

Some Reflections on the New Mormon History

ROBERT FLANDERS

In the last quarter-century a significantly different understanding of the Latter-day Saint past has begun to emerge in a series of books, journal articles, oral addresses at various conferences, and more informally, in a dialogue that has continued among the devotees of the inquiry. This significantly different understanding has been called the "New Mormon History." It differs from the "Old Mormon History" principally in a shift of interest and emphasis from polemics, from attacking or defending assumptions of faith. It is a shift from an evangelical towards a humanistic interest. As the Mormon historian Richard Bushman put it, it is "a quest for identity rather than a quest for authority."

Historical studies embrace the most extensive, intensive, and well-matured of the scholarly endeavors which have the Restoration as their subject. The paucity of critical writings in the various fields of theology and philosophy is by comparison especially striking. The phenomenon is understandable however. Mormonism as a religious culture is and always has been based very heavily upon a complex of histories—the histories of biblical peoples and of subsequent Judaeo-Christian histories; the histories of pre-Columbian Americans; and especially the religious and secular histories of the United States. Finally the histories of the Latter-day Saints themselves and of Joseph Smith, the most important Mormon, have been crucial to all Latter-day Saint self-perceptions and to the images which they have attempted to present to the world. Of all these pasts, the most accessible to writers are those that are most recent. The Great Revival of 1800, the world of Joseph Smith and his generation, the religious environment of the time, the First Vision, the writing of the Book of Mormon, Kirtland, Nauvoo, Utah of 1857,

**The John Whitmer Address, delivered at the first annual meeting of the John Whitmer Historical Association, Nauvoo, Illinois, September 29, 1973.*

1869, and 1890, etc., are not irretrievably lost in the mists of time and myth. Students are blessed (and sometimes cursed) with an abundance of written records carefully preserved. It has been and continues to be inevitable that almost everyone with an interest in the religion of the Latter-day Saints shall read—and sometimes write—Mormon history. The generalization may be reversed—historians of Mormonism have shared an interest in and often a dedication to religious concerns (never did an author profess greater indifference to religion and betray greater interest in the subject than Fawn Brodie in *No Man Knows My History*). So Mormon studies have tended to be historical studies of Mormons themselves. The New Mormon History is based in religious concerns, but is at the same time different from and a necessary precursor to critical religious studies yet to be written.

The practitioners of the Old Mormon History usually had a clear-cut position on Mormonism, either for or against, and tended to divide into two types: Defenders of the Faith (whatever their faith might be) and Yellow Journalists. With few exceptions, non-Mormon practitioners were anti-Mormon, and, likewise, with few exceptions, Mormons were pro-Mormon. Ex-Mormons often became anti-Mormon. The New Mormon History, on the other hand, exhibits different characteristics in both practice and practitioners. Most of the new historians are professionals whose work exhibits critical-analytical techniques. Many are Latter-day Saints in background or persuasion, but their work seems influenced by their literary or their historical training as much as or perhaps more than by their religious training. Their point of view might be described generally as interested, sympathetic detachment. One senses a shift in mood, too, from Victorian romantic sentimentality to a more realistic and tragic sense of the past.¹ The fact that some of the New Mormon Historians are not Latter-day Saints is an exception which proves the rule. In sum, the New Mormon History is a modern history, informed by modern trends of thought, not only in history, but in other humanistic and scientific disciplines as well, including philosophy, social psychology, economics, and religious studies.

There is a temptation at this point to indulge a favorite pastime of historians and discuss the historiography of the New Mormon History—that is, the history of its development. For the sake of concision in my primary purpose I will forego that exercise.² Suffice it to say that the trend under discussion is one in which the 1945 publication of Fawn M. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* was a landmark. Certainly not all of the work published earlier should be called "Old History," and neither is the reverse true. However, Brodie's famous and influential biography of Joseph Smith clearly exemplifies both Old and New, and so is a transitional work. A new era dawned with her book. All subsequent serious studies of early Mormonism have necessarily had Brodie as a referent point.³

A generation later, it is useful to analyze some of the implications of the New Mormon History for Latter-day Saints whom it has already touched during that time, as well as some possible future implications for them.⁴ The following discussion of these implications is divided into three topics:

1. The New History as an existential history.
2. The New History as a political history.
3. The New History as an ecumenical history.

1. *The New History as an existential history:*

Although the new historians are not necessarily existentialist in their philosophy, there does appear in the New Mormon History a tendency for which the word "existential" is the most descriptive. Existentialism, briefly, is an attitude which protests against views of the world and against policies of action in which individual human beings are regarded as the helpless playthings of historical forces, or as wholly at the mercy of the operation of natural processes. It emphasizes the dignity and uniqueness of individual human personality against the claims and demands of monolithic social systems such as the church or the state. So the existential situation of man is often described in existentialist writing as a series of agonizing moral choices to be faced by people privately and alone. These choices appear as dilemmas where the possible consequences are hidden from view and may be equivocal at best.

By contrast, in the Old Mormon History life is inclined to be depicted as a morality play, where moral choices are simply between good or evil, right or wrong. The choices divide the cast of characters into White Hats and Black Hats. The Old Historians are seldom comfortable until everyone in the cast is settled on one side or the other. Furthermore, for pro-Mormon Old Historians, individuals win esteem not necessarily for the dignity and humanity with which they confront the dilemmas of the Mormon experience, but for their piety, their orthodoxy, and the ardor of their fealty to the Church's leaders. In reality, the first generation of Latter-day Saints included many persons whose hearts were melted by the Prophet's evangel, but whose heads were skeptical of some of his policies. Their anguish, unless finally resolved in favor of a "sure testimony," was likely to cause them to be ignored by the Old Historians who desired to marshal a panoply of faithful witnesses, and to consign doubters to the side of the enemy or to oblivion. (A number of names spring to mind in this regard: Oliver Cowdery, Warren Parrish, John Corrill, Thomas B. Marsh, John and David Whitmer, and William Law). A special terminology exists in the Old History to describe their experience: they "break" with the church, and are subsequently "apostates" who often cease to exist in the history. As an RLDS I was fascinated in my student days to learn of this exercise, because in the Old Mormon History of the Utah church, the Reorganization and its generations of people have no existence and are not only unaccounted for, but, by definition, cannot be accounted for. The Reorganized Church developed its own version of the same phenomenon, in which the vast majority of Latter-day Saints drop from serious consideration after 1844, and, with their archvillainous leader, Brigham Young, become stereotypical scapegoats.

In the old *anti*-Mormon History the Church was a tyranny, and individuals within it were of little interest (top leaders excepted) until they "escaped" and "exposed" Mormonism. Ex-Mormons who escaped to the East, like ex-Communists who escaped to the West a century later, were expected to write books detailing the horrors of their experience. They also were expected to reinforce rather than to alter significantly the existing stereotypes about the tyranny from which they had fled.

The New Mormon History, by contrast, is interested in more than the narrowly sectarian experience of Latter-day Saints. More aware of and sympathetic toward the ambivalences of the human condition, it tends to be more patient with the "slow of heart." There are fewer apostates, fewer Mormon dupes and villains, at

least in the traditional sense of these terms. A "break with the Church" is just as likely to be interpreted as a political, economic, psychological, or cultural phenomenon as it is a moral or spiritual failure on the one hand, or as an escape on the other. The New History is rediscovering the lost people of the Mormon past—the ubiquitous dissenters, and the "Churches of the Mormon Dispersion," as Dale Morgan called the splinter groups. There is even new interest in "enemies" of the Church, who, instead of being simply explained as the Devil's tools, are now imputed with human characteristics, their actions described, and their motives analyzed. The New History senses the multiple influences which play upon individual and group decisions, and so it fashions a more humane, less doctrinaire history. The New History understands that the shortcoming of the Old History was not so much that the answers it gave were necessarily false, but that the questions it asked were often faulty, or at least incomplete.

In short, the New Mormon History is an existential history because it perceives the Latter-day Saint experience as a species of history not unrelated to other human species of history—of persons and groups acting and interacting in process, in time, in space, in culture. Latter-day Saint history in its early generations becomes an American history, a nineteenth century history, a protestant-revivalist-restorationist history, a corporate history, a nationalistic history, a white, predominately middle-class history, a Mid-west and Far-west history. Therefore almost necessarily it becomes a political history. So to the second point.

2. *The New History as a political history:*

At the outset, Joseph Smith's movement was essentially a kind of special religious revival, containing restorationist, associational, and millenarian elements. It was no ordinary revival to be sure, nor was Smith an ordinary revivalist. I use such a description to emphasize the *religious* character of the movement and of Smith's religious role at the beginning. It was to this new *religion* that the majority of first generation Mormons were converted.

However, as the policies of the Kingdom of God began to unfold in practice and in doctrine, the movement and Smith's role in it gained a political dimension with consequences which were both unanticipated and objectionable to some Mormon converts. This new politico-religious mix was evident in Missouri almost from the beginning of settlement in 1831, in Ohio at least from the mid 1830's, and in Illinois from 1840. In each case the Mormon corporation sought to influence, and if possible to dominate the local power structure in regions which it colonized; and finally to enlarge the parameters of its political action to include the state. In the "imperial" phase after 1842, the parameters were raised to the national and international level.

The character of this political activity I have called "utopian politics" or "apocalyptic politics."⁶ The coining of such strange terms requires an explanation, for utopian or apocalyptic conditions imply the absence of politics, or the struggle over power, from the historical process. It is just such a peculiar—one might even say bizarre—incongruity which marked Mormon politics. In practice, the Mormon political process was characterized by a unique and potent blend of the following: a rapid increase in local or regional Mormon population densities through conversions and "the gathering," a superior corporate organization with the operation of a pyramidal authority structure, a superior group discipline, a high degree of

cultural homogeneity, a superior quality of internal communications, and sometimes a more rapid rate of economic development based on greater talent, motivation, and pooling of capital. Underlying these was a set of powerfully held faith assumptions centering around the notion that God was actively engaged in the Work and would bring it to pass in apocalyptic fashion if necessary. "Men have a form of Godliness," Mormons reminded themselves and others, "but deny the power thereof."

Nevertheless, everywhere the early Mormon political enterprises ultimately failed. They failed in part because the leaders, especially Joseph Smith, exercised unwise judgment, and because the methods and objectives of Mormon politics were so radical—even revolutionary—that defection by Mormons from the enterprise were endemic and disruptive. But the greatest cause for failure before the move West was due to the fact that the locals would not suffer the Mormons to succeed. Gentiles responded to what they defined as the "Mormon insurrection" with brutal, crushing, lethal overkill in the same way that they responded to black or Indian insurrections.

I mentioned that the political dimension of Mormonism was, in effect, an unpleasant surprise for many Mormons. I do not mean to imply that political Mormonism was a *sub rosa*, or underground movement, cloaked in the guise of a religion, although this was a charge frequently levelled both at Smith and at Young after him. The doctrine of the political Kingdom of God, including the notion of the union of church and state under the hegemony of the Mormon priesthood, was explicit well before Smith's death. However, events moved so fast, the many-faceted character of the Mormon experience was so engrossing, and the very excitement and drama of the whole was so engaging, that the implications I have described might well have been missed by individual Mormons until they were deeply involved in the enterprise.

Furthermore, most Mormons were so captivated by Smith as a charismatic personality that they found it difficult to make a calculated assessment of his policies. (It is difficult for adherents of any radical reform movement to know how literally they should interpret the rhetoric of leadership. They assume that rhetoric to be exaggerated; but how much, and in what areas? In the end, Smith demonstrated that he had not greatly exaggerated his intentions).

In any event, the successive failure of the various early Mormon corporate enterprises through internal division, and through what amounts to counter-revolutionary Gentile vigilante actions, was a double shock to Mormons. First, they suffered real and personal losses through lootings, burnings, and drivings. Second, they suffered from the realization that some of their faith assumptions about an apocalyptic Kingdom Triumphant might be faulty. The different ways in which Mormons reacted to these twin shocks were crucial determinants of the peculiar character of all subsequent Latter-day Saint sects.

One reaction was dissent from the doctrines of the Political Kingdom. Some Mormons gradually began to reject the notion of a literal, political Kingdom of God. The Reorganized Church was the first large-scale expression of that rejection; but the descendants of Brigham Young's followers also abandoned the political kingdom ideal around the turn of the century. Finally, all surviving Mormons accepted some version of the standard American denominational settlement between church and state, which includes the understanding that churches abstain

from politics. The common acceptance of this settlement by church managers and members alike is what tends to make American churches traditionally conservative in politics as well as in social and economic spheres. The Restoration Movement, which began by rebelling against that settlement, finally joined it. For Latter-day Saints, "apocalyptic politics" changed to "survival politics," which meant, in effect, the politics of accommodation.

It is ironic that Latter-day Saints have not only rejected the Political Kingdom, but by successive acts of group forgetfulness, have erased the matter from the traditions that they understand to be their history. Most Latter-day Saints know little or nothing of the political kingdom idea, and have not even heard of the Council of Fifty. In 1966, Klaus Hansen, writing of Nauvoo as prototypical of the Mormon political kingdom, said, "In many ways Nauvoo was less the prototype of the [Mormon] future than was the Mormonism of those who rejected all the city stood for. Today, kingdom building is frowned upon not only in Independence, but in Salt Lake City as well."⁶

The New Mormon History has rediscovered the political dimension of early Mormonism. That dimension is now a main subject of at least three books (Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom*, my *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*, and Klaus Hansen's *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History*), and numerous essays. Consequently, Latter-day Saints might well re-examine the bases of their self-identity, inasmuch as it is now clear that Mormonism was shaped early in a crucible of political conflict, rather than one of religious persecution alone. Equally important is the task of re-examining the terminology and ideology of the doctrine of the Kingdom, which was in the first generation both literal and political.

3. *The New History as an ecumenical history:*

Joseph Smith intended that the moral and spiritual chaos of the world in the nineteenth century should be resolved and replaced by one faith, one God, one church-state, in preparation for the Second Coming. That intention embodied a radical ecumenism to match in breadth and scope the secular and profane vision of Smith's contemporary, Karl Marx. By another of the many ironies of Mormon history, Smith's movement was nevertheless characterized by the tendency of members to split off and go their own way, a tendency brought about by an anti-nomian disposition within Mormonism which was difficult to control. This centrifugal tendency was a constant embarrassment and a real weakness which Smith inveighed against with only partial success. He became almost paranoid about dissenters; and indeed, it was the great schism of 1844 that led indirectly to his death.⁷ That tragic event precipitated a succession crisis which brought the greatest fragmentation of all, a fragmentation which has continued to the present. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has done its best to ignore and even deny the existence of any devotees of the Restoration movement who are not in its own fellowship, while the Reorganized Church has achieved its traditional identity by the affirmation, "we are not Mormons." In short, the modern self-identities of most Latter-day Saints are based in part upon discrete sectarian polarities growing out of an historical fragmentation. But sectarian grounds alone are inadequate for religious and cultural self-identity. Indeed, in the world of the late twentieth century, all narrow self-definitions, whether sectarian, ideological,

national, racial, or whatever, need to be superseded by more humane, more ecumenical self-definitions. The New Mormon History suggests the possibility that the sectarian self-identities with which Latter-day Saints of whatever denominations have had to live, may become less exclusive and more inclusive. The New History urges upon the Saints the fact that all people of the Restoration Movement have had a common past despite themselves. Saints have survived and endured even if they have done so separately. If an LDS asks an RLDS (or vice versa) "Is your religious history legitimate?" the proper answer should be, "My religious history is authentic." Which is, of course, an answer to a different question. Like all peoples who have a rich heritage but suffer from cultural isolation or estrangement, Latter-day Saints need to discover authentic pasts other than their own. The New Mormon History is more diverse than the old, but also more inclusive. All Mormons are there. So are non-Mormons and ex-Mormons. As a final generalization, the New History attests that there is a common Mormon history, that all Latter-day Saints share it, and that it is indeed authentic.

Late one night several years ago, a new LDS friend asked me, as a consequence of several hours of conversation about our common faith, "Do you think the two churches will ever unite?" My answer then was equivocal; but now, with some additional understanding perhaps, I would answer that they will not and probably cannot, given the fact that each rests upon the same institutional foundation of Joseph Smith's doctrine of an exclusive authority structure. The question, "Will the churches unite?" should be superseded now by a different question: "Will each accept the other's history, as well as the common history, and be informed by it?"

There is another dimension of the New History as an ecumenical history. Not only do Latter-day Saints have the framework within which to understand their past as an existential history rather than as a branch of dogmatics and polemics, but interested people who are not Latter-day Saints and who do not share Mormon faith assumptions also have the opportunity to discover Mormon history as a legitimate rather than an aberrant phenomenon in American culture. As a result of these two developments, a kind of new middle ground has been created between those with and those without LDS faith assumptions, with the accompanying possibility of communication between them that does not have to struggle with the *a priori* issue of the legitimacy of the faith assumptions. Such middle ground is created when mutual interest in the existential history of the Latter-day Saints replaces mutual anxiety over dogma. Additionally it has provided a new location where "marginal" Latter-day Saints, who hold some faith assumptions but reject others, or who are attached to Mormon societies or social networks but not to the religion *per se*, can share in the dialogue about the significance of the Mormon experience. The New History may enable such people to discover a more comfortable and acceptable definition of their situation *vis a vis* both Mormons and non-Mormons.

There is no doubt that the most profound dialogue now occurring between LDS and RLDS people goes on among those who are the readers and writers of the New Mormon History (including a few non-Mormons). The dialogue is about history, but it is also very importantly about religion. It is a discussion of religious experience; but the dialogue has become a religious experience of Christian fellowship in its own right. The Spring 1974 meeting of the Mormon History Association in

Nauvoo was a memorable experience of probing, of sharing, of fellowship, of love. It was for many people both a culmination and a commencement. At the closing fellowship service, one participant said simply, "I walked at dawn today with my friends in the streets of Nauvoo. I thank God for my friends, and I thank God for the streets of Nauvoo." So the dialogue proceeds in the classic manner of modern ecumenism. Viewed in the traditional sectarian frame, this New History dialogue is a threat to sectarian boundaries. The threat is real. At the same time the tendency is a conservative one—its ultimate purpose is to recover, to preserve, and to augment the Faith of the Fathers. It lays the groundwork for a fourth history—a religious history.

History is one of civilization's most important service enterprises. The ends which it serves shift according to the shifting values of people. The New Mormon History is a response to such shifting values. Latter-day Saints, like many people of different faiths and persuasions, increasingly seek the services of a history that will aid them in ending their isolation; a history that will help dissolve arcane enmities and offer their children a tradition which is less parochial, less tribal, more humane, more universal. Here is the real meaning of the New History as an ecumenical history. It does not suggest that people of good will should not differ, but rather that people of good will should seek a mature understanding of their differences and of their commonwealth.

¹My juxtaposition of the concepts of the romantic and the realistic is probably understandable; the use of the concept of the tragic in the same context may be less clear. I tend to follow the meaning suggested by Alfred North Whitehead: "The essence of dramatic tragedy . . . resides in the remorseless working of things. . . . This inevitableness of destiny can only be illustrated in terms of human life by incidents which involve unhappiness. For it is only by them that the futility of escape can be made evident. . . ." *Science and the Modern World* (New York, 1948), p. 17. A tragic sense of history may but does not necessarily imply a fatalistic sense.

²I refer readers who may be unfamiliar with the trends and emphases in historical writing discussed here to *BYU Studies* and to *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. In their pages the New History has been exemplified in many articles, and described and discussed in numerous reviews, critiques, symposia, etc. *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action*, published privately by and for the RLDS community, contains similar useful information. For professionals and other readers who may quarrel with my facile division of Mormon historical writing into over-simplified dichotomies of "Old" and "New," and with my definitions of them, I plead *nolo contendere*. If my essay is defensible, I would wish the defense to rest upon general philosophical grounds, and not upon an attempt to argue, for example, the exact place of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Brigham Henry Roberts, or even Fawn Brodie in my scheme of things. An historiographical analysis would show the dichotomy to be anything but simple.

³See Marvin S. Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of *No Man Knows My History*," *Church History*, 43 (March, 1974), 78-96, for an important discussion, not only of Brodie, but of many large issues in Mormon religious history.

⁴My analysis owes much to the analyses of others who have addressed this subject in various ways, most frequently in the pages of *Dialogue*. I am indebted for example to Richard Bushman, Leonard Arrington, Klaus Hansen, Jan Shipps, Davis Bitton, and Marvin Hill, to name a few.

⁵See Flanders, "The Kingdom of God in Illinois: Politics in Utopia," *Dialogue*, 5 (Spring, 1970), 26-36.

⁶"The World and the Prophet," *Dialogue*, 1 (Summer, 1966), 107.

⁷Again ironically those schismatics claimed that it was Smith himself who was out of control, unrestrained by law or morality.