



1-1-1979

The Genteel Gentile— Letters of Elizabeth Cumming, 1857-1858 Ray C. Canning and Beverly Beeton

Eugene E. Campbell

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

Recommended Citation

Campbell, Eugene E. (1979) "*The Genteel Gentile— Letters of Elizabeth Cumming, 1857-1858* Ray C. Canning and Beverly Beeton," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol19/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All 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.

CANNING, RAY C. and BEVERLY BEETON, eds. *The Genteel Gentle—Letters of Elizabeth Cumming, 1857-1858*. Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1977. 111 pp. \$12.50.

Reviewed by Eugene E. Campbell, professor of history at Brigham Young University.

This handsome book, published in a limited edition, is number eight of the series, "Utah, The Mormons, and The West," which has included such valuable works as Elizabeth Wood Kane's *Twelve Mormon Homes* and Annie Clark Tanner's *A Mormon Mother*. These letters, eighteen in number, were written by Elizabeth Cumming, wife of Utah's first non-Mormon governor, during the time that she accompanied her husband, Alfred Cumming, and the elements of the U.S. army assigned to act as a *posse comitatus* to guarantee his acceptance by the Mormons as Brigham Young's successor in Utah. Three of the letters describe the trip from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Bridger; eleven were written from Camp Scott near burned-out Fort Bridger; and the remaining four give her impressions of Salt Lake City and the Mormons in the spring of 1858. Filled with interesting observations and details about the religion and people she encounters, Mrs. Cumming's letters provide a fresh view of the Utah Expedition. Her assertion that the winter months spent living in tents at Camp Scott were the "happiest and pleasantest months" of her life, while contemporary army diaries were filled with descriptions of the cold, miserable, boring—even desperate—time they were experiencing, probably tells more about her character than the actual conditions. Since her life to this point had not been unpleasant, one must conclude that here was a woman who enjoyed challenges and new adventures and who was able to see the bright side of a difficult situation. This buoyant attitude colors her descriptions of the landscape, her encounters with Indians, her attempts to entertain guests on holidays with limited supplies and facilities, and her observation of the Mormons and their accomplishments in Salt Lake Valley. Having both the time and the inclination to write detailed descriptions and observations, Elizabeth Cumming produced letters that are a valuable source of the woman's point of view.

Ever loyal to her husband, Alfred Cumming, Elizabeth in her letters portrays the new governor as the principal peacemaker and suggests that he risked his life when he chose to follow Thomas Kane's advice and enter Salt Lake City accompanied only by Kane and Mormon guards. She believed that her husband had accomplished "all alone" what the peace commissioners were sent to achieve, and she

has valid reasons for her position. Certainly Alfred Cumming's efforts to apply the laws of the country and yet mollify the Mormons and protect them in their constitutional rights in face of a bitter and embarrassed army is a human drama that needs to be publicized.

The wide-page format of the book permits the extensive notes to be printed in smaller type in a column paralleling the text of the letters rather than at the bottom of the page or at the end of the chapter. This device ties the notes more closely to the text and almost demands that the reader study them. Unfortunately, it detracts from getting the continuity of the letters and gives the reader the feeling that he is reading two different stories at the same time. Perhaps it would be best to read the entire letter first and then to study the notes and the letter in conjunction with each other.

The authors have written an excellent introduction, giving the background of Governor and Mrs. Cumming, and a survey of the Utah Expedition. They have also provided a substantial bibliography and index, as well as the copious notes based on such sources as Captain Gove's *Utah Expedition*, Lt. Marcy's *Army Life on the Border*, and the biography of Wm. Stowell, the captured Mormon soldier who supplied Mrs. Cumming with much firsthand information about the Mormons and their beliefs.

In summary, it is a beautiful book that should interest both the scholar and the history buff and is a must for anyone who teaches Utah history.