inconsistent: many selections are just not funny, and several could have been deleted because they do not represent "Mormon" wit (e.g., an Irish letter reproduced in the *Deseret News* because it was "appreciated" by the Mormons). While John Pulsipher's terse proposal of marriage by letter is typical of pioneer days, others are more amusing. For instance, in his recent biography of Charles C. Rich, Leonard Arrington includes an 1837 letter written by Rich proposing marriage to Sarah Pea that is a treasure in Mormon literature.

Bitton's ten categories are potpourri, courtship, pioneering, preaching, church meetings, dress, Word of Wisdom, persecution, stories from exchanges, and subscription blurbs. Obviously, the list is incomplete, and the most notable omission is polygamy. The collection would be more valuable had he included at least selected stories about plural marriage.

Finally, the book gives the impression of having been hurriedly put together. The introduction, for example, is filled with careless sentences not characteristic of the author. Nevertheless, this little book is a welcome beginning in Mormon humor that Mormons everywhere will enjoy. Hopefully it is not the end.