

How Then Should We Write History?

ANOTHER VIEW

Ronald K. Esplin

IN discussing issues of faith and history, we are not dealing with matters unique or new to Mormonism. The questions have parallels in other societies, and most of them have been discussed before in our own. Recently some Church officials have criticized much contemporary writing about the history of the Church. To some, these remarks seemed a brief for distortion and dishonesty in history, a prescription that would make responsible scholarship impossible. A condemnation of all we have tried to do, said one; an excommunication of historians, said another. *Newsweek* highlighted such concerns as "Historians versus Apostles."

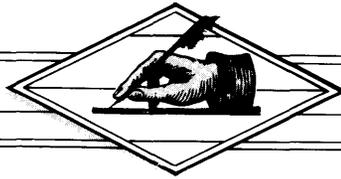
Why, we might ask, does some history so trouble the stewards of faith? Are they narrow, embattled, fearful men who would resort to suppression of the truth in an attempt to calm the waters? Or are there reasonable, understandable grounds for concern? For historians to read remarks narrowly and apply them in a proof text kind of way appears, it seems to me, almost as if we wanted straw men to battle; it is unfair both to the officials and to our craft.

I believe it is more fair and reasonable to read their remarks as broad statements of concern. With that in mind, it seems clear that the heart of the matter has less to do with *what* historians include in their histories than it does with *how* events are presented. The central issue put simply: How do we write history that does justice to all aspects of the historical experience of a religious people?

Professor James L. Clayton's paper may be read as an able defense of the standard secular brand of history. If only critics would understand the kind of tool such history is and give it room, he hints, all would be well between history and faith. I am not convinced that this standard approach is a perfected tool, nor do I believe that it is the best or only way to write Mormon history. It has produced important insights and will continue to do so, but, like any methodology, it is imperfect and neither requires nor deserves exclusive and unqualified loyalty.

A major limitation of the traditional Rankean approach to history, note critics within the profession, is that no historian can actually be "objective" in any ideal or perfect way. An approach to historical truth that assumes otherwise is unrealistic and naive; studied neutrality is merely pose. In a given instance, historians may not even agree on what is fact, let alone what is relevant fact. Facts have to be discovered, selected, related, analyzed, explained, and presented, all activities involving judgment and interpretation. For that reason, as one scholar has noted, "an objective knowledge of the past can only be obtained through the subjective experience of the scholar."¹ Historians can question fearlessly, investigate with integrity, systematize honestly—and still arrive at varying conclusions, inescapably influenced by what they individually believe. For that reason there is room within the breadth of rigorous historical scholarship for multiple responsible interpretations.

Another problem with traditional "objective" history



is that most who write from this perspective share a particular set of assumptions that are anything but sympathetic toward religion. Because of their training most historians instinctively think of the secular, liberal outlook as "objective, obvious, and natural," notes historian Richard Bushman, "even though when we stop to think about it we know it is as much a set of biases as any other outlook."² Such biases, acknowledges one proponent, predispose historians "to ignore or slight spiritual values."³ That is certainly one reason why histories of Mormonism contain relatively little about the religious, even though the documents of Mormon history are full of the religious.

For example, historians routinely describe Brigham Young as a temporal leader of great practical genius. But contemporaries as disparate as the British apostate John Hyde and the French traveler Jules Remy agreed that it was President Young's deep religious sincerity that motivated him and bonded his followers to him. The record suggests that he could remain serene in the face of impossible odds and short-term failures because he was personally certain that, in the long run, the kingdom would triumph and, as he often said, no power of earth or hell could prevent it. Clearly an approach that would deal insightfully and forthrightly with these aspects of his life would have the potential to more fully explain Brigham Young and his people than interpretations based on secular assumptions alone.⁴

When we become bold enough to overcome our timidity in dealing with the religious aspects of our past, we will write better history. I learned this lesson several years ago when Leonard Arrington and I delivered a paper about the Quorum of the Twelve during the administration of Brigham Young at a rump session of the American Historical Association in New York City. The commentators, non-Mormon scholars from eastern schools, first praised the study as traditional history and then pointed out that it fell short in dealing adequately

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with the religious issues involved. In the words of one, "I do not think that [the authors] exploit the religious nature of their materials fully enough." Parts may be "superb history," but there is "little interpretation of religious meaning."⁵ We had left vital dimensions unexplored.

Both commentators were from "history of religions," a relatively new discipline, which offers an alternative to

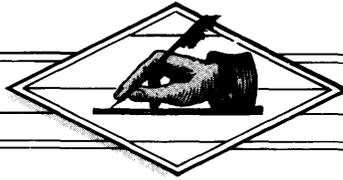
the secular bias of "ordinary" history. Historians of religions attempt to discern what is at the core of the religious impulse in a given historical situation.⁶ This approach, and associated perspectives from the broad field of religious studies, should be explored by Mormon historians seeking to deal more adequately with their own religious heritage.

Perhaps the most difficult problem in writing religious history—and through the ages history in general—has been determining to what extent God intervenes in the world of men. As pointed out by Mormon historian Howard Searle, histories have generally been from one of two polarized perspectives: "extreme supernaturalism" or "providential history," which assumed that all could be explained by reference to God's will; or "naturalism" which assumed that all could be explained as the result of impersonal forces or actions of man without reference to divine intervention or to the supernatural.⁷ This latter scientific view of history, subscribing to a Kantian denial of the possibility of scholarly insight into the world of God, holds that scholars can neither detect nor therefore acknowledge the hand of God.

Several years ago Douglas Tobler suggested that our own Mormon history would be more accurate "if it takes into account some awareness of God's role," both in the unfolding of the Church and in human history generally.⁸ Both our history and our theology demand that we do this. Like Judaism and Christianity, Mormonism is a historical religion that posits and indeed depends on the hand of God in history. A perspective that does not even allow for this possibility is severely limited in dealing with the history of a religious people. As Searle has pointed out, Mormon theology requires that historians take into account both God's hand and man's agency.

Some have suggested that recent statements by Church leaders dismiss this need for middle ground and insist that we find only the hand of God. Professor Clayton cited a statement that to him suggests nothing short of literally showing the hand of God as the prime mover in every act can be acceptable. Nonsense. Even scripture does not do that. I am convinced that is not what Church leaders are calling for. Interpreting their statements as banning history that takes into account men's agency and abilities makes as much sense as trying to take all of Brigham Young's hyperbole literally, where the literal is ludicrous but the message is clear. The Church official was simply saying, it seems to me, that this is the history of God's work, his people, his kingdom, and that some of what has occurred has been providential. How can we write true history and not allow for that possibility. Can we not sometimes acknowledge God's hand, point to it, allow for it?

The leader's message is a plea that historians write in a manner that will allow the Saints to see the hand of God where it was. Even though with mortal eyes and earthly tools we may not know with certainty when or where, our history must be written to allow for those moments



or it is less than complete and true. We can, for example, permit actors in our past to speak with a strong voice when they thought they saw or felt the hand of God. We might write with the artistry of a Thomas Flexner who, in a subtle, understated way, leaves room for Providence in his highly-acclaimed life of George Washington.

If we must allow for the hand of God in our histories, we must also deal with the reality of man's agency and his capacity to make mistakes. The issue is not infallibility; no one expects flawless, one-sided Saints. Church leaders understand their own limitations and recognize the same in leaders past. When one Church official recently mentioned with dismay the scholar who delighted in pointing out the frailties of our leaders, his concern clearly was not that weaknesses in history had been acknowledged but rather that they had not been kept in proportion, placed in balanced context. This latter was the approach used in the biography of President Kimball; and it is the approach promoted in the preface to Frank Fox's biographical volume on J. Reuben Clark where President Marion G. Romney insists on an account that tells of "decisions and indecisions, sorrows and joys, regrets and aspirations, reverses and accomplishments, and, above all, . . . constant striving."

Clearly we cannot and need not avoid mentioning the negative in Church history. In a lecture directed to family historians, James B. Allen described the challenge well. Without being blind to or glossing over faults, the writer must remember, he counseled, that his goal is to show how his subject's actions relate to his own concerns and his own time. This, the opposite of debunking, is not easy. Surprising and disappointing information about an ancestor must be handled wisely, he noted, avoiding both sensational and flippant approaches that make it stand out beyond its real significance. Professor Allen advised writers to adopt a low-key approach, telling the truth by working it naturally into the web of the work in such a way "that the subject's real life and genuine personality as well as your own integrity as a biographer are all preserved."⁹

In writing about Brigham Young, for example, I could focus on a series of weaknesses, imperfections, supposed problems—which has been done. Or I could describe his power as a leader and suggest that power depended on his goodness and his faith; I could illustrate the bond between him and his people and demonstrate that it rested on respect for his character and ability; then I could mention his frailties matter-of-factly as part of a detailed review of his performance and thus provide a more balanced perspective. It would be possible to detail his unrefined language and perhaps shock readers with several unusually strong examples. Or more fairly I could tell how he was a master of language, how he consciously used hyperbole and exaggeration, even a "cuss" word or two, for powerful effect; I could share his own rationale for doing that, explain how it suited his time and place, then give specific examples that illustrate why he spoke as he did and how effective he was.

The scriptures are a good model of how to deal with

the human side of history. Some historians have argued that the scriptures are a model for the kind of full disclosure that pulls no punches about the humanity and imperfections of participants. Such a limited view of the scriptural model does not explain why the scriptures seldom offend the faithful, however. An editorial in the *Seventh East Press*, an independent BYU student newspaper, recently pointed out the obvious reason: although the Old Testament (for example) seems almost to go out of its way to show how "mortal and imperfect" its heroes were, it also affirms unequivocally their prophetic callings. The reader, in other words, learns of

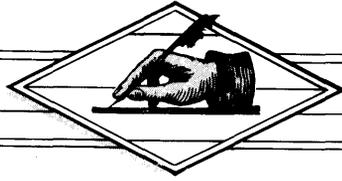
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their humanness in the same place he learns of their strengths and of their divine commission. That, as the editorial notes, is why knowing their weaknesses does not interfere with or damage faith.¹⁰

It is possible then to present honest, full-dimensional portraits of past Mormon figures that increase the understanding of the Saints without incurring the displeasure of Church officials. Although historians cannot affirm divine commission as does scripture, they can provide a context that promotes understanding. As one General Authority told an assistant Church historian in 1972, "You can say whatever you need to if you say it in the context of faith."

But can such a history, which allows for the hand of God in history and deals kindly with imperfect humanity, be credible and scholarly? Concern for credibility is one reason many historians stay comfortably within the fold of "scientific" history. Along with a tendency to equate its own perspective with "objective, obvious, and natural," secular scholarship also tends to judge as biased and distorted anything that differs in tone or perspective and, in the case of religious history, to label it apologetics and dismiss it. Clearly, uncritical polemics jeopardize the hardwon advances of historical scholarship. No historian wants to return to the kind of history that Elder John A. Widtsoe once characterized as displaying "such extreme religious partisanship that even the sympathetic reader can place no reliance upon [its] statements."¹¹

To avoid such traps we must build on a solid foundation of scholarship. He who is ignorant of the evidence or contradicts it, he who would substitute inspiration without labor for the rigors of historical investigation and analysis, deserves to be believed by neither Saint nor Gentile. As Douglas Tobler has



cautioned, we have an obligation to examine critically and with integrity everything that has bearing on our subject, "including errors, examples of bad judgment, misplaced zeal, sin and willful wrong doing of every kind," without suppressing evidence, succumbing to pressure, or distorting what is uncomfortable.¹²

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Anything short of that is not history. If we are tough-minded and uncompromising in our scholarship, however, we should be able to present directly, in a warm and sympathetic manner, what we ultimately believe to be true. Tone and perspective, in other words, should not be the criteria for judging historical scholarship. History need not be secular to be honest and scholarly. Scholarship should be judged by weighing such things as acquaintance with relevant sources, honesty in the use of documents, integrity in presentation, quality of insights, and adequacy of interpretation—does it, in fact take into account the data and provide plausible explanations, for example?

But can the religionist, some will ask, analyze the evidence with an open mind? Certainly he can as easily as can the secularist. Some aspects of Mormon theology actually promote open-minded probing. Convinced that human agency is sacred and eternal, the Mormon historian expects to find ambiguity, complexity, human involvement in all the things of God. He can, without preconceptions about the mixture of the human and the divine in any given situation, explore and investigate the evidence. A conviction that the Church's message is correct and its history can withstand scrutiny also fuels frank and honest probing. For such a historian, faith and history are interrelated and compatible.

That does not mean, of course, that history presents no questions for the faithful. Recently Professor Clayton wrote that he suspected Mormons took their history seriously only "up to the point where it begins to undermine their faith,"¹³ suggesting that there is a point at which history necessarily undermines faith. On the contrary, I am convinced that members of the Church can face all of the complexities of the past and emerge with their faith intact, that an in-depth rather than a superficial knowledge of history offers solutions to most of the questions which seem to threaten faith. Unfortunately scholars are better at communicating the questions their work has raised than they are at suggesting the personally satisfying answers they have found. But honest history sensitively written can be an

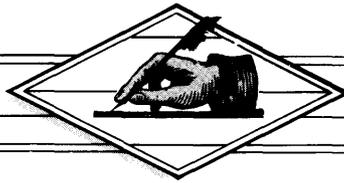
important aid to informed faith.

As a member of a recent panel on faith and history, I was asked if historians could write honest history about the difficult areas of our past and uphold and strengthen the Church at the same time. I answered that it was not only possible but that we had a special responsibility to write about the difficult areas and thus assist our people in understanding them. I am not suggesting that it can be easily done, but it is essential if we would have a strong, informed people. Our past will always be with us. As a historical religion we could not escape it if we would. We must learn to live with it.

Most Mormons grow up with and come to rely on "ritualized" or simplified versions of the past; all groups do this. Suitable for Pioneer Day commemorations or Sunday School classes, such history is both necessary and useful. Since it preserves central truths by focusing on the "big picture," however, it excludes nuances and also prunes details, therefore providing little help in dealing with the complex realities of life in any age. For example, we often speak of being driven from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley. That is true, as far as it goes, but it is hardly the whole story. The larger story of coming West, a compelling and complex epic that begins before the formation of mobs in Illinois, is not only more accurate but has more power to uplift and instruct. Told in detail, it can provide a case study of the God-man partnership.

It is essential that members of the Church make the transition from Pioneer Day history to the more complete and complex realities of history as it happened. Not only does the detailed history have more potential to edify, it can also inoculate against disillusionment. Today members are frequently exposed to ideas not easily assimilated if one is acquainted only with "ritualized" history, the necessary "milk" of Church history, nor do adversaries leave us unaware of the problems in our past. Those unwilling to move beyond the generalizations of simplified history are "set up" to stumble, perhaps over some inconsequential "problem" for which there are sound answers. Historians can ease this necessary transition while immunizing against distorted versions of real issues presented by those who would use history as a weapon to undermine faith.

Perhaps even more than with secular learning, which also is best absorbed in small doses, matters touching on faith require growth grace by grace and learning line upon line. One does not overnight move comfortably from Pioneer Day generalizations to the complexities of Church history. Consequently, in scriptural terms, care must be taken when feeding meat to those otherwise existing on milk (I Cor. 3:2; I Peter 2:2; D&C 19:22). This is the reason that scriptures and Church leaders in our dispensation (today and in the past) agree in cautioning that theological truths and, we can assume, historical ones as well, should not be presented before we can "bear them" (John 16:12; D&C 50:40). In support of "full disclosure," some historians cite scriptural references emphasizing the importance of truth—and indeed there



are many—as if they were unaware of the parallel scriptural cautions. One historian used John 16:13 for this purpose, overlooking the irony that, in context, the scripture is a clear warning against giving more truth than people, in this case trusted disciples, were ready to bear!

Admittedly, as historians we cannot control to whom our writings go. That, it seems to me, is all the more reason to be alert to their potential impact and to write carefully, exercising wisdom in how we present our history. By doing this we can help insure that the tension between faith and history will be a creative or dynamic tension, not a destructive one. Just as individuals must weigh the respective demands of obedience and personal agency, so the reader of history encountering for the first time new ideas and new information, must reexamine assumptions and personal understandings. In either case, the process of reexamination is both inevitable and, properly resolved, positive, as Elder John A. Widtsoe implied in his statement urging that men “should test their religious beliefs” as part of a “sincere and honest search for truth.”¹⁴

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From the secular perspective of traditional history, scholarship and faith have often been viewed as “mutually exclusive perspectives,” sparking the fear that mixing them “sooner or later will compromise the one or the other.”¹⁵ Rather than the compartmentalization required by this point of view¹⁶, many historians today seek integration. Leonard Arrington has noted that attempts to “integrate or synthesize religious beliefs and historical philosophy and methodology” do not necessarily bring today the scorn or ridicule they once might have. The effort still is not without risk, however, and the historian who makes the attempt is in danger of being charged within the Church with believing too little, and without with believing too much. Nonetheless, as Professor Arrington noted, many Mormon historians today have made that integration and do find “moral meaning and spiritual significance” in the events of Mormon history.¹⁷

How should we write Mormon history then? In many ways. Audience, subject, purpose, and individual perspective will continue to influence how our history is written, and we must resist any tendency to exclude all but one brand of history as unscholarly, unfaithful, or inappropriate. But there is clear need for additional exploration of approaches that deal adequately with the

religious aspects of our history and that better integrate scholarship and faith.

More than twelve years ago historian Richard Bushman postulated that for “authentic forms of Mormon-style history” to ultimately emerge in the works of Mormon historians, we must “believe our framework as sincerely as the Progressive historians believed in economic forces or as any of our secular contemporaries believe in their theories of motivation and social change.”¹⁸ Today there are examples of professional Mormon history dealing sensitively with religion and with religious questions, suggesting that this has occurred and that new forms of history may, indeed, result. Meanwhile, the challenge issued by Douglas Tobler several years ago remains:

In a secular world Mormon historians need to write “faithful history”; faithful to the truth as they understand it; faithful to the memories of those who have gone before; faithful to themselves with whom they must live, faithful to the God-man partnership. Their history will . . . put Mormonism in its proper context: not yet in heaven, nor beneath the earth, but on the earth reaching upward.¹⁹

Notes

1. Hajo Holborn in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History* (New York: Donald Publishing, 1956), p. 25.
2. Richard Bushman, “Faithful History,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Winter 1969): 15.
3. James L. Clayton, draft of letter, November 1981, copy in possession of author. See also his “A Response to History and Theology: The Mormon Connection,” *SUNSTONE* 5 (November/December 1980): 51, where he discusses traditional history as “fundamentally secular.”
4. For a discussion of the religious foundation of Brigham Young’s leadership and some of the professional approaches that may help illuminate it, see Ronald K. Esplin, “The Emergence of Brigham Young and the Twelve to Mormon Leadership, 1830-1841,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1981), pp. 1-18.
5. Catherine Albanese, “Response: Administrative Patterns in Religious Organizations,” unpublished paper, copy in possession of author.
6. *Ibid.*
7. See Howard Searle, “Early Mormon Historiography: Writing the History of the Mormons, 1830-1858,” (Ph.D., UCLA, 1979), pp. 445-49; see also *SUNSTONE REVIEW* (March 1982):15,18.
8. Douglas F. Tobler, “Sacred and Profane: Writing Mormon History in a Secular Age,” unpublished paper, copy in possession of author.
9. James B. Allen, “Writing Mormon Biographies,” 1980 World Conference on Records. 10. *Seventh East Press*, 7 February 1982.
11. John A. Widtsoe, ed., *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), p. v.
12. Tobler, “Sacred and Profane.” 13. Clayton, “A Response,” p. 52.
14. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), p. 27. See also pp. 32, 179, 226.
15. Clayton, “A Response,” p. 52. 16. Tobler, “Sacred and Profane.”
17. Leonard J. Arrington, “Clothe These Bones: The Reconciliation of Faith and History,” unpublished paper, copy in possession of author.
18. Bushman, “Faithful History,” p. 25.
19. Tobler, “Sacred and Profane.”

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