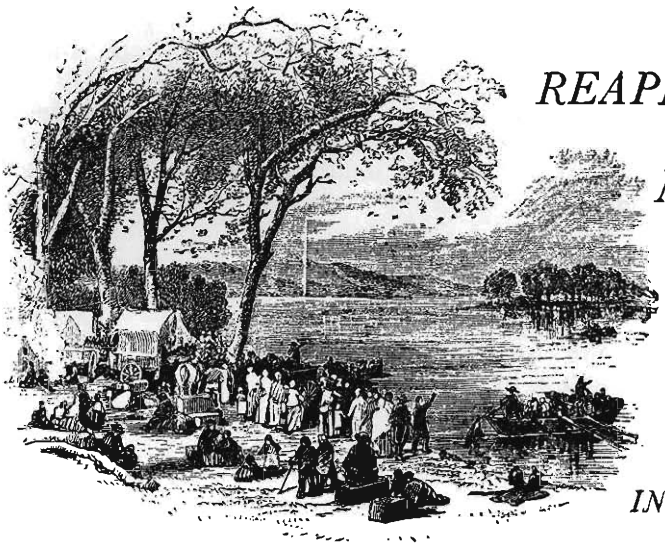

Encampment of Mormons on the Missouri River.

REAPPRAISALS OF MORMON HISTORY

PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

PREFACE

The articles in this section reveal the strength and vibrancy of current Mormon historiography. In December, 1965, in connection with the meetings of the American Historical Association at San Francisco, approximately 100 Mormon historians, mostly under 40 years of age, formed the Mormon History Association. Dedicated to the promotion of understanding, scholarly research, and publication in the field of Mormon history, the Mormon History Association was pleased to accept an invitation from *Dialogue* to prepare its first special section. From the essays presented here, readers will be able to sample the impressive research, original thought, and capable writing which are increasingly characteristic of Mormon studies.

Leonard Arrington
Guest Editor

INTRODUCTION: THE FUTURE OF MORMON HISTORY

Until recently the conventional division of books on Mormonism into pro- and anti- was the most important and revealing brief comment one could make in a bibliography. Although in the heat of the nineteenth century's war on the "Mormon Menace," an occasional author stood apart from the fighting and left a record which can be read without heavy discounting, for the most part works of history were tracts in crusades either to destroy the Mormons or to defend them. Both parties cast the Utah landscape as a battleground of good and evil and the figures marching across it as heroes or demons. The pro- and anti- bias did more than simply warp the narrative; it provided the very intent and purpose of the work, the interest and the moral of the story.

The end of polygamy and admission to statehood relieved the pressure and changed the course of Mormon historiography. Embattled works continue

to appear, but in recent years many Mormon historians have readily admitted there were some faults in the early leaders and accepted blame on behalf of the nineteenth century Church for bringing persecutions on itself. In this issue, Thomas Alexander's essay on Judge McKean finds redeeming virtues in a man whom earlier Mormon historians saw as an unmitigated blackguard. Similarly, Mormon-baiting has gone out of fashion with gentile writers — in the best circles anyway. Neither the sardonic cynicism of the twenties nor the fierce hatred of the ninteenth century will do. A kindly and fair tolerance which permits an occasional chuckle at Mormons' colorful ways and an implicit repudiation of their beliefs is more appropriate for our time.

Robert Flanders' essay, which charts and documents this tradition, raises questions about the direction Mormon history will now take. His list of works that offend neither Mormon nor gentile and that contribute to the common understanding starts a hope that the Church's clouded past can at last be cleared and the ghosts that have haunted it laid to rest. The list proves there is an audience ready for an unvarnished account. Mormons need no longer be so defensive: an admission of weakness will not be exploited by enemies but accepted with a measure of sympathy; the admirable qualities of the Saints will be recognized. For a time some Mormons may not fully realize that a frank presentation, fairly measuring strengths and weaknesses, is far more believable and persuasive than undiluted praise; but when they do the Church's archives may be less restricted. P.A.M. Taylor, the British historian who in an essay in this section expresses his fear that the biography of Brigham Young will never be written for lack of available materials, may yet be proven wrong.

We should not be deceived, however, by the illusion that at long last we have learned to write objective history. In the past three decades historians have discarded the myth of scientific history which inspired them at the beginning of the century. Every historian reflects personal and cultural values in his tone, in his selection of facts, and even in his subject. The objective history of our age, like that of every age before us, will in time appear subjective. Moreover, to have it otherwise would drain history of its power, its meaning, and its zest. To call forth a man's best efforts, history must involve him personally. Historians will continue to search for meaning in Mormon history, for some moral to the story that can be the equivalent for today of attack and defense in the nineteenth century.

Modified forms of the pro- and anti-theme continue to grip some historians, many of whom (such as Bernard DeVoto, Dale Morgan, Fawn Brodie and Wallace Stegner) grew up among the Mormons. Underneath the fairminded posture, their writings bear the marks of personal tensions. On the other hand, Mormons like Hugh Nibley and Richard Anderson energetically defend the Church and stand ready to reply to criticism which they consider unfounded. The interest in the Mormon past for these people comes from varying combinations of love and resentment, similar to the emotional mix of nineteenth century historians, except that the feelings are more restrained and the work more scholarly.

For a growing number of younger men, represented in this issue by James Allen, Klaus Hansen, and Davis Bitton, the study of history is in part a search for identity. Mormons can be criticized, as can Americans generally, for refusing to believe that we have a history, which is a somewhat over-subtle way of saying that we deny any essential changes in our aggregate personality. We have

moved, been persecuted, enjoyed some triumphs, built chapels and temples, organized auxiliaries, but the essential we, our feelings, beliefs, and moral attitudes, have remained the same from the beginning. Challenging this position, these three authors point to ways in which we have changed. Allen argues that while belief in the reality of the First Vision has remained constant, the moral and doctrinal lessons drawn from it have steadily expanded. Hansen's essay suggests that Mormon society and belief were once directed by an organization — the Council of Fifty — and an aspiration — imminent theocratic world government — which contemporary Mormons have scarcely heard of. Britton argues that Mormons in general were once much more prone to use reason in defending their belief, more open to the learning of their day than now. He expressly states that present attitudes are an historical overlay and not the essential Mormonism. All three are asking what time has wrought upon the faith and morals of the Saints.

This reexamination of the Mormon past is primarily a family affair — Mormons talking to Mormons in an effort to find out who we are. A question of greater interest to the larger community is the place of Mormonism in America. Where do Mormons fit in the growth of the nation and of its religion? Mormons have generally been assigned their place according to the interpretations of the American past current among professional historians, in our time notably those of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard. Turner's frontier thesis, which holds that American character and politics emerged primarily from the process of settling the wilderness, easily accommodated the Mormons' story. Mormonism's birth in a new community, its extraordinary beliefs, its break with convention, not to mention the Church's part in settling the West, fit nicely into Turnerian categories. In the Heroic Saga of the frontier thesis, the western setting and the trek remain in the foreground, but the courage and fortitude of the people are made to sound more loudly in the narrative. To a lesser degree, Mormon history has fallen under the influence of Beard's notion that American history is the conflict of propertied interests with the common people, and Church leaders in some histories have been identified with business interests.

Nowadays, however, both Turner and Beard are losing ground among historians, and their influence on Mormon history is likely to fade. Their passing will probably leave a vacuum similar to the one created by the dissipation of animosities at the end of the nineteenth century. Historians will be compelled to look for new meaning in the Mormon past. History writing will go on, of course, and with added vitality, as the articles in this issue demonstrate. For the time being this work will draw upon the earlier interpretations for its ultimate significance, but, if the past is any guide, as American historians propose new interpretations for the nation's history, we may confidently expect new interpretations of Mormonism. One need only observe the currents within the profession to predict the direction of Mormon historiography.

So far Church historians have never proposed a distinctively Mormon interpretation of the Church's place in America. Inside the Church, Mormons view themselves as a saying remnant whose destiny is to redeem the nation as it normally deteriorates, but no Mormon has been able to persuade outsiders that this belief is more than pitiful ethnocentrism. Acquiescence to the dominant professional interpretations has been the natural recourse. A convincing presentation of Mormons' own view of their relationship to America would re-

quire a far more thorough revaluation of American history as a whole than Mormon scholars seem prepared to make.

They would have to discover large, continuing problems in American life for which Mormonism offers convincing solutions. For example, the current controversies over the "new morality" and the "death of God" theology, added to the anarchism of the New Left, may point to a recasting of the American past in which it will be seen that American emphasis on freedom from control ultimately tends to dissolve all structure in personal and social life. Then Mormonism with its peculiar beliefs about God and about man's power to become as God could be conceived as a valid alternative for preserving order while still allowing scope to the human yearning for liberty and personal power. In another vein, the miseries of our overgrown cities and the deterioration of community in mass society might be contrasted to Mormon stress on small, tightly-knit communities exemplified in the past in the Mormon village and today in the ecclesiastical wards. Or the erosion of individuality in bloated business and governmental bureaucracies could be compared to the stress on personal relationships in Church organization.

These are but a few of the avenues which might be followed by Mormon historians. A distinctively Mormon interpretation of American history calls for an identification of problems in American civilization with deep roots in the past and a comparison with the traditional Mormon ways of solving the problems. Historians would focus on the question of why Mormon culture developed in one way and American culture in another.

As massive as the task may seem, the resources are available. The Church's conception of its role as a social and economic as well as an ecclesiastical organization enables Mormons to find in their own experience a broad range of values which contrast sharply with general trends. Implicit in the Mormon tradition is an elaborate critical apparatus for analyzing and evaluating American history.

It is doubtful that non-Mormons could ever accept entirely the validity of Mormon values or even of a Mormon formulation of the problems. But the saving remnant thesis could be made somewhat more plausible, and, at the very least, concentration on the contribution of the Mormon sub-culture, with its alternatives to the dominant patterns, would enrich American pluralism.

Future Mormon historians might well take as their model Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kngdom,* which implicitly contrasts the Mormons' cooperative settlement with the rugged individualism prevailing elsewhere. Mormon historians could also profit from Thomas O'Dea's insight that in some ways Mormons became a nation unto themselves. Guided by that notion, Mormon scholarship would seek less to fit Mormonism into the overall American scene than to map the distinct paths taken by the two cultures and to assess their efforts to engage in fruitful exchange with each other.

Richard L. Bushman