
TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

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150 YEARS OF TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES ABOUT MORMON HISTORY



The 150 years of tension about the truths of Mormon history have been prologue to the events of 1991-92.

THE TRUTHS OF Mormon history are diverse. A truthful Mormon history will reveal devoted and faithful people doing inspiring and courageous things. Such history also includes a mass of mundane experience that is the grist for demographers. These devoted and faithful Mormons also had experiences that were acceptable, even faith-promoting, to them, but which discomfort current Latter-day Saints. And finally, in the Mormon past there were disruptions which troubled Mormons then and now.

There are different ways of publicly telling uncomfortable truths about Mormonism. Not all of them have been, like the Apostle Paul, "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

The LDS church used to have an institutional commitment to telling both inspiring stories and uncomfortable truths about its

own past. In the nineteenth century, LDS leaders like Brigham Young frequently spoke publicly "in love" of unsettling truths about Joseph Smith and the Mormon past. During the Church's first century, official Church publications had many examples of such faithful disclosure.

From 1950 onward, significant Mormon academics have adopted Brigham Young's model of "speaking the truth in love" about difficulties in the Mormon past. For fifteen years, this was a solitary endeavor of lone researcher-writers. In December 1965, academic truth-telling about the Mormon past became institutional with the organization of the Mormon History Association. Then in a tumble came *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, a new historical emphasis in *BYU Studies*, *Exponent II*, then *Journal of Mormon*

History, *SUNSTONE* and the Sunstone Symposiums, the Utah Women's History Association, the Mormon Pacific Historical Society, the B. H. Roberts Society, the HLT Forum in Germany, the Canadian Mormon Studies Association, the Australian Mormon Studies Association, and the Mormon Women's Forum. Likewise, the RLDS church experienced the short-lived magazine *Courage*, then the John Whitmer Historical Association and its continuing *Journal*, and also *Restoration Studies*.

This independent historical disclosure has posed a special challenge to the modern LDS leadership. Some general authorities have become hostile to the kind of earthy honesty of a Brigham Young or a J. Golden Kimball. Since 1950, individual general authorities and sometimes unified quorums have reacted in various ways to independent historical disclosure—sometimes with indifference, sometimes with endorsement, sometimes with private concern but no overt actions, sometimes with intimidation, sometimes with punishment, sometimes with public repudiation.

ATTACKING THE MESSENGER

HOWEVER, when LDS leaders have strongly disliked an *unauthorized* exposure of Mormonism's checkered past, they have typically attacked the messenger. This has occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those attacks have usually been harsher when the messenger was a participant in the uncomfortable truths she or he revealed about Mormonism.

One response of the Mormon hierarchy toward an unwelcome messenger has been character assassination founded on a common assumption about the general public: "If you discredit the messenger, you discredit the message." The logic is flawed but often effective. Linked to character assassination has been the use of excommunication and the designation of "apostate," particularly in response to partisan accounts of Church history.

Character assassination was common in Nauvoo Mormonism. In 1842, Nancy Rigdon rejected Joseph Smith's polygamous proposal. She told her family, and her brother went public. As a result, Joseph Smith published affidavits that she had been sexually impure. In another example, Martha Brotherton published an affidavit about her rejection of Joseph Smith's polygamous proposal. As a result, he had her sister Elizabeth publish the answer that her sister was a whore and a liar. Elizabeth Brotherton later became a plural wife of Apostle Parley P. Pratt.

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This paper was originally presented to a meeting of the B. H. Roberts Society at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, on 17 October 1991 as part of the panel discussion, "Do What is Right, Let the Consequences Follow: Telling the Truth About Our History."

Joseph Smith's sometime lawyer, Robert D. Foster, became the focus of a double-edged effort at character assassination in 1844. Foster and Joseph Smith's second counselor, William Law, joined in the *Nauvoo Expositor* which proposed to reveal details about Joseph Smith's polygamous wives and his ordination as theocratic king by the Council of Fifty. Exactly a week after Law and Foster obtained the press to print their exposé, Joseph Smith published an affidavit: "When riding in the stage, I have seen him [Robert D. Foster] put his hand in a woman's bosom, and he also lifted up her clothes." This referred to the Prophet's travels with his lawyer a year before. Joseph Smith also privately testified that William Law had once confessed to adultery. The uncomfortable fact of this belated attack on these messengers is that the Prophet had tolerated their sexual adventures until these men turned against him.

APOSTATE EXPOSÉS

BEGINNING in October 1831, Ezra Booth's letters to the *Ohio Star* were first in the exposé genre of apostate histories. They were reprinted in the first anti-Mormon book, Eber D. Howe's 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled*. Booth's letters were not only the first published exposé, but also the first Mormon history published by a Mormon.

The official *History of the Church* stated that Ezra Booth "became an apostate, and wrote a series of letters, which, by their coloring, falsity, and vain calculations to overthrow the work of the Lord, exposed his weakness, wickedness and folly, and left him a monument to his own shame, for the world to wonder at."

With only slight variations, that was the response to other famous critics of Mormonism, all of whom clearly had a discernible axe to grind: Sampson Avard's court testimony about the Danites in 1838, which was published by the state of Missouri in 1840; John C. Bennett's *History of the Saints* in 1842, which is best known for its list of Joseph Smith's plural wives (it was also the first exposé by a former general authority); James C. Brewster's *To the Money Diggers* in 1843, the first account of the treasure-search by a Mormon participant; William Law's *Nauvoo Expositor* in 1844; Maria and Increase VanDeusen's 1847 publication, *The Mormon Endowment: A Secret Drama, or Conspiracy, in the Nauvoo-temple, in 1846*. . . ; Lyman Wight's *An Address*. . . in 1848, about the theocratic Council of Fifty and the succession right of Joseph Smith III; William Marks's letters to *Zion's Harbinger* in 1853, about the Council of

Fifty and Nauvoo polygamy; George Miller's letters to the *Strangite Northern Islander* in 1855, about the Council of Fifty; Bill Hickman's *Brigham Young's Destroying Angel* in 1872, about three decades of his murders and thefts which were either sponsored or ignored by Apostle Orson Hyde and President Brigham Young; Fanny Stenhouse's *Exposé of Polygamy in Utah* in 1872 and her husband T. B. H. Stenhouse's *Rocky Mountain Saints* in 1873, about Utah Mormon society; Ann Eliza Webb Young's *Wife no. 19* in 1875, the first and only exposé written by the wife of a Church president; John D. Lee's *Confessions* in 1877, about his former participation in the Council of Fifty since 1845 and Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857; Emily M. Colburn Austin's 1882 *Mormonism: or, Life Among the Mormons*, of her experiences since her conversion in 1830; Sarah B. Pratt and other apostates who contributed to W. Wyl's *Mormon Portraits* in 1886, primarily about Nauvoo polygamy; David Whitmer's 1887 *Address to All Believers in Christ*, about pre-1834 Mormonism; Ebenezer Robinson's "Items of Remembrance," about Nauvoo's radicalisms in *The Return* periodical of 1889-90; Frank J. Cannon's 1911 *Under the Prophet in Utah*, about political manipulation by the Church.

There is an irony about these usually mean-spirited publications. On the one hand, LDS church leaders rightfully condemned them as apostate. Most of the authors had already broken with LDS church authority and proudly wore the title "Mormon apostate." The publications were also self-serving. On the other hand, even traditional LDS historians and devotional historians today use nearly every one of those apostate publications as important sources for understanding what happened in nineteenth-century Mormonism. Why? Because these apostate authors were knowledgeable insiders about the Mormon past. That's the irony of trying to dismiss historical information by attacking the messenger. In other words, even in the extreme case of apostate literature, the message is more important and complex than the label you give the messenger.

MORMON ACADEMICS

THAT'S why the LDS hierarchy has usually been perplexed by Mormon academics who have explored uncomfortable dimensions of the Mormon experience. In most cases, the label "apostate" does not apply. The academic may be a Mormon insider, but has rarely, if ever, participated in the events she or he examines. However, whether the academic is a believer or non-believer, she or he

usually tries to compensate for that by adopting a neutral tone and by examining all the relevant evidence on the topic at hand. Some regard Mormon historians' efforts for academic neutrality as more subversive than an apostate's diatribes. Thus, the Mormon hierarchy has manifested a patchwork response to academics who tell uncomfortable truths.

For example, Apostle Orson Pratt was a much-criticized academic whose ardent belief permeated all his works. His printing of Lucy Mack Smith's *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith* in 1853 resulted in the hierarchy's first public condemnation of an academic. Dismissed by Brigham Young for decades as a misled intellectual, Professor Pratt's publication of that history and his theological speculations became the target of the first joint declaration by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on 23 August 1865. They recommended that Mormons destroy Mother Smith's history, and threatened excommunication for anyone who promoted Pratt's doctrines. When the Quorum of Twelve tried to excommunicate him, however, there was only one bottom line: "If Orson Pratt were chopped into a thousand pieces," Brigham Young said, "every piece would shout that Mormonism is true." He protected Pratt's membership in the Church and Quorum.

Although the joint declaration condemned Orson Pratt's theology that God had all knowledge, his doctrine became the orthodoxy of twentieth-century Mormon theology. This joint declaration of doctrine by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve lacks the force of scripture for the contemporary Church. In fact, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie once publicly condemned as a "deadly heresy" the idea that God progresses in knowledge, a doctrine proclaimed by the 1865 joint declaration as part of its condemnation of Pratt's teachings on God's omniscience.

In a similar case, B. H. Roberts, a seventy, had problems directly involved with the writing of Church history. In November 1910, Church President Joseph F. Smith told the Salt Lake Temple fast meeting that Elder Roberts doubted that Joseph Smith had actually received a priesthood restoration from John the Baptist. Church president Heber J. Grant also required B. H. Roberts to censor some documents in the seventh volume of the *History of the Church*. Elder Roberts was furious. "I desire, however, to take this occasion of disclaiming any responsibility for the mutilating of that very important part of President Young's Manuscript," Roberts replied to President Grant in August 1932,

"and also to say, that while you had the physical power of eliminating that passage from the History, I do not believe you had any moral right to do so." Despite such strident defense of maintaining the integrity of LDS church history, B. H. Roberts received no formal censure. He remained senior president of the Seventy until his death in 1933.

Contrast the hierarchy's response to an ardent disbeliever whose disbelief permeated her historical work. By instructions of Church headquarters, literary biographer Fawn McKay Brodie was excommunicated for her publication in 1945 of *No Man Knows My History: A Biography of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*. Although he refused to read her book, J. Reuben Clark asked the *Deseret News* to publish his long review of *No Man Knows My History*. Nevertheless, her research and analysis raised fundamental questions about the founding prophet. Those questions had to be addressed in some way by every serious historian thereafter, beginning with Apostle John A. Widtsoe's devotional biography in 1951.

Compare the above with the treatment of Mormon academics who submerge personal beliefs while exploring the complex Mormon past. In 1950, Juanita Brooks and Stanford University published the *Mountain Meadows Massacre*, for which local Church authorities considered excommunicating her, and for which she was ecclesiastically black-listed thereafter. In 1958, economic historian Leonard J. Arrington published *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900*, which the Church Historian's Office classified as "Friendly Non-Mormon" for years, even though he was a member of a stake presidency. Nevertheless, Arrington was appointed official Church Historian in 1972 and sustained to that position by several general conferences.

That same year, however, folklorist Thomas Cheney's *Golden Legacy* ran into an ecclesiastical snag. Church headquarters instructed Brigham Young University Press to shred the entire press run of Cheney's book due to its inclusion of some of J. Golden Kimball's vulgarisms. Cheney later re-published an expurgated version of the book by a private publisher.

In 1976, Apostle Thomas S. Monson intervened to stop the performances of BYU professor Thomas S. Rogers's play, *Huebner*. The Gestapo had executed this seventeen-year-old Mormon for his anti-Nazi activities. Elder Monson was concerned that the play could endanger the safety of Mormons in what was then Communist East Germany. Even before the Iron Curtain fell, Rogers later

published *Huebner*, and SUNSTONE published an article by two BYU professors about the anti-Nazi martyr's experience.

The same year as the *Huebner* incident, Apostle Ezra Taft Benson took direct action against Mormon historians. He tried to get Deseret Book Company to destroy the unsold press run of James B. Allen's and Glen M. Leonard's 1976 *Story of the Latter-day Saints*. Financial considerations prohibited a repetition of the *Golden Legacy* shredding and the large first edition sold out within a few months. Elder Benson successfully had Deseret Book refuse to reprint the book for a decade (despite steady popular demand). His concerns focused on their use of words like "communitarian" and "experimental" to describe Church programs, and on their discussion of the American environment which preceded various revelations. At the same time Elder Benson publicly warned about Mormon historians who "inordinately humanize the prophets of God so that their human frailties become more evident than their spiritual qualities." Elder Benson's activities in 1976 signaled the turning point in the process by which Church historian Leonard J. Arrington was gradually cut adrift from the office of Church Historian. *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* had been written by the officially sustained Assistant Church Historian and another member of Arrington's staff.

The 1980s were an unhappy sesquicentennial of the consequences of emphasizing the unconventional Mormon past. In 1980, Church headquarters officially washed its hands of interpretive Mormon history by transferring Leonard J. Arrington and his staff of historians to Brigham Young University. The position of Church Historian was in limbo. In 1981, Apostle Boyd K. Packer devoted an entire talk to Mormon historians who have an "exaggerated loyalty to the theory that everything must be told." He criticized historians who "destroyed faith" by showing the human and fallible characteristics of prophets. In January 1982, the First Presidency formally acknowledged the release of Leonard J. Arrington as Church Historian, and without fanfare set apart general authority G. Homer Durham as his successor. In February 1982, *Newsweek* chronicled the tension-filled climate with an article titled "Apostles Vs. Historians."

A year later, general authorities began taking direct action against historians. In May 1983 newspapers reported that Apostle Mark E. Petersen had instructed stake presidents to question historians and others who had contributed to *Dialogue* and SUNSTONE. In May 1985, three apostles gave orders for my re-

luctant stake president to revoke my temple recommend due to my publication of "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890-1904" in *Dialogue*. In June, Church headquarters instructed bishops in Utah, Idaho, and Arizona not to allow discussion in Relief Society or other Church meetings of Linda King Newell's and Valeen Tippetts Avery's biography, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*. In October 1985, Mark Hofmann killed two people with bombs as part of his elaborate scheme of using forged documents to manipulate the LDS hierarchy's paranoia about Mormonism's unconventional past.

For me, that sesquicentennial decade of tensions in Mormon history ended a little early. In 1986, LDS Church Archives required all researchers to sign a form whose wording implied a retroactive right of censorship. Upon inquiry by archives personnel, Apostle Boyd K. Packer said that the form was intended to apply retroactively to my fifteen years of previous research in LDS Archives. I declined to sign the form and ceased manuscript research there. In 1988 I resigned as a full professor from Brigham Young University after several years of quiet conflict with Church headquarters and BYU's administration about my publications of the controversial Mormon past.

It's an old saying that "the past is prologue." Certainly the 150 years of tension about the truths of Mormon history have been prologue to the events of 1991-92. Unaware of the ironic coincidence of dates with the earlier joint declaration against Orson Pratt, the Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve on 23 August 1991 issued a declaration against "recent symposia." The statement obviously referred to the Sunstone Symposium a few weeks earlier by an unmistakable reference to a paper on the program that gave historical analysis of terrorism against LDS missionaries in Latin America. During the next several months, Church headquarters instructed stake presidents individually to take various sanctions against those who participated in Sunstone forums. In the April 1992 general conference, Apostle Dallin H. Oaks also spoke at length against some historical interpretations of Joseph Smith's words to the Relief Society in 1842. Those views were prominent in *Sisters in the Spirit*, the University of Illinois publication by LDS women historians.

The saga of Mormon history continues. The main protagonists are not just historians and Church leaders, but also the average Mormon who has interest in the past. All of us are making a little bit of history when we respond to the Mormon past. ☞