



4-1-1976

To Utah With the Dragoons and Glimpses of Life in Arizona and California, 1858-1859 Harold D. Langley, ed.

Richard D. Poll

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



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

Recommended Citation

Poll, Richard D. (1976) "*To Utah With the Dragoons and Glimpses of Life in Arizona and California, 1858-1859* Harold D. Langley, ed.," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol16/iss2/10>

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.

LANGLEY, HAROLD D., ed. *To Utah With the Dragoons and Glimpses of Life in Arizona and California, 1858-1859*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1974. 230 pp. \$8.50.

Reviewed by Richard D. Poll, professor of history, Western Illinois University, Macomb.

The most interesting single chapter in this collection of letters which appeared originally in the *Philadelphia Daily Evening Bulletin* is the last, "In Search of a Soldier" (pp. 188-204). Here the editor, who is presently Associate Curator of the National Museum of History and Technology at the Smithsonian Institution, reports the first-class piece of historical detective work by which he reached a tentative identification of the author of twenty-five dispatches from a soldier-journalist-goldseeker which appeared in 1858 and 1859 over the pseudonym "Utah."

Harold D. Langley has convinced this reviewer that "Utah" was Henry W. Fischer (or Fisher), a German immigrant who had some journalistic experience in Pennsylvania before he enlisted in the Second Dragoons in March 1858 at the age of twenty-seven. As one of the reinforcements for the Utah Expedition who were recruited while the fate of General Albert Sydney Johnston's forces at Camp Scott was still uncertain, he received a few weeks training at Carlisle Barracks before moving to Fort Leavenworth, from which his first published letter bears the date 28 May. He marched (or rode horseback) from Kansas to Utah, arriving in August after Thomas L. Kane, Alfred Cumming and the "peace commissioners" had brought the "Mormon rebellion" to an end. Fischer—if "Utah" was Fischer—spent several months at Camp Floyd before being given a disability discharge as the result of a wound received in a skirmish with the Ute Indians. He then journeyed to southern California and to the gold diggings on the Gila River in what was then New Mexico Territory. Illness forced him back to Los Angeles and after a last letter dated 23 May 1859, "Utah" dropped out of the *Philadelphia Bulletin* and out of history.

The letters justify republication, "Utah" being a remarkably literate and entertaining observer and commentator on many of the events of which he was aware. Quotations from English and American poets and pundits share space with pro-Republican comments on the national political scene. James Buchanan is no favorite of "Utah" (or of the *Bulletin*, which may be one reason why the dispatches were printed). The character and courage of the Utah

Expedition's officers, with a few exceptions, do not impress "Utah," nor does the overall caliber of the enlisted personnel. Drunkenness, desertions and discipline—the last usually lax but sometimes brutal—draw critical comment, though individuals are praised and the combat potential of the common soldiers is held in high regard. Brief descriptions of Forts Leavenworth, Kearney, Laramie, Bridger and Floyd are supplemented by contemporary sketches supplied by the editor; the scenery of the Overland Trail, Utah and the Southwest, about which "Utah" is often ecstatic, is similarly treated. Descriptions of the Indians from Kansas to California are more sympathetic than one might expect from a soldier on the frontier. "Utah" strongly sympathizes with the Utes at Spanish Fork in their early troubles with the United States Army.

Langley has done a generally good job of editing the letters, and the University of Utah Press has made them attractively available, with contemporary illustrations, photocopies of some of the military records relevant to "Utah's" identification, and maps which are mildly anachronistic in that they locate the routes and place names of the 1850s on the states as their boundaries are today. Footnotes identify almost all of the people mentioned in the letters and many of the events mentioned by "Utah" are informatively explained. The fifteen-page introduction concentrates on the background of the Utah troubles and the recruitment and training of the 1858 reinforcements. The style is clear but a bit choppy; one might argue with the way a few details are handled, but the treatment is basically accurate.

To Utah With the Dragoons is weakest in those parts which are probably of greatest interest to the readers of *Brigham Young University Studies*. "Utah" apparently never had more than superficial contact with the Mormons, although the conventional anti-Mormon bias of his first dispatches gives way to a very sympathetic view of the LDS people as he meets them on the Overland Trail and among the workmen at Camp Floyd. If he ever went into Salt Lake City or Provo, it is not indicated in his letters, and his perspective on the controversies among Governor Cumming, General Johnston, Judge Eckels, et al., is that of a reader of newspapers and listener to barracks rumors. He reports seeing Brigham Young when the Mormon president visited the camp on several occasions, and being once introduced by the bricklayer-bishop with whom "Utah" was at the time working as a hod carrier. He expresses emphatic

admiration for Young as a man, but not for his doctrines; nor does he think much of the 1858 editorial policies of the *Deseret News*.

Langley's notes, too, are disappointing with regard to Utah affairs. Although he identifies the LDS leaders mentioned in the letters, the editor adds nothing to the dispatch references to Mormons involved in building and operating Camp Floyd, nor does he provide context for "Utah's" cryptic and pro-Cumming references to the troubles among the gentile authorities in the occupied territory. Mexican politics, to which tangential references are made in the California dispatches, receives more attention in the footnotes than Utah politics in connection with the letters from Camp Floyd.

This collection of letters makes informative and often entertaining reading. The chapter, "In Search of a Soldier," might be used with profit in an undergraduate seminar on historical method.