

## Seeing Through the Glass Darkly

DEALING WITH DISSONANCE:  
MYTHS, DOCUMENTS, AND FAITH

By Richard D. Poll

I AM A MORMON OF THE LIAHONA PERSUASION. I BELIEVE IN God as the organizer and manager of the eternal enterprise in which we are all engaged. I believe in Christ as the great exemplar of righteousness and our Redeemer. I believe that we have the right and power to make choices and that the choices make a difference. I believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet and that this church is prophetically led. I do not subscribe to the concepts of scriptural inerrancy or prophetic infallibility. I do believe that God will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to his work.

I am a historian who accepts the challenge of the great nineteenth-century German historian, Leopold von Ranke, to describe the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—as it actually was. I recognize that even isolated events cannot be described perfectly, because of such human limitations as narrow perspective, ideological and emotional bias, faulty and selective memory, fragmentary and fraudulent records, and inability to deal with the total context of any happening. With regard to the causes, connections and meanings of interrelated events and the personalities, ideas and motives of people, the historian should speak with even less certitude, for reasons that readily come to mind. Still, I believe that a competent historian can get close enough to *wie es eigentlich gewesen* to generate provocative, often profitable, sometime perilous knowledge.

The study of history, whether as professional or nonprofessional, is fraught with the same perils as exploration of any field of knowledge. It is a peril aptly expressed in this slightly paraphrased language of Dean William Inge: “The fruit of the tree of knowledge always drives us from some Garden of Eden.”<sup>1</sup>

Let me first offer a provocative example that is neither perilous nor particularly profitable.

The Case of “This is the Place” is drawn from my teaching experience. Today’s Mormon students say they have grown up with about the same images that I encountered when I first heard about

the pioneers over sixty years ago. The Saints were driven out of Nauvoo for a variety of reasons, all classified as “persecution.” They were led into an uncharted wilderness by their prophet, Brigham Young. After spending some time there, Brigham, like Moses of old, recognized their destination, rose up in Wilford Woodruff’s wagon and said, “This is the right place. Drive on.” They went down into the Great Salt Lake Valley and began to make the desert blossom as the rose.

A problem arises when one discovers that the statement, “This is the right place,” was first attributed to Young by Woodruff more than thirty years after the pioneer advent.<sup>2</sup>

That may or may not prove anything. Even what Wilford Woodruff wrote at the time may not prove anything, but here’s part of his journal entry for 24 July 1847:

This is an important day in the History of my life and the history of the Church . . . . On this important day, after trav[eling] from our encampment 6 miles . . . we came in full view of the great valley or Bason [of] the Salt Lake and land of promise held in reserve by the hand of GOD . . . .<sup>3</sup>

Then he described the pleasing prospect and reported: “President Young expressed his full satisfaction in the Appearance of the valley as A resting place for the Saints & was Amply repaid for his Journey.” Woodruff recorded that they traveled about four miles down to the camp of “our brethren who had arrived two days before. They had . . . broke about five acres of ground and commenced planting potatoes.”<sup>5</sup>

It is very clear from this contemporary record that, at least in Woodruff’s judgment, the hand of the Lord was in the selection of the Latter-day Saints’ new home. The only surprising point is that the memorable Pioneer Day words do not appear in this account. They do turn up many years later when Woodruff looks back upon the event, and they nicely epitomize the sentiments that Brigham Young may have expressed, perhaps even in those very words. But it is very clear that the journal account does something to the Pioneer Day tradition, because there were people down there plowing and planting potatoes by the time Brigham Young said, “This is the right place” or whatever it was that he said. Their action obviously had not waited upon this prophetic identification of the spot. That decision had been made earlier as Young

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excellence, and he knew what good story tellers know—use what works with the crowd. You are making a point.

What is one to do with this story? Gene Campbell and I fretted, then told the World War events as we had reconstructed them and fell back on Elder Harold B. Lee for protection. In writing of President Brown's appointment as an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve, Lee had mentioned the episode in terms that we felt the documents supported, so we quoted him.<sup>8</sup> We never really made a judgment on the currant bush story, but used it in another chapter without the military details.

What to do with a story in a book is a small thing. What separating the myth from the documents does to the image of President Hugh B. Brown, each individual must judge for himself. I still love and respect him very much after discovering this chink in his armor—and chinks in some of the other stories that played very well, too.

One of the problems with myths and documents relates to a concept in learning theory called cognitive dissonance. You learn things that don't fit with what you have learned before, and the experience is jarring. It may be a little jar or it may be traumatic. Trauma is likely to occur when new information is inconsistent, incongruent, or incompatible with what you have previously regarded as *important* truth. An example is what happens when some children learn that there is no Santa Claus. Emerging modern European society had similar difficulty when somebody suggested, on the basis of new data, that the earth is not the center of the universe. Many important concepts and values hung on pre-Copernican perceptions of heaven and earth. People had a hard time adjusting to the new knowledge; indeed, a few people in our own day still resist.

I'll illustrate this problem of cognitive dissonance with some further examples and then turn to dissonance management in history, particularly Mormon history.

The Case of the Missing Convention<sup>9</sup> concerns the Deseret statehood movement of 1849. The key document and the associated problem of cognitive dissonance are described in a brochure that Peter Crawley wrote to commemorate the acquisition of the document as the two millionth volume in the Harold B. Lee Library collections.<sup>9</sup>

This rare book, *Constitution of the State of Deseret, with the journal of the convention which formed it, and the proceedings of the legislature consequent thereon*, is a pamphlet of 16 pages, published in 1849. It gives the text of the constitution and describes the events that produced it and the elections that approved it and selected the first officers for the proposed new Mormon commonwealth in the Great Basin.

Historians for at least two generations have been perplexed by the fact that two political activities seemed to be going on simultaneously in early 1849. One—a movement to create a territorial government—produced petitions with several thousand signatures that John M. Bernhisel carried back to Congress. The other—a

constitutional convention to create a new state—sent Almon W. Babbitt east to join forces with Bernhisel.

Historians had rationalized away this dissonance or just left it on the back burner until Crawley made some interesting discoveries. Among other things, he found that some people who are described in this pamphlet as having attended this convention were actually somewhere else at the time. Further, in the diary of one of the alleged participants he found what the Watergate generation might call “the smoking gun.” Here is Franklin D. Richards's entry for Thursday, 19 July, months after some of the events described in the pamphlet were alleged to have occurred:

Attended Council the two weeks past, at which the Memorial[,] Constitution of the State of Deseret, Journal of its Legislature, Bill or Declaration of Rights, and the election of A. W. Babbitt as delegate to Congress, was all accomplished.<sup>10</sup>

Crawley's explanation is a fine example of dissonance management. He notes that the United States had just acquired the Great Basin as part of the spoils of the Mexican War, and that national politics was very much in flux before the Compromise of 1850. After the proposal for territorial government was devised and Bernhisel was dispatched, news from the east, including recommendations from Thomas L. Kane, led to the conclusion that statehood should have been sought instead. If California and New Mexico were going for it, why not Deseret? Statehood would give the Mormons the self-government that they really wanted.

The decision makers in Great Salt Lake City concluded, however, that there wasn't time to go through the steps of electing, drafting, ratifying, electing again and then petitioning Congress. They also knew that if they asked for statehood without going through this rigmarole, they couldn't succeed. So they created a record. They wrote a constitution, borrowing mostly from a copy of Iowa's. They then created minutes and election documents, named members to a legislature, and sent the papers back to Kanessville, Iowa where Apostle Orson Hyde printed them at the *Frontier Guardian* office because the Salt Lake valley did not yet have an operating press. Babbitt took copies of the pamphlet back to Washington and went to work with Kane and Bernhisel in an unsuccessful effort to secure statehood.<sup>11</sup>

You can make a credible rationalization for it, and Crawley does, but this document is as fraudulent in its content as the Donation of Constantine and the “salamander letter.” It is still precious, but it does raise questions. Especially if you have difficulty coping with the fact that an LDS First Presidency published it.

There is dissonance in other pioneer stories—the seagulls and crickets, for example, and the traditional account of the calling of the Mormon Battalion. Think of what has happened to the pioneer treks. Although tens of thousands of people came West between 1847 and 1869, the myth-making process has reduced the pioneer experience to Brigham Young's advance company and the handcart pioneers of 1856—neither of them representative. (Young's caravan of 143 men, 3 women, and 2 children was hardly the demographic mix to build up Zion in the Rocky Mountains!) The handcart migration has been reduced to one heroic, tragic

considered the options with his colleagues, studied the available geographic information about the Great Salt Lake Valley, and received at least provisional confirmation that this, in God's judgment, was the place.

Some things in the past are more important than others—more useful than others. We remember them best and we recall them in association with the purpose, or cause, or value that makes them useful. Sometimes an alteration of the event *wie es eigentlich gewesen* occurs in this process.

This brings us back to the term “myth.”

Most dictionaries insist that a myth must be fictitious—like a fairy tale. However, that is not what it means to us historians. A historical myth is an idealized version of someone, or something, that once existed. It is what the memory of an event becomes after people have transformed it so that it is more useful, usually for reasons involving group values. The process of myth-making distills from the past elements that motivate people to be more patriotic, generous, loving, or virtuous in some other dimension.<sup>6</sup>

This process of taking something out of historic experience and converting it—by addition, subtraction, modification or revision—into a value-laden symbolic memory can be observed in many contexts. George Washington was hardly dead before the myth-making process began. The cherry tree was added, because Parson Weems wanted to make Washington's honesty vivid for children. A Valley Forge prayer that may never been uttered became one of the most familiar images of the father of our country.

Myth making forgets things, too. Sally Fairfax almost disappeared from the Washington story until the diggers into documents and the psycho-historians discovered her again. There is no big scandal here, but there is evidence that Washington, for all his uprightness, never quite got over feeling special about this wife of his good friend, whom he almost certainly would have courted if the friend had not done so first.

A clear indication of the mythologizing process is the visual myths that gradually emerge—the pictures of the Pilgrims landing, or the seagulls devouring the crickets. The statue of Joseph and Emma at the Nauvoo visitors' center is a beautiful idealization of these very important people. The statue of Brigham Young on the BYU campus is another. It's fair to say that you may know you have become a myth when they make a statue of you. Unless, of course, you are a demagogue who commissions your own statue—a clear sign that you expect to become a myth.

Let us turn next to the tools of the historians. If an event is in the recent past, they have the testimony of witnesses—people who were there or heard about it from people who were there.

They have also the artifacts that people leave behind for archaeologists, anthropologists and antique collectors to find. Mostly, however, the historians work with documents written on paper, papyrus, wood, metal, stone, or some other material, that convey information. Only where there are documents can one really begin to “do history.”

I have had the interesting, delightful, sometimes exasperating opportunity of reconstructing the lives of three great men, using these tools. I've tried to recover Hugh B. Brown, Howard J. Stoddard and Henry D. Moyle from the memories of people who knew them, the objects they accumulated, and the documents they left. An illustration from this research leads to the third term in my title—dissonance.

“The Case of the Disappointed Canadian Officer” concerns President Hugh B. Brown, surely one of the favorite LDS General Authorities of the twentieth century. One of the great experiences of my life was working with my good friend, the late Eugene Campbell, on Brown's biography. Our last meeting with him was to report that the book was in press. He was bedfast and near death, but he still had his smile and his wit. When we told him the book was almost ready, he said, “We can call it my obituary.” I protested, “Oh no, President Brown. This is far more than that.” He said, “Maybe we should call it ‘Son of Obituary.’”

Many have heard the story of the currant bush. In summary, it tells how Hugh B. Brown, as an officer in the Canadian Army in the First World War, took a contingent of troops to England, expecting to lead them into combat and anticipating a promotion in rank. At a critical point he was called in for an interview. The general fussed and stalled and then was called away, giving Brown an opportunity to glance at the papers on the desk. On his service record, in very legible letters, was written, “This man is a Mormon.” Denied the appointment, Major Brown was inclined to be resentful. Then he recalled the currant bush complaining of being pruned too short, and his response: “You've been cut back so that you can get the growth that you're intended for.”

It's a wonderful story. The problem with it is that, on the basis of the documents, it isn't true. Hugh B. Brown was a good and very popular officer, and he *did* go overseas expecting advancement. But when he got to England, he discovered what the history of that war clearly establishes—that more enlisted men than field grade officers were being killed in France. By 1917 recruits were going to the front as replacements, not as new combat units, and there was no place for all of the officers who had trained them. The journal of Major Brown's aide suggests that personal favoritism was behind the selection of one of the other contenders for advancement. Contemporary documents also show, however, that Brown went back to Canada without ever having the interview that he requested. As the soldiers he took over began to die, some Albertans made snide comments about “slackers.” He wrote in his journal then:

I spent most of . . . May at home visiting family and friends and learned by bitter experience of being misjudged, for some who had appeared to be my friends were most harsh in their criticism of my returning home, thinking I came on account of my fear of the battle line. But God knows I did not have any choosing and that I tried to do my duty and play the game.<sup>7</sup>

In such circumstances, one can imagine the parable of the currant bush beginning to take shape. From the time it appeared in print in 1939 until President Brown's death 36 years later, it evolved further, as such tales do. President Brown was a story teller *par*

episode. Although three thousand people crossed the plains with handcarts between 1856 and 1860, the only ones remembered are the members of the Willie and Martin companies who either didn't make it or did so with severe frostbite. The myth invites reflection. Which is the more faith promoting experience: To cross the plains with nothing more serious than blisters, or to leave one's feet along the way?

Such incongruities—minor or major dissonances—abound. One may ask, “What difference do they make?” The answer is, “Little, if nothing important is at stake.” I suspect that very little depends on whose crops were saved by the seagulls, or whose great-grandparents suffered with the handcart companies. On the other hand, it may make a great deal of difference if the myth has become a significant feature of “some Garden of Eden.”

A danger in some historical myths is that, by depicting levels of aspiration and accomplishment that transcend the historic events, they lead us to inaccurate assessments of ourselves. An example is the point so often raised in talks about the pioneers: “We could never do that.” The documents suggest that those people did what they did because they had to do it. We don't know what we would do if we were in their shoes. Some of us might lie down by the path and sing the fourth verse of “Come, Come Ye Saints,” but I believe most of us would tough it out. People have a capacity to rise to challenges.

If people grow up believing that the heroes and heroines of their past were a different kind of people, without the human traits and vulnerabilities that we have, they have been ill served by their ‘history.’ The greater the disparity between myth and event, the greater the potential trauma in confronting the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. And the more natural the tendency to respond irrationally. Ancient history tells of a soldier who stumbled into town with the report that he was the only survivor of a great battle and was killed for bringing the bad news.

**I** turn now to a case of more traumatic dissonance—a case in which the discovery of documents has had substantial impact upon an important faith-related historical myth. It also illustrates several approaches to dissonance management and permits me to draw my own conclusions. It is “The Case of the Book of Abraham.”

The rediscovery of some of the Egyptian papyri associated with The Pearl of Great Price certainly challenged the LDS tradition—the historical myth—that the Book of Abraham is a literal translation of an ancient document. The recovery and identification of the *sn-sn* text presents a two-fold problem of dissonance: One problem involves the LDS concept, or concepts, of translation. If the book did not derive in any linguistic sense from the papyrus documents with which its origin is associated, was there a significant connection between them? The second problem involves the LDS concept, or concepts, of revelation. If the book did not come from the papyri, did it come from God?

The dissonance—the incongruity—between the pictures and text of the Book of Abraham bothered me when I read the work as an undergraduate, possibly because of something I did in the

preexistence, and possibly because of my exposure to textual criticism at Texas Christian University. Being under no urgent necessity to impose harmony, I adopted the stimulating and helpful ideas from the book and left the questions alone—as any lazy Liahona would. When the recovery of the papyri forced the issue, I sampled a little of the apologetic literature, found it unsatisfactory and left my own position unarticulated until James Allen and Glen Leonard gave me a superbly phrased formulation in *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*:

The exact relationship between the ancient scrolls and the printed text of the Book of Abraham has been a matter of controversy . . . . Although translations by both LDS and other scholars made it clear that [the papyri] were not part of the Abraham text, Church scholars . . . suggested that the scrolls themselves may simply have been the catalyst that turned Joseph's mind back to ancient Egypt and opened it to revelation on the experiences of Abraham . . . . Joseph may have received these ideas the same way he did those of the inspired translation of the Bible. In that instance, acting without original documents, the Prophet's only claim was that by divine inspiration he was able to replace incorrect with correct ideas and restore the original biblical meaning . . . . Even the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God rather than through any prior knowledge of ancient language. When applied by Mormons to Joseph Smith, the term “translator” thus has a special meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Why Joseph Smith thought it important to provide partial explanations of the pictures associated with the Book of Abraham is, to me, part of the larger enigma that is the Prophet. I wish that he hadn't. I also wish that the Allen-Leonard interpretation of “translator” had wider currency among today's Latter-day Saints.

This brings me to the second problem: If the Book of Abraham is not from the papyri, is it from God? The Allen-Leonard formulation implies an affirmative answer, to which I will add this personal observation: If one prophet can hear God in a burning bush, it is possible for another to sense him in a mummy's wrappings.

This was less of a problem during my undergraduate days, because there was less pressure within the Church to identify revelation with such dogmas as prophetic infallibility and scriptural inerrancy. We quoted the eighth and ninth Articles of Faith as though the words “as far as it is translated correctly” and “He will yet reveal many great and important things” had real meaning. We took Joseph Smith seriously when he said that some of his own revelations might be from man or the devil, and it helped us to cherish the great insights in his teachings without worrying unduly about Zeph or the Kinderhook plates, or whether that figure in the Pearl of Great Price is Abraham on an altar.

**T**he relatively recent preoccupation with institutional unity and individual security has brought us today, however, to the point where dissonance must be denied. This effort to make everything tidy does not, in my view, stem from doctrine or even institutional necessity, but from the idiosyncrasies of some leaders and the psychological needs of many followers. Without digging fur-

ther into the “why” question, I want to make a point or two about the prevalence of the denial of dissonance and the degree of its success.

Authoritarian pronouncement is, of course, one technique of denial, well represented in the literature of the new LDS orthodoxy. *Since* the gospel is true and all truth is harmonious, perceived incongruities in Church teaching and practice must reflect the frailty of the perceiver. *Since* the scriptures are substantially inerrant, now that the footnotes from the Prophet’s revision are there to smooth out rough places in the Bible, neither fossils nor floating axes need trouble the faithful. *Since* the public utterances of the prophets are almost always inspired and cover almost every consequential topic, one needs only quasi-authoritative help with the odd incongruity in the *Journal of Discourses* to remain secure against the buffetings of dissonance and doubt.

Reliance on selected “experts” is another way to finesse dissonance. My good friend Hugh Nibley is a superb example. *Since* he gained unique status as “defender of the faith” with his rebuttal to Fawn Brodie’s book, he has become a security blanket for Latter-day Saints to whom dissonance is intolerable. Dr. Nibley’s contribution to dissonance management is not so much *what* he has written as *that* he has written. On the basis of no scientific evidence whatsoever, I suggest that relatively few Latter-day Saints read the Nibley books that they give to one another or the copiously annotated articles he has contributed to Church publications. It is enough for most of us that they are *there*. We have a scholar who has met the scholars on their own ground and established that the dissonances they point to are only apparent, not real. As Hugh retires from the front, other defenders of the faith are coming forward to perform this service.

Discouraging inquiry is yet another way of denying dissonance. I refer not only to the formal and informal restraints on academic investigation with which many are familiar, but to the general inhibition of free discussion in the educational programs of the Church. As a teacher who sees questions as steppingstones to learning in both college and Church classes, I am perturbed that the highly structured and correlated lessons prepared for our Sunday School and seminary consideration repress inquiry, even by the teachers, and treat questions from class members as impediments to “covering the material.” Where the scriptural segments under study have the potential to raise questions, teachers are counseled to use pre-packaged answers and avoid “controversy.” The apparent intent and observable result is to produce bland instruction in which acquiescent students read or recite on cue and even contradictory opinions are heard without demurrer. The capacity to perceive dissonance is dulled.

There is a touch of irony in all this, because Mormons of both Iron Rod and Liahona complexion have shown remarkable capacity to accommodate dissonance when it has been unavoidable. The Pearl of Great Price has survived the recovery of the papyri. The discovery that certain of God’s children are not going to have to wait until the millennium for the priesthood has been accommodated with grace even by those whose prior concepts

of the plan of salvation were shaken by it. The Joseph Smith III blessing document had already been accommodated by most testimonies before it was exposed as a forgery, requiring no accommodation. As seerstones and freemasonry are found to have figured prominently in the Restoration, similar outcomes may be expected.

What is the moral? A cynical view might be that belief will overcome evidence. I prefer a more hopeful interpretation, paraphrasing language first used in another context: What matters most must not be at the mercy of what matters least.

How well—how righteously—life is lived does not depend on either myths or documents about the past. The myth-making process contributes to the pursuit of righteousness to the extent that it provides ideal models and motivating traditions that are consistent with truth. The historians, with their documents, contribute to the pursuit of righteousness to the extent that they check the myth-making capability to generate and perpetuate untruths and half-truths, and even to sanctify unrighteousness.

God only knows the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. Whether we are myth-makers or myth-shakers, we see history through a glass darkly. Given our human limitations and the caveats expressed in the eighth and ninth Articles of faith, we must expect to encounter cognitive dissonance, even in the sphere of faith. As God’s free agent children, we have the right and the responsibility to choose how we will cope with it.

## NOTES

1. The quotation from the Anglican cleric, as it appears without source citation in class notes taken when Gene and I audited P.A. Christensen’s BYU course on Milton, is: “The fruit of the tree of knowledge always drives man from some Paradise or other, and even the Paradise of fools is not an unpleasant abode while it is habitable”

2. *Utah Pioneers* (Salt Lake City, 1880), p. 23, quoted in Leland H. Creer, *The Founding of an Empire* (Salt Lake City, 1947), p. 302, n. 93.

3. Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1983), 3:233.

4. *Ibid.*, 3:234.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Historical myths may also generate negative passions, as such as use as anti-Mormonism, anti-semitism and anti-communism demonstrate.

7. Eugene E. Campbell and Richard D. Poll, *Hugh B. Brown: His Life and Thought* (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1975), p. 70.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

9. Peter Crawley, *The Constitution of the State of Deseret* (Provo: Friends of the Harold B. Lee Library, 1982), 27 pp.

10. Crawley, p. 9. Richards was probably referring to the Council of Fifty because no other council was involved in with such political matters then.

11. Crawley, pp. 10-17.

12. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), p. 68.