Heber C. Kimball, Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer Stanley B. Kimball

Ronald W. Walker

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Reviewed by Ronald W. Walker, senior research historian for the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History, Brigham Young University. 

Writing a biography of President Heber C. Kimball, Brigham’s First Counselor and pioneer Utah’s number two man, requires a
skillful and steady hand. The man was a kaleidoscope of jarring images. When standing behind a pulpit, he could be irrepressible to the point of coarseness and gaucherie. In contrast, his domestic moments were often filled with tenderness and timidity. His contemporaries saw him as incurably optimistic; yet there is ample evidence that he doubted, at times severely, his own abilities. His boisterous humor, like the celebrated wit of his son J. Golden Kimball, masked a serious-minded, meditative, and private soul. The Eastern press caricatured him as an artless bumpkin, but those who knew him best recognized his integrity and even spiritual majesty. In short, he was Heber—unique and idiosyncratic, a phenomenon.

Stanley B. Kimball is the second kinsman to attempt a biography. Orson F. Whitney, a grandson, completed his Victorian portrait in 1888. The two works show the distance Mormon biography has traveled in the last century. The first, like most religious biography of its era, was heavy with quotation, exhortation, and adulation—and correspondingly weak in research and characterization. At first glance, Stanley B. Kimball’s sketch is far removed from the other work. It is a “historical” biography, displaying the tools and mood of a twentieth-century research historian. Footnote paraphernalia show the author’s wide-ranging, longtime study of the sources, and the reader will be introduced to a large body of new and interesting material. There is also candor. As the author pledges in his preface, “Heber has not been prettied up for contemporary tastes” (p. xiii). The result may be distressing for those who like their biographical figures to be universally praiseworthy. But after one notes how the author has stacked Heber’s discordant features against his considerable strengths and remembers that Utah was a rough-and-ready frontier, this portrait is not unflattering. Indeed, while Stanley Kimball’s prose is far more detached than Orson Whitney’s, it still conveys Mormon sympathy and idiom.

Stanley Kimball sees his progenitor as a Mormon archetype. From his conversion in 1832 to his death in 1868, thirty-six years later, Heber charted the Mormon experience. He embraced the new faith in New York, experienced the trials of Kirtland and Missouri, opened the British Mission, and after a brief tenure in Nauvoo pioneered the western plains, and settled in Utah. Moreover, his personality reflected his own generation and perhaps succeeding ones as well. Heber is seen as “voluble, visible, totally lacking in sophistication” (p. xii). When speaking before the Saints (and one suspects on a larger stage as well), he was “plain, definite, unpremeditated, eccentric, rough, disjointed, hard, and severe” (p. 269); yet there

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were also "imagination and humor" (p. 269) and "total integrity, raw courage and indomitable faith" (p. 260). But, his final years were touched by tragedy. The author argues that while Heber's Mormon devotion was unrivaled, as the Church matured his rough-hewn talents increasingly fell by the wayside. He died defensive and at times cantankerous, his influence decreasing or replaced. Events had passed him by.

The book's subtitle is apt, for emphasis is given to Heber as "patriarch and pioneer." His numerous wives are listed, catalogued, and repeatedly mentioned throughout the text, though without the precision and feeling the task probably requires. Questions of spouse relationship and obligation in the complicated marriage system remain unanswered, and until someone sorts out the meaning and reality of the respective "wives," it is premature to rank Heber as more married than his file-leader Brigham. However, serving as a case study, the book confirms previous scholarship that Mormon polygamy had little salacious passion. Heber is a dutiful, reluctant, and at times insensitive husband whose "portion of domestic discord and disappointment was probably greater than that of any other modern Western man" (p. xii)—not too much of an exaggeration given the magnitude of his endeavor.

The biography skillfully describes Heber's western trek, taking advantage of the author's unsurpassed knowledge of the trail. Fully a quarter section of the book is devoted to the hegira (about a sixth of its pagination), and the time is well spent. Here the narrative is at its best, having a confident sense of detail and place, allowing the reader to smell the campfires and observe the picturesque. Heber himself becomes animated: "'Hunting, riding, fishing, exploring, he investigated caves, climbed vertiginous promontories, rolled stones down steep mountains, stood guard, scouted, fought quicksand and prairie fire, [and] was chased by a she-bear'" (p. 155).

Unfortunately, the narrative is not as surefooted when it moves into the Utah period. The usual (and often picayune) errors which normally plague first editions become more frequent in this section of the book. The map of pioneer Salt Lake City has several mistakes, including limiting the pioneer fort to a city block and confusing the Seventies Council Hall with the never-built Seventies Hall of Science. Certainly more than a "few" Saints deserted Zion for California gold. The implication that Heber was basically orthodox on the Adam-God question, at least by modern standards, is problematic.

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Moreover, Heber’s claims as Brigham’s possible successor rested on his apostolic seniority, not on his position as President Young’s First Counselor.

There are several problems with documentation. The book’s first endnote incorrectly suggests that the George Q. Cannon journals are lodged in the Mormon Library–Archives instead of in the First Presidency Office. With historians long eager to use this restricted source, LDS Librarian–Archivist Donald T. Schmidt can expect an unseemly clamor at his door. The author has inexplicably chosen to identify the Kimball diaries in his endnotes by an abandoned and cumbersome archival description and not by the present identifying system which was adopted by the LDS archives almost a decade ago. And the book’s bibliographic note is so brief and vague that it has little utility.

Despite its refreshing honesty, detail, and character dimension, *Heber C. Kimball* leaves much unsaid. What were Heber’s administrative duties beyond his presiding over the Endowment House and his frequent consulting with President Young? Did he exert “informal” or indirect influence in other ways besides his unusual preaching? How important was he? The intimate Kimball–Young friendship, perhaps pivotal in understanding both men, is explored only lightly and psychologically not at all. More perplexing, in contrast to exploring Heber’s public image, the narrative gives little attention to his private dealings and relationships—where Heber Kimball most revealed himself as a warm and compassionate human being. And in a broader context, how would Heber “stack up” if measured by his nineteenth-century norms and peers?

What is most lacking is a sense of the inner man, a solution to the enigma of Heber C. Kimball. While the text chronicles a career and while its adjectives seem accurate, an understandable human life fails to emerge. We look vainly for a key to Heber’s personality, evidence of psychological tension, or insights into how his experiences molded him. And we ask for meaning. “A man’s life of any worth,” Keats held, “is a continual allegory” into the “mystery of life.” Biography must speak beyond the experience of a man or woman to comment on the human spirit. This transcendent quality, revealing the universals of everyday experience, never quite emerges from the narrative.

The science and research of a historian is most evident in this work, not the penetrating art of a narrative biographer. Yet within its parameters, this is a solid contribution to the growing body of Mormon biography and in this category may be ranked as one of the half dozen best. That more is requested confirms the relative youth of serious LDS life-writing. It also shows, as the book suggests, that
Heber C. Kimball was “larger-than-life.” These are the ones for whom no portraitist’s canvas is ever sufficient.