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Brigham Young: Sovereign in America

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David Vaughn Mason. *Brigham Young: Sovereign in America*.

Routledge Historical Americans Series. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Reviewed by Roger Terry

I first came across David Mason's writing in the *Washington Post's* "On Faith" blog, to which he contributed. Mason is a Latter-day Saint, the son of a BYU physics professor, and an associate professor of theatre at Rhodes College in Tennessee. His blog posts were atypical, to say the least, but insightful and well written. I emailed him about one of his posts, and we began an intermittent but friendly correspondence. A couple of years ago, Mason emailed me to say he was in Utah doing research for a short biography Routledge had commissioned him to write about Brigham Young, and he wondered if he could take me to lunch. I was curious. Why would a respected academic publisher ask a theatre professor to write a biography of a religious leader? I was not alone. "For reasons I'm sure I don't understand," Mason wrote me, "Routledge gave me a contract to write a Brigham Young biography, so I'm in Utah until mid-July to pretend I'm a historian."¹ Someone at Routledge had apparently seen his blog posts, as I had, and liked his writing style.

Now that the book is in print, the question is, did Mason just pretend to be a historian? I would argue no. Keep in mind, this is not a full-blown biography on the order of, say, Leonard Arrington's *Brigham Young: American Moses*, Eugene England's *Brother Brigham*, or John Turner's more recent *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet*. Routledge's stated purpose with its Historical Americans series is to create a collection of "short, vibrant biographies that illuminate the lives of Americans who have had an impact on the world. Each book includes a short overview of the person's life and puts that person into historical context through essential primary documents, written both by

1. David Mason to Roger Terry, email, June 4, 2013.

the subjects and about them” (ii). The list of these biographies to date is eclectic: Woody Guthrie, Frederick Douglas, Thurgood Marshall, Harry Truman, John Winthrop, John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Benjamin Franklin, Mary Lincoln, and, of course, Brigham Young.

Mason’s biography of Young is a scant 145 pages, followed by a section of eight relevant historical documents. The idea behind the Routledge series is that these biographies are to be concise enough for use by college professors as supplemental texts for their American history courses but complete enough to give students a thorough introduction to each subject’s life. This is also the reason why the books in this series are available in paperback with a list price of \$34.95. But I would caution readers not to judge this book by its cover (or its cover price). In the context of the series’ intent, I found that Mason’s treatment of Brigham Young succeeded surprisingly well. Even after reading Turner’s more comprehensive biography, I still gleaned new information and fresh insights from the Routledge publication.

I was particularly impressed with how many original sources Mason mined, from Young’s correspondence with his wives and fellow Church leaders to his office diary and his speeches (as recorded in both the *Journal of Discourses* and the Historian’s Office Report of Speeches). Equally notable, given both the brevity of the book and the short timetable this nonhistorian scholar had to work within, is the range of secondary sources he consulted in producing this very readable history of a remarkably diverse leader. After our lunch together, I brought Mason back to the BYU Studies office and loaded him down with a copy of every book we had published that was remotely related to Brigham Young. And although the author mentions this gesture in his acknowledgements, I was interested to see that while he lists only a couple of these sources in his footnotes, he cites more than thirty different *BYU Studies* articles as well as scores of other journal articles, books, and newspaper reports—enough to fill eight pages of bibliography in a very small type size.

A book of this size and purpose must, of necessity, leave many things out, but I am pleasantly surprised at how much Mason was able to shoe-horn in. This is partly due to his writing style, which summarizes and synthesizes intricate events and interactions in readable and pithy prose. In this regard, the Routledge editors apparently knew what they were doing. There is scarcely a significant issue or event in Young’s very eventful life that Mason does not directly address or skillfully weave into his

narrative. He brings certain overarching themes to the fore and shows how these tie together to make sense of a man who could otherwise be viewed as self-contradictory and contrarian. The Brigham Young who emerges from these pages is a man driven by his commitment to the cause of Zion above all else and convinced that he has the innate ability to hold it all together.

As one would expect, this is not a hagiographic work (something a non-LDS publisher would be disinclined to produce) and the Brigham Young Mason portrays is sometimes not a very likable person. The book touches upon his charged language from the pulpit, his persecution-inspired suspicion over government intrusion, his mistrust of gentile merchants, his disputes with fellow Church leaders, his handling of the handcart program, his few now-discarded doctrinal innovations, his communitarian enterprises that were later disbanded, and his statements on race and priesthood that have troubled many, but the man depicted in this biography is still a remarkable human being as well as a believable one.

Some may feel that this book cannot provide a balanced look at Young because the author does not focus on the spiritual experiences or doctrinal contributions of this religious leader. Clearly it is beyond the publisher's parameters for a volume such as this to make the case that Young was God's representative on earth, although Mason does give an accounting early in the book of Young's initial religious ambivalence and protracted conversion to Mormonism, offering credible reasons for such a permanent personal commitment. He also makes a compelling argument that without Mormonism Brigham Young would have lived out his life in relative obscurity.

Mason divides his subject's life into a mere seven short chapters, each chronicling a major period in Young's incredible journey. These chapters are titled "Out of Obscurity," "Pushed Ahead," "A New Society," "The Exodus," "Deseret," "A Civil War," and "Brigham's Kingdom." As the story unfolds, we see a poverty-stricken child, who lost his mother when he was fourteen and whose strict disciplinarian father set him free to fend for himself at age sixteen, grow into an intensely independent man who nevertheless embraces a radical new religion, which then allows him to rise through adversity and fierce loyalty to a station of prominence (and ridicule) that few Americans have achieved.

Brigham Young is one of the most complex figures in American (and, I would argue, Mormon) history, and Mason does not shy away from any of the apparent contradictions that help define the man. Instead, by

identifying a central priority in Brigham's makeup, he attempts to bring a tentative, albeit sometimes jarring, congruence to the outwardly warring attributes of Mormonism's second prophet. Perhaps this effort can be best illustrated by Young's elaborate views regarding women. Mason points out that while Brigham promoted education for women, orchestrated their right to vote, and reestablished the Relief Society, he also "insisted that women were cursed, naturally inclined to be led by men, and ought to worry more about their children's welfare than about getting the attention of their husbands" (124). Mason reconciles Young's seeming ambivalence by suggesting that Brigham "made policy according to what would best promote the material interests of the kingdom. Wherever women could contribute to the operation and expansion of the church, he advocated their liberation. Where their emancipation threatened the stability of the organization and its male hierarchy, Brigham retrenched" (124–25). Women's right to vote was thus a strategic move aimed at strengthening Young's hold on political power in the territory in the face of the Godbeite revolt and not a cause in itself worthy of his attention. The subtle implication in Mason's focus, of course, is that he assumes Young merely turns people into instruments in a "greater" cause rather than seeing them as the underlying reason for the cause.

This view may apply to a degree, and yet even here Young is more complex and unclassifiable than Mason's framework allows. I would have liked to see him view Young even briefly through the eyes of non-Mormon writer Elizabeth Kane, for instance, who recognized that despite Brigham's sometimes gruff and authoritarian exterior, the people did seem to genuinely love him, and he them.² Nevertheless, her grudging admiration for the man still allowed for ulterior motives in Brigham's interactions with his people: "They talked away to Brigham about every conceivable matter . . . and expected him to remember every child in every cotter's family. And he really seemed to do so, and to be at home, and be rightfully deemed infallible on every subject. . . . I noticed that he never seemed uninterested, but gave an unforced attention to the person addressing him, which suggested a mind free from care. I used to fancy that he wasted a great deal of power in this way;

2. See Edward A. Geary, "Tom and Bessie Kane and the Mormons," in *Colonel Thomas L. Kane and the Mormons, 1846–1883*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), 121–57.

but I soon saw that he was accumulating it.”³ Indeed, such multifaceted power has rarely been accrued or exercised in American history.

Mason does not argue, however, that power itself was Brigham’s ambition. Throughout Young’s presidency, in Mason’s view, he was single-mindedly devoted to building God’s kingdom and to the concomitant belief that he, above others, possessed the capacity to direct the kingdom’s earthly affairs. Seen through this prism, many of Young’s superficially contradictory or troubling actions and policies begin to make sense at a deeper level. And this is the source of Mason’s subtitle. In his concluding words:

The kingdom Brigham aspired to rule required revolution, and he was, undeniably, a revolutionary figure. He knew poverty, he saw new, wrenching forms of it in England, and he meant to make a government that would eliminate want and desperation. He saw the determination of the United States to bring his kingdom under its control as the imposition of the same old oppression that inevitably resulted in misery, fury, and war. The enormity of the task of building an alternative, the persistence of the opposition, and the dire consequences of failure moved him to demand absolute obedience, in spite of himself. No one else, he was sure, had the insight nor the grit to see the task through.

He had no choice, then, but to be a monarch. For the sake of justice, for the sake of the people, for righteousness, and for the triumph of the kingdom, Brigham had to be sovereign in America. (140)

Roger Terry is editorial director at *BYU Studies*, an avid reader with diverse tastes, and the author of books, articles, essays, reviews, editorials, and short fiction.

3. Geary, “Tom and Bessie Kane,” 143.