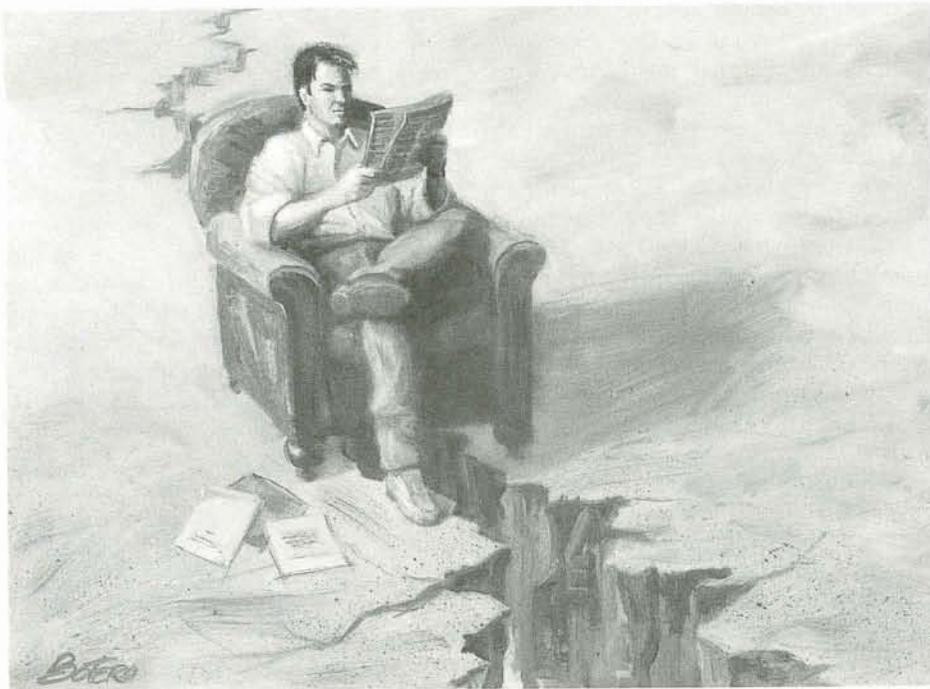

TURNING TIME OVER TO . . .

Fred Buchanan

PERILOUS PONDERINGS



KIRK BOTERO

Let us admit the case of the conservative: if we once start thinking no one can guarantee where we shall come out, except that many objects, ends and institutions are doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place. (John Dewey)

A LONG TIME ago as a student in social studies education at the University of Utah,

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I took Dewey's statement both as a personal challenge and a necessary component of the scholarly enterprise. It has not always been easy to follow the logic of a particular set of facts to their conclusion, but that it ought to be done has been a constant goad to my thinking. Consequently, I have doubted almost everything, but there have also been times when I have ended up doubting some of my doubts. Some questions will not go away, however, and after mulling over one idea for some twenty years, perhaps it is time to let it see the light of day.

It all began as I was taking a trip via the atlas to some of the world's less well-known places. As I skimmed down the list of place names I noticed a listing for a place called Moroni. Using the coordinates given in the

index, I turned to the map and found that Moroni was the capital of a few minuscule dots of land in the Indian Ocean, off the east coast of Africa near Madagascar. What was even more surprising was the fact that Moroni was located in the Comoro Islands. At first I was inclined to say "Well, perhaps Lehi stopped off in these islands on his voyage to the western hemisphere and picked up the names there." And, of course, it could always be just coincidence that these names are so similar to the central names in the Mormon story—Cumorah and Moroni. But my tendency to think the unthinkable also led me to consider the possibility that perhaps Joseph Smith derived the names from information he had heard or read about these islands. I did not pursue the matter, however, in part because I wasn't sure that I wanted to be confronted with a possibility that would put my religious world in such peril.

In years after this initial encounter I was too busy doing research on the Amish schools in Ohio and in getting established professionally to give much thought to the possible connection between the Comoro Islands and a sacred hill in upper New York. I mentioned the idea to a number of people, but no one seemed to think it was worth pursuing. However, the thought persisted and was piqued in the 1970s by press reports of civil unrest in the Comoro Islands, with the date-line always including the name Moroni. I wondered why no one in Utah, that I was aware of at least, was asking any questions about this coincidence in names. My attempt to get some information about the islands led nowhere.

During the Mark Hofmann salamander letter episode I became interested in the origins of Mormon names again. In perusing the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I discovered that "Moron" (from the Old French *Morrone*) was in fact a variety of salamander. I also discovered that Oliver Goldsmith's *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, which was available in the old Manchester (New York) Library c. 1820, discussed the "Moron" and also the mythology of the salamander as a creature which supposedly can live in fire. Concurrent with this discovery I traced down some recent research on the history of the Comoro Islands and learned that the names "Moroni" and "Comoro" are both derived from the local Comoron dialect and mean, as far as I can determine, "in the place of the fire." The islands have one of the world's largest active volcanoes. Given the excitement over the salamander letter, I began to wonder if there were some connection between the

Moroni in the Comoros and the word "Moron." Was the name Moron related etymologically to Moroni? Did the French word "morrone" stem from French colonial contacts with Moroni? A letter from an anthropologist conversant with the language of the Comoro Islands quickly dispelled that hypothesis.

He did suggest, however, that it is possible that Joseph Smith might have come in contact with the names in newspaper reports about the islands which may have circulated in New England and New York in the early part of the nineteenth century. A person I had been corresponding with also mentioned that Joseph Smith spent some time during his boyhood years visiting his uncle on the Atlantic seaboard. Could Joseph have picked up the names in this way? I located published accounts (late 18th and early 19th century) which referred to the Comoro Islands (many of them in French) but nothing seemed to fit, and I paid little attention to the notion for a year. Recently I began to entertain the thought again. My friend had written and mentioned that the famous buccaneer "Captain" William Kidd, who is reputed to have hidden gold and treasure at Gardener's Island, New York, and in a variety of New England locations, actually visited the Comoro Islands during his voyage to East Africa. My inherent interest in things Scottish was also stimulated discovering that Kidd was born on the Clyde Coast not many miles from my own home. Ultimately I found that Kidd actually spent a considerable amount of time in the vicinity of the Comoros between March and August 1697, and that the islands were an important stopping-off point on the long voyage from New York to India. In fact, New York was a major source of supplies for pirates in business in the Indian Ocean. Captain Kidd, buried treasure, Comoro and Moroni-Joseph Smith, treasure hunting, gold plates, Cumorah and Moroni? Is all this coincidence or is there a connection between the activities of a Scottish buccaneer in the Indian Ocean in the late seventeenth century and the development of a prophet in upper New York in the early nineteenth century? Did Joseph Smith have access to accounts of Captain Kidd's exploits, which became more and more elaborate in the years following his hanging in London in 1701? Did accounts of Kidd's rendezvous at Comoro and Moroni color the folklore about Kidd's buried treasure to which young Joseph may have been exposed? It is widely acknowledged that Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug" and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* are rooted in the Kidd romance. Can the possibility that Joseph Smith was

influenced by the same sources be ignored? Should an effort be made to test such a theory? Or can we dismiss it all as mere coincidence?

If subsequent research on the origins of the names Moroni and Cumorah point to the Comoro Islands as a source, must the whole Mormon story be labelled a myth in the pejorative sense of that word? I think not. I have always had an almost religious commitment to being a Scot and am fiercely proud of my homeland's traditions and history. However, as research sheds new light on those traditions I have had to adjust my perceptions and be content with the meaning which can be derived from the past even if it cannot be proven in a factual sense. Two examples may illustrate this point. In the eighteenth century, James Macpherson claimed to have "discovered" an ancient Celtic epic which gave Scottish culture a great boost at a time when it was almost submerged by Anglifying influences. The publication in 1760 of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands* also molded the course of European literature by helping to shape the emerging Romantic movement. Now there is no doubt that Macpherson's manuscript was not as ancient as he said it was, but modern scholars are more charitable in their assessment of the man. He is no longer condemned as the deliberate forger which Samuel Johnson branded him, but a creative intellect who made a real contribution to our literary heritage.

Another invented tradition is the "Scottish tartan" myth, i.e., that all the Scottish clans wore distinguishable clan tartans (or plaids). Ask any person with only a hint of Scots blood and they will claim that they are entitled to wear a particular clan tartan because their name is MacDonald, Campbell, or even Smith. This notion was given great impetus by the supposed discovery in the 1830s of a sixteenth century manuscript which gave precise clan names to particular tartans and included directions on how the tartans should be woven. John and Charles Sobeiski Stuart published their "find" in 1842 under the title *Vestiarium Scoticum* and claimed that it was based on three ancient manuscripts which they had found in the library of the Scots College at Douai, France. No manuscripts were ever produced and eventually the supposed grandsons of "Bonnie Prince Charlie" were discredited, but not before many a highland clan chief once again sported the "ancient" tartan of his ancestors—courtesy of the Sobeiski Stuarts. They had helped invent a tradition, and although many Scots would like to disassoci-

ate themselves from this manufactured tradition, it is now a reality. Witness the fact that each Scottish clan now has at least one tartan, and some 1200 tartans symbolize Scottish culture worldwide. I still wear my Buchanan kilt with pride, though the Buchanan tartan probably dates from around 1820, and not the sixteenth century.

The importance of the invention of tradition—literary, cultural, or even religious—cannot be ignored. Just as significant meaning has come out of Macpherson's reworking of old oral Celtic ballads and out of the Sobieski-Stuart's tinkering with the colorful strands of the Scottish tartans, so too in religion we must keep open the possibility that uncertain or even common-place origins do not necessarily condemn an enterprise as meaningless or "untrue." Dewey's observation that "education is the continuous reconstruction of experience" holds a great deal of promise for a belief system as dynamic as Mormonism. Within such a system faith may be viewed as a matter of continuously developing and reconstructing meaning in our lives rather than the empirical validation of history.

No doubt some may find this cultural analogy demeaning of the religious truths of Mormonism, but I have had to struggle to find meaning in my religious tradition as much as in my cultural tradition when the facts don't seem to add up. Perhaps eventually they will, but in the meantime I try to increase my faith in the meaning of things rather than trying to prove them. After all, if the Divine Will can work its will through physical evolution and even political systems, perhaps it can do the same in the realm of religious ideas. As Reinhold Niebuhr has observed, "Many a truth has ridden into history on the back of an error."

As the writing and rewriting of Mormon history continues, it seems certain that many of the assumptions, biases, and errors of the past must be squarely faced. Honest questions must be asked and honest attempts made to face challenges to the assumptions of past generations. But more than that, the LDS people must be ready to use the new information in creative and responsible ways. As Hemingway says of the creative flow of ideas in literature, one must be ready for them when they come. If we are not ready for them, they might just blow us away.

Perhaps Mormons can take some heart from the archeological research done on the reputed site of King Arthur's Chapel Royal near Cadbury, England. The whole Arthurian legend is, of course, cloaked in mystery, intrigue, and even magic; but there appears to be physical evidence which suggests that

the legend does have a basis in real events and places. One of the archaeologists working on the site made a comment a few years ago which can easily be applied to Mormonism:

[In archeology] there isn't such a thing as proof. There is only the balance of probability or a pattern of coherence. If you arrange your bits and pieces of evidence in one particular way, they appear to be coherent. If you try to arrange them in any other way, they appear to be incoherent. Archeological truth means the most coherent pattern of currently available bits of evidence. And the patterns become increasingly rich and colorful.

Although the salamander letter has joined the list of the world's great forgeries, it would be a mistake to close the curtain on the drama

of Mormon history and return to business as usual. Never have Mormon origins seemed so complex and at the same time filled with possibilities for a deeper and more universal understanding of Mormonism as a world religion. Mormon history becomes increasingly rich and colorful and will continually present challenges of re-interpretation for every new generation.

One more thing. There is a location in Scotland which has intrigued me for years: the Hill of Mormond in Strichen Parish in Aberdeenshire. The word "Mormond" (the "d" is silent) is Scottish Gaelic for "big hill." Under the direction of the eccentric laird who owned the land, the Hill of Mormond was adorned around 1773 by a large white horse made of local white rocks. There is also an old ballad, c. 1820, entitled "Mormond Braes," the refrain of which goes like this:

Then fare ye weel ye Mormond Braes,
Where aft times I've been cheery.
Then fare ye weel ye Mormond Braes,
For there I lost my dearie.

When I served as District President of Scotland in 1953, one of the missionaries suggested that there was something "special" about the Hill of Mormond and that we should have one of our monthly testimony meetings on its summit. The idea was a bit too mystical for some, however, and we met in down-to-earth Glasgow instead. But maybe the missionary was right—given the existence of Scottish ancestors (the Macks) in the Prophet Joseph's maternal line and a "White Horse Prophecy," I have been thinking that the Hill of Mormond might be. . . , but that's another path which must be kept for another day. One peril of great price is enough for now. ☺

PSALM

A DIPTYCH: A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

This was not my typical leisurely stroll
through Hyde Park.
More an urgent sense of mission
for the family—
to the Bayswater Grocery.
Just Britany and I
and the brisk air of a London spring.

I saw him coming
emerging from the corner
of my right eye—
Clad in the unmistakable aura of a panhandler.

Moving to the left of the walk
I pretended not to see—
"Excuse me, sir . . ."

Turning my head toward the street
and trying to hasten the pace,
I felt my daughter's resistant pull,
tugging on my right arm.
Without slowing down, I took her up
quickly into my arms, and hurried on—

Further down the block, while setting her down
I met her indignant and condemning eyes—
"Daddy! That man wanted to talk to me!"

Our first basketball outing together,
Just my youngest son and I
On our way from Salt Lake to Provo,
A chicken dinner—and a triple over-time with LaSalle.
But first an emergency stop at the rest area.

Out of the rest room, and toward the freeway
A stranger passed, almost unnoticed by me—
A flower child from the sixties
Desperately seeking Woodstock
A decade too late.

As I opened the door to admit my son,
I looked down and saw Morgan,
staring back in the direction of the road,
with eyes that could have garaged any of the 18-wheelers:
"Dad," he began, very softly, "Was that Jesus?"

Father, grant me—
That I may be allowed to see
the world just once more
before I die—

Through the trusting eyes
of my own childhood.

—ARTHUR R. BASSETT