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Clinton F. Larson: "I Miss His Booming Laugh"

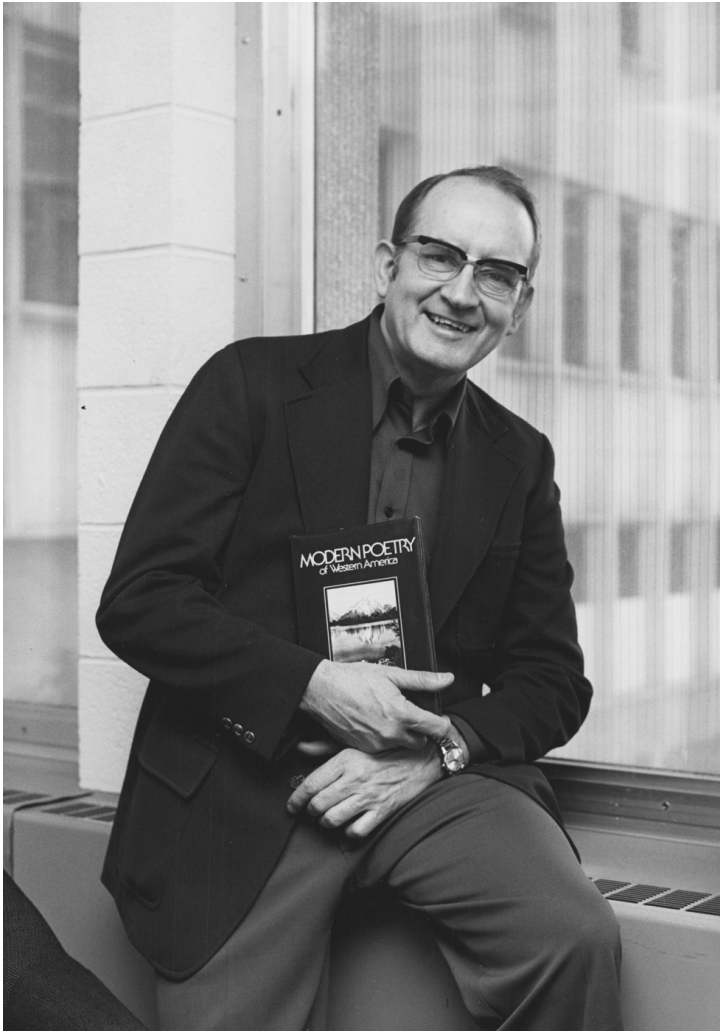
Neal E. Lambert

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Clinton F. Larson. Courtesy University Archives, Brigham Young University.

Clinton F. Larson

“I Miss His Booming Laugh”

Neal E. Lambert

On the evening of March 10, 2010, as a prelude to a symposium sponsored by BYU Studies to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, a special lecture was held in the Harold B. Lee Library Auditorium to honor Clinton F. Larson, founding editor of BYU Studies, and Hugh W. Nibley, frequent contributor to the journal. This event also introduced two new exhibits created by the L. Tom Perry Special Collections staff to honor the work of Larson and Nibley. The following remarks by Neal E. Lambert, one of Clinton Larson’s colleagues, were delivered at this special lecture.

First, you need to know that I am here tonight representing—certainly not replacing—Richard Cracroft, who, because of ill health, cannot be here himself. He has asked me to extend his sincere apologies for missing this assignment, “a job that I was looking forward to doing.” Dick’s witty voice would have been wonderfully appropriate here tonight, especially since he and Clinton have each had such significant roles in the establishment and recognition of Mormon literary expression. I regret, as well, that the circle of those who heard and knew firsthand the voice and personality of Clinton Larson is now rapidly shrinking. Seeing and hearing Clinton, the man, was an unforgettable experience.

Clinton was a presence. His tall, self-assured figure filled the space around him as no one else I have known. His tieless unbuttoned collar, his beltless trousers with suspenders were visible types of Clinton’s rejection of restraint, adjuring any constriction to his free-flowing blood and spirit. Even his office had its unique atmosphere with its plush rug and floor lamp, as though Clinton eschewed our usual asphalt tile and our fluorescent ceilings.



Neal Lambert, during his remarks, demonstrating how Clinton Larson would raise his right forefinger in triumph.

But it was his voice that I remember best—his roaring laughter, heard most often in the pleasure of successful wordplay, but sometimes, as well, in derision of something that he disapproved. In my memory's ear, I still hear his unmistakable voice from the department steno-pool where, standing over the pedestaled, multitudinous pages of the Oxford English Dictionary, his left forefinger pointing to the fifth (or the fifteenth) definition of some unfamiliar, latinate, polysyllabic word, his right forefinger raised in triumph, he would boom

out, "Aha! See! There it is! That is exactly what I meant," his forceful voice a response to some poor colleague's or critic's questioning of a certain word from one of his poems.

Clinton lived in an atmosphere of words. Indeed, he seemed most alive when, as he was wont, he unabashedly, without knock, inquiry, or introduction, would walk into one's office, fresh manuscript in hand to read in the sonorous sounds of his operatic baritone some lines from his latest composition. Clinton was, above all else, a practicing poet. And his practice was his passion.

Fortunately, his own talent was nurtured early on through his exposure as a missionary to the articulate and word-conscious Hugh B. Brown. That talent was further cultivated, refined, and directed under the influence of Brewster Ghiselin at the University of Utah. Through the years, other regional, national, and international poets recognized and utilized his work and his abilities. With William Stafford, he edited *Modern Poetry of Western America*, and with Andre Maurois, *La Poesie Contemporaine aux Etats-Unis*. He was instrumental in founding the Rocky Mountain Writers' Convention and the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, and he was the first to fill the position of BYU's poet in residence. This list simply skips a stone across the surface of his accomplishments.

Clinton was also, as we recognize in a special way here tonight, one of the founding forces and the first editor of *BYU Studies*. What we see in this journal now is the fruit of an effort launched five decades ago through the indefatigable efforts of Clinton Larson. And we can thank him for that.

His legacy is present in the anniversary we celebrate and recognize, tonight and in the days ahead. Indeed, Clinton was a pioneer, making possible much of what has come after him.

However, after all he has done, the poetry will be, at least for me, his most remembered legacy. As David Evans, one of Clinton's editors, said, Clinton is "one of the most significant" and highly respected writers of our time, and also one of the most prolific.¹ Eugene England called Clinton Larson "the spiritual father of [modern] Mormon literature,"² who showed us that writing by and about Latter-day Saints needs no apology.

So, how splendid it is to have now collected here both his published and his unpublished works, which now are available for consideration and study. The Clinton Larson collection that we recognize here tonight is a rich gathering, especially in its holographs, through which we can trace and explore the creative process itself, following Clinton's own aesthetic track—and his eclectic mind and heart and hand—as he made his way through words in the cause of Zion. So, in the end, we will remember Clinton as an extraordinary pioneer for Mormon literature at large.

But even beyond his place in the history of Mormon literary development, I believe we can as well remember him as an example of an artist working in his own atmosphere of faith. Clinton showed us how to draw significant expression from the deep well of our own belief. He showed us that the true poet writes well not in spite of his faith, but because of it. Indeed, as Richard Cracroft and I were working to establish our own serious consideration of the literature of Mormonism, we were floundering about, looking for a title for our collection. And it was Clinton who helped us understand what was at the heart of our gatherings. He was the one who helped us see the true center of what we had before us and gave us the title *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*.

That belief is present, implicit and explicit, in everything Clinton did. He articulated the grand qualities in the mundane efforts and quiet decisions of the Mormon migration as well as anyone I know, as demonstrated in this dialogue from "Mantle of the Prophet," giving voice to people living out a God-given history. Stephen Forbes and Nancy Dayton, two young Mormon lovers, ponder the future of leaving Nauvoo and going west, sound and sense combining in an expression of faith that takes on an almost epic quality. Stephen says to Nancy:

I have become Brigham's man.
 When he spoke of Joseph I saw
 A scimitar of cities against the mountains
 Where we must go, and somehow in him
 I saw Joseph again, the arm of Joseph
 That will bring us there:

Nancy, a scimitar of cities against the blue mountains,
 And a great city where the temple of the six spires
 Awakens the dawn of our people: . . .
 The temple of Joseph is there and golden Moroni
 In the flame of morning bursting from the eastern peaks;
 The singing morning is there and blue-clear night
 When the valley glows and the air is warm
 As the smile of Joseph: the meridian, north,
 And the temples rise in the gleaming scimitar.
 Come west, Nancy, our home is west;
 For that, we could leave Nauvoo;
 For the cities, we could walk a hundred years
 Beside the axletree and wagon wheel;
 We could forget the old lands behind us
 For the hundred years of prophecy in Brigham Young.³

For Clinton, religion—his faith—was not a source for metaphors by which to understand and explain his life, but rather his life was a metaphor by which he could understand and articulate his faith, his religion. Thus, Clinton's poetic vision saw the love and grace of God in the matters of everyday living.

Let me illustrate this point in two of his simplest and most accessible pieces. The first comes from a simple breakfast episode of spilt cereal, touching our human need for Fatherly understanding:

Granddaughter

Next to tears for the supposed naughtiness
 Of tipping oatmeal from her pastel bowl
 And spilling milk under our haughtiness,
 She displays the repentance of her soul

 Over there. Her gaze is tenuous with sorrow
 As she looks at the world, hoping for the best,
 Arms folded to gather herself for the harrow
 Of scolding. "Amen," she says in a tentative test

 Of our love, grace over, but willing to pray.
 I saw the lip of her tray had tipped her bowl,
 She not knowing why her oatmeal in disarray
 Was so, but feeling the sackcloth of her role.

 And there stand I as well with her as anywhere,
 Marvelling how to keep some order at hand,
 Displaying my hope glossily to keep fair
 Days of charity flowing like hourglass sand.⁴

This next poem draws on a typical Sabbath scene—one of the older sisters of the ward nodding off to sleep under the stern doctrines of a speaker

(probably from the high council). But it's a picture, not of irony nor humor, but of beauty and of God's own peace:

Sleeping in Church

Lovely, Lovely. She brought her rickety bones
 And her belief to church, and now she sleeps.
 Hardly in the arms of Morpheus, who weeps
 In envy of her peace, she nods as she atones
 For every ill she thought of, amid the knowns
 And unknowns of this life. A low moan seeps
 From chief authority that she abridges and defeats
 His charismatic rule, though he busily hones
 The edge of Calvinism, grim and erstwhile,
 Mulling doctrine. But Sunday is a day
 Of rest, as she knows it. Who would defile
 Such peace? Not I. The church is hers, a way
 To house the inner light and the inner sight
 Of God it proffers, not the whittling spite
 Against her Christian will. Oh, lovely, lovely she,
 Aging at eighty-five in the arms of her creator!⁵

Certainly, the last word regarding Clinton Larson's poetry has not been written. We can be grateful that this collection will make possible a better understanding and a fuller appreciation of what this extraordinary person and pioneer has done. I think it appropriate to conclude with Richard Cracroft's own assessment of his friend. He said to me, as he regretfully handed this assignment off, "I love Clinton. He was a wonderful colleague, good-humored friend, remarkable poet; his contribution to Mormon letters is considerable, influential, and ongoing. I miss his booming laugh." So do we all.

Neal E. Lambert (neallambert@gmail.com) is Professor Emeritus of English and American Studies at BYU. His teaching and writing have focused on early American literature, the literature of the American West, and Mormon literature. He and Richard Cracroft edited an anthology of Mormon writing, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*. He also served as Department Chair and as Associate Academic Vice President.

1. David L. Evans, ed., *Selected Poems of Clinton F. Larson* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1988), xi.

2. Eugene England, "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," in *Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995), 471.

3. Clinton F. Larson, "The Mantle of the Prophet: A Poetry Drama," *BYU Studies* 2, no. 2 (1960): 193-226.

4. Evans, *Selected Poems*, 5.

5. Evans, *Selected Poems*, 4.