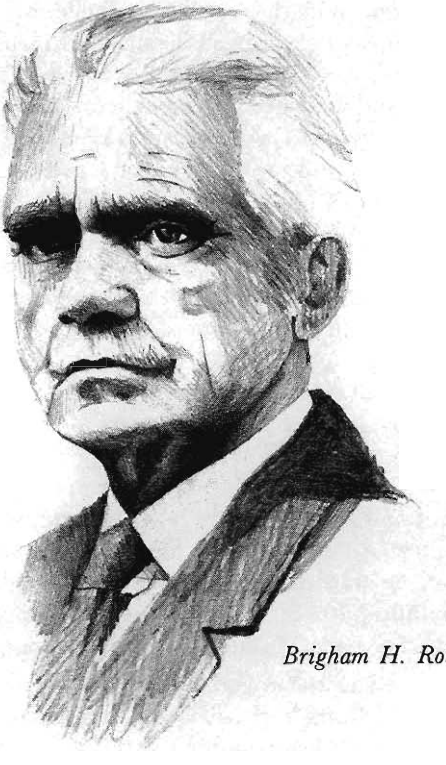
than the multitude. When a prevalent assumption—which he accepts—is challenged, he of all people should be able to defend that assumption with something better than cut-and-paste manipulation of scripture: the "proof-text method" at its worst.



Brigham H. Roberts

BRIGHAM H. ROBERTS: NOTES ON A MORMON PHILOSOPHER-HISTORIAN

Sterling M. McMurrin

Sterling M. McMurrin is E. E. Ericksen Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Utah and is the author of THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE MORMON RELIGION. *The following introduction, written for the recent reprinting by the Deseret Club at Princeton University, of B. H. Roberts's* JOSEPH SMITH, THE PROPHET-TEACHER *is published here by permission.*

Although the fundamentals of Mormon thought were quite firmly established in the Church's first generation, it was the second generation which pulled the philosophical and theological strands together. It was the intellectual leaders of this period, among whom Brigham H. Roberts was pre-eminent in both abilities and influence, who not only shaped the outlines of a systematic theology but developed, as well, the perspectives which placed the Church as an institution within the framework of history and provided the Mormon people with

the instruments for rationalizing and defending their beliefs and practices. Though perhaps less radical and less creative than the first, the second generation was more reflective, more reasonable, and intellectually more responsible. The Church had already become defensive where before it had exhibited a quite admirable independence in both thought and action, and argument and scholastic justification had displaced the facile prophetic pronouncements of the first years. Something very important to Mormonism had been lost with the death of the Prophet and the passing of those who had known him and were close to him and had been creators with him of the new Church and its faith. But just as inevitably, something was gained by their successors in the necessity for explaining and justifying the doctrine and exploring and exploiting its numerous entailments for both thought and action. Above all, a new intellectual vitality was gained by the "defense of the faith and the saints."

Since his death in 1933, Roberts has been a much-neglected figure in the Church. Where once he was easily the most interesting and exciting and stimulating person in its leadership, its most prolific writer, its chief theologian and historian, and its most capable defender, today, only thirty-three years later, his name is scarcely known to large segments of the membership of the Church. He has been eclipsed by a deluge of writers of varying but lesser talent, many of whom lack even the grace to acknowledge their indebtedness to him. The resurgence of interest in Roberts' work, therefore, and the reissue of some of his writings are fortunate, for in him the Mormon people have a spokesman of uncommon stature and ability. His name should be kept very much alive by those who value the traditions of the Church, who have any attachment to its robust and romantic past, or who have genuine appreciation for the ideas and institutions that have been the substance and strength of Mormonism.

Roberts belonged to the era of great Mormon oratory, and for a third of a century he was the Church's great orator, in the days when the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City sounded and resounded with the voices of impassioned advocates and defenders, the days before the microphone and camera robbed the Mormon conferences of much of their character and vitality and inspiration, the days when the Church both valued and invited argument and debate. There was then a kind of intellectual openness about the Church which encouraged thought and discussion. Its faith and confidence were firm and it was ready and anxious to take on all comers. The Church could justifiably boast a roster of admirable talent, but Roberts was its chief exhibit and its most competent advocate.

The high value which the Church in those days placed on intellectual strength and achievement in matters pertaining to religion yielded a good return, for it gathered into its leadership a quite impressive group whose thought and writings were a permanent impress upon its character. Among these, Roberts was the recognized leader. Often in rebellion and conflict, he nevertheless commanded both the confidence and admiration of his colleagues and of the rank and file of the Church. His native intellectual powers, his wide and intelligent reading, his forensic skills, the forcefulness of his pen, his enthusiastic and even impetuous speech, and the sheer impact of his uncommon personality made him the intellectual leader of the Mormon people in the era

of Mormonism's finest intellectual attainment. Since his death over thirty years ago, the Church has suffered a steady intellectual decline in matters pertaining to religion, a decline accompanied by a growth of irrationalism and anti-intellectualism from which there is now no indication of recovery. Perhaps a resurgence of interest in Roberts' work will point toward a better future.

It seems to me that Roberts' central importance for Mormon thought derives largely from the reliability of his instincts in assessing the crucial elements in the Mormon intellectual foundation, both philosophical and theological, and in his capacity to exploit those elements within a historical framework of large perspectives and vision. He was not a creator of doctrine like Joseph Smith, or even Brigham Young, nor did he import doctrine into Mormonism as did Sydney Rigdon. And he was somewhat less original in his thought than Orson Pratt. Certainly he lacked Pratt's disposition for speculative metaphysics as well as his analytic and logical talent. There is nothing in Roberts' writings, for instance, comparable in character to Pratt's finest philosophical piece, "The Absurdities of Immaterialism." But Roberts had a better historical sense than any of these and a far better knowledge of history, and he was in a better position to achieve perspective on the place of Mormonism as a religious and social movement. If less analytical and innovative than Pratt, Roberts had a better feel for relevance and a firmer grasp of the large implications of the Mormon doctrine, and he had, I believe, more common sense in his treatment of religious issues. Roberts was less legalistic and literalistic than his contemporary James E. Talmage, and if his talents in treating doctrinal issues were less refined than those of Talmage, he had a more expansive intellect and a far greater sensitivity to philosophic issues.

Roberts lived during a crucial period for Mormonism. The original prophetic and sectarian impulse was waning, the major feats of pioneering were accomplished, and the struggles with the federal government and their aftermath were taking a severe toll of human energy and threatening the economic and institutional life of the Church. More than anything else, the Church needed the defenses that would justify its existence, establish its moral and intellectual respectability, and guarantee its own integrity. But there were additional challenges which engrossed Roberts—the coming of statehood for Utah and the creation of a political life for the Mormon people, and the secular threat to religion that was carried largely by the new humanism and by Darwinism and the sciences generally. Roberts seemed born to these tasks and he entered into them with quite remarkable energy and dedication and with the self-assurance and determination of those whose commitment and faith are firm.

Roberts' prose style is rhetorical and dramatic. He was at all times the orator. He lacked the precision of Talmage's diction and the poetic qualities of Orson F. Whitney. But he was without pedantry and both his oral and written words drew strength from his directness and enthusiasm. Roberts wrote as he spoke, and his written pages often read not with finely composed and polished sentences but as if they were edited reports of extemporaneous statements—direct, often repetitive, somewhat personal as if writer and reader were in conversation, sometimes careless in construction, but always to the point and effective.

Roberts' writing, like his public address, was argumentative and polemical. He enjoyed nothing more than argument. Indeed, he liked nothing better than a good fight. If no one was available to engage in debate, he would produce a battle by monologue. He was at his best in the heat of controversy, and it is not surprising that his most commendable theological piece, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity,* certainly the most competent theological statement to come from a Mormon leader, was in its most important part a literary debate, an argument with a Roman Catholic scholar set within the large dispute on Mormon doctrine that aroused widespread public interest near the turn of the century.

In his private as well as public life, Roberts was a controversial figure. His autobiography, still unpublished more than thirty years after his death, is a fascinating, moving story of a lonely child in England, left to shift for himself by irresponsible guardians after his mother had migrated to Utah; of his walking barefoot from the Platte River to Salt Lake City; of a rough and tumble youth; of his admirable struggle for education; of his fight with the Church to get into politics; of his role in the struggle for statehood; of his dramatic losing battle with the United States Congress, which refused him his seat in the House because of his polygamy. The full story of his life will tell of his double struggle against the inroads of secularism in the Church and the anti-scientific bias of some of his ecclesiastical colleagues; of his battle as historian to publish an uncensored history of the Church; of his fights over doctrine and evolution; of his missionary controversies with the Christian sects; of his fight to get into action in the First World War, when he was commissioned a chaplain above the age limit because of his demonstrated physical strength and abilities; of his determination to make Mormonism intellectually acceptable; of his endless battle with its critics; of his struggle to maintain the prestige and influence of his quorum, the First Council of the Seventy, which since his death has been downgraded in the top councils of the Church; and of his internal struggles with his own faith, the struggles of a man who wanted to believe and yet be honest. His parallel study of Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* and the *Book of Mormon* attests his determination to keep the case for Mormonism open and honest.

When Roberts died, a packed Tabernacle paid him homage, and he was buried with military rites in the cemetery of the little village of Centerville, where much of his life was lived. His grave is marked by a monument erected by missionaries who had served under him in the Eastern States. Those who can remember his death can remember what, for the Mormons, was the end of an era.

Brigham H. Roberts' strength as a historian, it seems to me, was especially in his intense historical consciousness, his quite spacious perspectives on history, his capacity for historical research and talent for narrative, his sense of personal involvement with his subject, his passion for it, and his deep-lying desire to be honest and open with his readers. His histories are not without bias and prejudice. They are clearly pro-Mormon and sometimes with a vengeance. They are written to justify the Mormon Church, but they are written with honesty and sincerity. They have the mark of a desire for objectivity even when it is not achieved. "The historian's line of delineation between things," Roberts wrote in his autobiography, "must follow justly, firmly and without hesitation, or he will

fail in his absolute duty to the truth of things." Often in his writings the Church comes out second best where a man of lesser character under similar circumstances would have found it easy to bring it out on top. "History to be of any worth," he wrote, "must not only tell of your successes, but also of your failures or semi-failures in your work."

There have been and are a number of highly competent historians of Mormonism. Indeed, some of the very best are now at their work. Of these, however, most are students of specialized facets of Mormon history. The time is near when a general history of high order should make its appearance, as the materials are available and they have been well worked over. But as yet nothing like a definitive history has been published. There are excellent works of historical fiction and equally good biographical, sociological, economic, political, and local studies, and some good general commentaries, but no full-fledged history—none, that is, except Roberts' *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,* a large and expansive work. Linn's *Story of the Mormons* is the best history by a non-Mormon, but it has its own biases and it doesn't bring the story down very far. Roberts, whatever his deficiencies as a historian and whatever his prejudices, is still the best account of the first hundred years of the Church.

It is well known that most work on the Mormons produced until quite recently has been strongly biased pro or con with prejudices which violently distort the facts. No historian, of course, can be expected to achieve anything like a full objectivity. In history this is a concept quite without meaning, for the historian must pick and choose his materials from an enormous and unwieldy mass of events, and if he is to be anything more than a chronicler he must run the risks of causal explanation and interpretation which must sooner or later get him into trouble. Anyone who reads written history must have the grace to take all such matters into consideration.

But until quite recently Mormon history was written under the stress of exaggerated propaganda and controversy, propaganda that was excessive and controversy that as often as not was more passionate than reasonable, generating more heat than light. Today we can find numerous professional historians who have a calm competence on various phases of Mormon history. Some of these turn out historical essays of the highest quality. I think here of writers

like Stanley Ivins, Dale Morgan, or Juanita Brooks, whose *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* is a model of historical research and composition. The works of these exhibit qualities not always found in historians, especially historians whose subject relates to religion. And there are the works of Mormon historical fiction, most notably Vardis Fisher's *Children of God,* a magnificent and soul-stirring epic, such specialized research as Lowry Nelson's study of *The Mormon Village,* E. E. Ericksen's profound analysis of *The Psychological and Ethical Aspects of Mormon Group Life,* William Mulder's highly literary treatments of the ideal and practice of the "gathering of the saints," or Thomas O'Dea's studies of Mormon community life. Though none of these fits the stricter pattern of written history, such work is essential to the historical understanding of Mormonism and to the eventual production of anything like a definitive general history.

Now I mention these representative works in commenting on Brigham H. Roberts because I think it is essential to see that he was not the end of history writing on the subject of Mormonism. He lacked many of the talents and opportunities represented in today's better and more specialized historians, and no one should read his *Comprehensive History* and suppose that this is the end of the matter. Indeed, it is only the beginning, and this is my point. For the historically minded and history-based Mormons, Roberts composed a strong and carefully researched comprehensive historical statement, laid out many of the fundamental issues and basic problems, and did so with courage and honesty. He had a large capacity for work, a fine sensitivity for the controversial, and a talent for research, comprehension, and synthesis. And while he wrote as he argued and debated, he achieved a measure of understanding admirable in a man who was personally living through the impassioned event which he described and who wrote as both a high official of the Church and as its official historian. But the very ground which he covered must be worked again and again if the Church is to have the written history which it deserves.

Though every historian must adopt a position from which he selects his materials, if he is to avoid confusion and frustration, I personally regret that Roberts was so strongly inclined toward what I would call the "political" theme in his history. This is a confession of my own bias, of course, and I suppose he would have been untrue to his own political nature if he had done otherwise. But it is still disappointing to find so much of political and institutional conflict and controversy and so little of what might be called cultural history in his work. Yet he was himself a man of action and quite certainly he told the narrative where the action was. Andrew Neff's *History of Utah,* edited after his death by Leland Creer, was better balanced on the cultural side.

I feel, moreover, that Roberts did not fully and properly examine and exploit the origins of Mormonism; and partly because of this, the generality of Mormon people today, who depend so heavily upon him for their historical interpretations, do not understand and appreciate the multiple forces that went into the making of their religion and the historical movement of their Church. The picture is altogether too simple and is too much affected by the strong desire to vindicate and justify the Church.

But enough of criticism. If one seeks evidences of special virtue in Roberts

as a historian, his determination to lay things out as he saw them, however distasteful they might be to some of his ecclesiastical colleagues and many of his readers, let him read the commentary on the destruction of the press of the *Nauvoo Expositor,* the account of and notes on the so-called "Canadian Copyright Incident," both in the *Comprehensive History,* or the fascinating "case of Pelatiah Brown," included in his editing of the documentary materials of the *History of the Church, Period I.* Or let him note the omission by Roberts of blocks of myth and legend which many accepted as history in his day.

Finally, it should at least be noted that Roberts' perspectives on history and his competence to treat some of the large problems in Christian history were due in part to his intelligent and broad reading. There was much that he neglected in intellectual history, through no fault of his own, for his formal education was at best very elementary. He seems to have known too little of Greek and Roman philosophy and their bearing upon Christianity, or of medieval philosophy and theology. And he neglected some of the great minds among his own contemporaries in favor of second- and third-raters. But he was acquainted with Emerson and Fiske and profited much from such writers as Andrew White, Kitto, Draper, and Gibbon. His works are well furnished with telling references to such greats as Mosheim, Milner, Edersheim, Milman, and Eusebius. Roberts read extensively from all of these, and from Renan, Blackstone, Macaulay, and an assortment of major philosophers, ancient and modern, when still a youth employed as a blacksmith—no mean accomplishment for one who first learned the alphabet at the age of eleven. His work indicates, too, a broad acquaintance with the Bible and with Bible commentaries, though he seems to have been little affected by the historical and literary scriptural criticism which had such a large impact during his lifetime. Partly because of this neglect by Roberts and his contemporary fashioners of Mormon ways of thinking, the Mormon people even today are in general the victims of traditional patterns of biblical thought which often tie them to an outworn and intellectually frustrating scriptural fundamentalism.

Roberts' treatments of Christian history were polemical and propagandistic. He dealt altogether too casually with the large cultural forces that produced Christianity and its institutions, and while his factual materials are in the main reliable, much that he wrote on this subject is difficult to defend. He failed to grasp the character of the early hellenistic Christianity, to see its very beginnings in Paul as a departure from the Palestinian religion, and failed therefore, as did most Christian historians, to fairly judge the subsequent course of Christian thought and institutions. Nevertheless, he wrote intelligently, and though he depended excessively on secondary sources, the church historians, he described the main historical foundations upon which the Mormons have rested their case, the apostasy of the Christian Church as the necessity for a restoration. I refer here especially to his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History,* his addresses, *The Falling Away,* and to his Introduction for the *History of the Church, Period I.*

At the turn of the century the Mormons had special problems of their own which kept them well occupied, but their intellectual leaders did not escape the main controversy of the time, religion versus evolution. The evolu-

tion controversy reached the United States rather late, and it reached the Mormons a little later, but Roberts was in the thick of it, determined to make the case for orthodoxy by discrediting Darwinism. His main, and early, essay on the subject, "Man's Relationship to Deity," does him little credit, but it is an important part of the story of his work. It is interesting that his argument was not anti-scientific in spirit, an attitude that would have betrayed his confidence in the virtues of reason. The errors of Darwinism, he insisted, were not due to the scientists. They were the fault, rather, of the churches, whose nonsense regarding the creation and age of the earth had driven the scientists far from the truth in their efforts to find a ground upon which they could make sense. Roberts' efforts to reconcile the findings of science with a liberalized biblical literalism were typical of the times and do not deserve serious attention today, but it should be said in his defense that in later years he appears to have developed a much greater sophistication in such matters. He was interested in the science-religion controversy and he read quite widely in the field, but he was better prepared to see the dispute in past centuries than to contribute importantly to it in the present.

Roberts' main strength as a theologian for Mormonism was not at all in his capacity for theological dialectic or refinement, or in any originality for this discipline. It was, rather, in his instinct for the philosophical relevance of the Mormon theological ideas—this combined with his sense of history. This combination in temperament, talent, and interest brought both breadth and depth to his thought, giving his work a profoundness that was uncommon among Mormon writers. Certainly one of the best exhibits of these qualities is his 1907 discourse, *Joseph Smith, the Prophet-Teacher.*

More than any other, Roberts sensed the radical heresy in Mormon theology, its complete departure from the traditional Christian doctrines of God and man, its denial of the divine absoluteness, and its rejection of the negativism of the orthodox dogma of the human predicament. Roberts was not a creator of doctrine in these matters, but he had a clear vision of what was entailed by the basic ideas already laid down by his predecessors, and he did more than any other person to set forth the full character of the Mormonism that followed inevitably from the theological ideas of Joseph Smith, from the doctrine, for instance, of the uncreated intelligence or ego and the denial of the orthodox dogma on the creation of the world. Roberts was not repulsed by the unorthodox implications of the finitistic conception of God. He delighted in them, for they made room for a positive doctrine of man. Yet he kept the discussion of the nature of God on a more defensible level than did some who confused the old absolutism with the new doctrine of man and the optimism of the nineteenth century, and it required a bold and rebellious and spacious mind to grasp its full implication.

Today religious liberalism is largely spent and the facts of life too often fail to support its claims. And there is little justification remaining for genuine optimism. Even in Mormonism the old Christian orthodoxy in new clothes is gaining ground. We are a tired and disillusioned generation which has suffered a new loss of nerve, and too often we prefer our religion in negative rather than positive terms. We prefer the comforts of resignation to the dangers and uncer-