B. H. ROBERTS AS HISTORIAN

Davis Bitton

If the Mormon community has today an informative record of its past, much credit must be given to B. H. Roberts. Davis Bitton, Associate Professor of History at the University of Utah, who has published both European and Mormon history, assesses the work of Roberts from the point of view of the professional historian.

I

In 1930, when B. H. Roberts published his six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* learned journals were silent. But he himself, with pardonable pride, had described his work as "monumental." One Mormon, answering Bernard De Voto's contemptuous description of Utah as an intellectual desert, hailed Roberts as "another Gibbon."[1] Although hyperbolic, the favorable judgment was in general well deserved. Not only was the *Comprehensive History of the Church* (hereafter referred to as the *CHC*) far superior to any history of Mormonism which had yet appeared; even today it is a work which no serious student of the subject can afford to ignore. Nevertheless, the work did have some flaws, and Roberts had his limitations as an historian. It is the purpose of the present essay to examine his historical writings, making some judgments on their quality and hopefully arriving at a just estimate of his place in the development of Mormon historiography.

---

[1]*Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1930), VI, 550–51. J. R. Paul's response to De Voto is in the *Improvement Era,* XXXIV (March, 1931), 253.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that Roberts was far more than an historian. Newspaper editor, mission president, a member of the Church's First Council of Seventy, politician, chaplain in the Army during World War I, spokesman for the Church in many debates and conferences, Roberts was a Renaissance man born out of due time. He wrote furiously throughout his adult life — editorials, lesson manuals, theology, and even some history in areas where he made no claim to original scholarship.[2] But with all of these we are not here concerned. It is his writings on the Mormon past which we must examine in considering Roberts *qua* historian.

Roberts' writing on Mormon history began long before 1930. As early as 1886 he was publishing a series on the "Missouri Persecutions" and another on "The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo." In 1892 appeared his *Life of John Taylor*, a biography of the third president of the Church. In 1900 his earlier articles were revised and published as two books, *The Missouri Persecutions* and *The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo*.[3] Soon afterward he was appointed Assistant Church Historian and in 1902 began the publication of Joseph Smith's so-called documentary history. Not to be confused with the *CHC*, this seven-volume work (sometimes abbreviated as *DHC*) was primarily a collection of documents centering around the journal of Joseph Smith. As editor, Roberts added critical notes, other pertinent documents, and extensive introductions which were in fact bold interpretive essays summing up the period covered in each volume. He was therefore well prepared, even aside from his polemical and apologetic works (some of which had led him to further research into historical problems), when in 1909 he launched his general history of the Church as a series in *Americana*, a monthly periodical published by the American Historical Society. A small monograph on *The Mormon Battalion* appeared in 1919. Finally, in 1930, the *Americana* series was revised, expanded, and published as the *CHC*.[4]

---

[2]For example, his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (Salt Lake City, 1893; 2nd ed., 1895; 3rd ed., 1902). Judged as a lesson manual intended to substantiate the Mormon view of a "great apostasy," this work has much to recommend it. It referred frequently to such historians as Josephus, Eusebius, Mosheim, Gibbon, and Milner. It tried to encourage serious study of the subject by men in the Melchizedek Priesthood quorums of the Church. But it is frequently historically naïve and at times simply inaccurate, as, for example, on pp. 221–41. The same is true of the highly tendentious *The Falling Away* (Salt Lake City, 1931). Since these are not works of serious scholarship — Roberts lacked the necessary language skills, for one thing — they will be ignored in the present essay. Also ignored will be the following works dealing with different aspects of Mormon history and theology, for they are primarily works of polemic: *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City, 1907–12); *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (1909–11); and *Succession in the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1894).

[3]"The Missouri Persecutions," *The Contributor*, VII (1886); "The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo," *The Contributor*, VIII (1887); *The Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City, 1892); *The Missouri Persecutions* (Salt Lake City, 1900); *The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City, 1900).

[4]Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols., B. H. Roberts, ed. (Salt Lake City, 1902–12, 1932); "History of The Mormon Church," *Americana* (New York), 1909–15; *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, 1930).

Almost as if they were part of a carefully devised research strategy, his earlier works allowed Roberts to become familiar with the sources, write up his history, and then improve it in later editions or new combinations. The following table, listing these works in chronological order of their appearance, shows how frequently he had the opportunity to revise or expand upon his earlier treatments.

	1805–1830	1830–1848	1848–1887	1887–1915	1915–1930
"Persecutions" (1886)		X			
"Nauvoo" (1886)		X			
John Taylor (1892)	X	X	X		
Persecutions (1900)		X			
Nauvoo (1900)		X			
DHC (1902–12)	X	X			
"History of Mormon Church" (1909–15)	X	X	X	X	
Battalion (1919)		X			
CHC (1930)	X	X	X	X	X

It is clear that the early history of the Church, before the exodus to the Great Basin, was treated most frequently. Even excluding "partial" treatments, the *CHC* as published in 1930 represented for this early period the culmination of some five successive renditions. Although the period of Utah history prior to 1887 did not benefit from this backlog of previously published work, the biography of John Taylor served admirably to introduce Roberts to the specific problems of that age. The period from 1887 to 1915 was virgin soil when he wrote on it for the *Americana* series, but he had the opportunity for revision before the *CHC* appeared, which was not true of the chapters on 1915–1930. In any event, at least the first five volumes of the *CHC* must be regarded not as a fresh treatment of Mormon history but as the culmination of successive efforts, allowing for tinkering, amplifying, clarification, and general revision.

Roberts had a strongly personal style of writing. It must be recognized that his work contains punctuation peccadillos, unhappy images, and even errors of grammar.[5] His tendency to wax poetic when treating an emotionally charged incident is often carried too far. He was capable of producing paragraphs of hackneyed description:

> The spring of 1833 opened early in western Missouri. The streams, which had been so long locked up in ice, broke loose under the genial rays of the returning sun, and rushed madly on to swell the majestic current of the Missouri. The winter snows early melted before the balmy breath of spring, and grass and flowers in rich profusion and of

[5]By way of example, see the impossible sentence structure (I, xlvii); faulty diction (VII, 11); unhappy imagery (I, 48); and the following slight distortion of foreign words and phrases: "en report" (I, 78); "increscendo" (II, xxiii); "en mass" (II, 159); "en march" (V, 113). Also: "Being unable to resist them, they beat him unmercifully. . . ," *The Missouri Persecutions* (1900), p. 97.

> varied hue clothed the great rolling prairies of the west in their loveliest attire. The forests along the water courses put forth their tender buds, and the birds that had migrated to the south in the autumn, to escape the severity of the winter, joyfully returned to build their nests in the same old woods, and make the wilderness glad with their sweet songs. All nature rejoiced, and the saints who had gathered to that land to build up Zion rejoiced with her.[6]

Unhappily, this is not the only sentimental and cliché-ridden passage in Roberts' historical writings.[7]

But in his favor it should be said that his very involvement with his subject often enhanced interest. One example among many memorable passages is the following description of "The Mob Tragedy on Cane Creek":

> By ten o'clock a number of people had gathered at the Condor residence where three of the elders had arrived earlier in the morning, Gibbs, Berry, and Thompson; Elder Jones who had lingered at the home of Mr. Thomas Garrett to read Utah papers, as he drew near the Condor residence was seized by a mob of twelve or fourteen masked men who held him prisoner, and made inquiry as to the whereabouts of the other elders.
>
> A number of the gathering congregation were loitering about the gate and doorway of the house, and some were in the orchards at the rear of the house, when the mob from ambush rushed upon the Condor home. At the gate the mob seized the older Condor and held him fast, but not before he had shouted to James R. Hudson, his wife's son by a former husband, and his own son, Martin, to get their guns and resist the attack. The two young men made a dash for the house. Young Hudson had to go to the attic of the house for his gun, which he, that morning, had loaded at the request of his mother in anticipation of trouble. Martin's gun was suspended in deer horns over the back door of the living room, where the morning's religious services were to be held. As Martin entered the door the leader of the mob was taking down this gun, and a short, fierce struggle ensued for possession of it, during which young Martin Condor was shot down by others, and the mobber, turning the gun upon Elder Gibbs, who was in the act — *Bible* in hand — of seeking a text for the pending morning service — shot him, and the elder sank to the floor a dead man.
>
> Meantime other bloody work had been going on. Many guns had been fired. One aimed at Elder Thompson, Elder Berry seized and pushed aside, enabling Thompson to escape from the back door through the orchard and to the woods, but at the instant he had saved Thompson's life Berry himself fell riddled with bullets. The mobber who had shot down Elder Gibbs had just stepped from the front door of the house when young Hudson came from the attic, gun in hand. Two men seized him at the foot of the rude stairway, but flinging them off, he rushed to the door and shot the murderer of Elder Gibbs, killing him instantly. . . . Then pandemonium reigned. Young Hudson

---

[6]*The Missouri Persecutions*, p. 69.

[7]Other examples are found in *The Missouri Persecutions*, pp. 22, 69, 132, 171–72, 188–89; and in the *CHC*, I, 19n., 48; V, 112–13.

> was fired upon and fatally wounded — he died within an hour; the mob yelling for vengeance for the killing of their leader, rushed to the open windows and fired promiscuously into the house, savagely wounding Mrs. Condor in the hip, from which to the time of her death she remained a cripple; but most of the shots thus fired riddled the bodies of the dead elders upon the floor. This done the mob took their dead leader and departed.[8]

This incident occurred in 1884, when Roberts was an assistant mission president in the Southern States, and he personally arrived on the scene six days later, at considerable danger to himself, in order to disinter the bodies of the elders and send them to their families. Such involvement did not make for objectivity, perhaps, but it did help to assure that he was not guilty of the insipid journalese too often encountered in current scholarship.

Some of the characteristic features of his style can be understood, I believe, if we remember (a) that he once had hopes of becoming known as a writer of imaginative fiction; (b) that his experience as a newspaper editor and writer of tracts helped to develop fluency — or, as some would say, glibness — and the ability to argue a strong point of view; (c) that the writers he was fond of included Gibbon, Fiske, and Thomas Carlyle; and (d) that he became known very early as an eloquent orator and continued throughout his adult life to practice and develop the skills of platform speaking.[9]

But a vivid style, however desirable, is not in itself sufficient. To evaluate Roberts as an historian we must also consider such lowly matters as his familiarity with sources. He had, in fact, read widely in both the secondary literature and primary sources. The *CHC* contains no bibliography as such, but its footnotes do indicate Roberts' familiarity with the major secondary works. Remembering that scholarly study of the Mormons had produced few works of real quality, we are reassured to discover frequent references to Tullidge, Whitney, Stenhouse, Waite, Beadle, Linn, and Riley.[10] Given the highly biased nature of some of these works, it would have been folly for Roberts to accept them uncritically. This he did not do. Nor did he confine his reading to Mormon works. Particularly valuable to him was H. H. Bancroft's *History of Utah*, a veritable mine of information.[11] He also used to

---

[8]*CHC*, VI, 90–92. For a firsthand account written soon after the event, see B. H. Roberts, "The Tennessee Massacre," *The Contributor*, VI, No. 1 (October, 1884), pp. 16–23.

[9]See Eric George Stephan, "B. H. Roberts: A Rhetorical Study" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Utah, 1966); and Ralph Wayne Pace, "A Study of the Speaking of B. H. Roberts, Utah's Blacksmith Orator" (unpublished master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1957).

[10]Of these, the most recent works, which Roberts often used as a foil, were Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons* (New York, 1902); and I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism* (New York, 1902). He also used such older works as Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism* (New York, 1867); E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed* (1834); and Lucy Mack Smith, *History of the Prophet Joseph* (Salt Lake City, 1902). On the original publication, suppression, and revision of this work by Joseph Smith's mother, see *CHC*, I, 14n.

[11]Bancroft's work has been accused of being pro-Mormon. It is true that the Church cooperated with Bancroft by supplying materials, and Franklin D. Richards may even have written portions of it. It is not entirely laudatory, however, especially in the footnotes. More

good advantage some of the state and county histories which appeared during the second half of the nineteenth century.[12] Although he may not have read the entire mass of published material on the Mormons, he did his homework sufficiently well to avoid the charge of having overlooked any basic scholarly study relevant to his subject. At least this was true in 1909, when he began the serial publication of his general history.

He also made extensive use of primary sources. Some of these are published — early Mormon periodicals, the sermons collected in the *Journal of Discourses*, eyewitness accounts published several years after the events described, and government documents. He also used unpublished sources. The "History of Brigham Young," a vast compilation of letters and papers located in the Church Historian's Office, was frequently cited, as was the important unpublished diary of Wilford Woodruff. It should be noted, however, that many such sources remained untapped. Other Mormon authorities kept diaries, including men of the second rank. So also did some of the key Gentiles. Assuming that he had access to the vaults of the Church Historian's Office, one can only regret that he did not make more extensive use of such materials. Recognizing that he did indeed utilize several basic manuscript sources, we are nevertheless not entitled to regard Roberts' work as an "exhaustive" exploitation of unpublished materials.

In discussing his use of primary sources we must here say something about his edition of Joseph Smith's documentary *History of the Church* (the *DHC*). Although Roberts wrote a substantial introduction to each of its seven volumes, the primary purpose of the *DHC* was to make available the basic documents of Mormon history before 1847. Unfortunately the work has evoked serious strictures. To be sure, the multi-volume *DHC* is an immensely useful tool for anyone studying the early history of Mormonism. Not only does it contain numerous "journal" entries of Joseph Smith, it also brings together hundreds of newspaper editorials, sermons, and letters, not to speak of the primary material added by Roberts in the notes. What, then, is the problem? Why cannot the *DHC* be put forth proudly as an example of Roberts' historical scholarship?

To answer this question we must recall that Joseph Smith's *History* had been published, in whole or in part, three times before. In the 1840's the *Times and Seasons* had published part of it; it was also published serially by the *Millennial Star* and the *Deseret News*.[13] Since it was inconveniently scattered in these periodicals, which were virtually unobtainable at the end of the century, the idea of publishing the entire work in a new critical edition was an excellent one. But to achieve its purpose such a work should have been scrupulously accurate. It should have gone back to the original manuscript

---

important, through it Roberts could find his way to hundreds of titles on the subject, for it was an excellent bibliographical aid.

[12]Already, in his study of *The Missouri Persecutions*, he had included substantial excerpts from state and county histories, many of which were published during the 1880's by the Union Historical Company.

[13]See *Times and Seasons*, Vols. III–VI (1842–46); *The Millennial Star*, Vols. III–V (1842–1844), XIV–XXV (1952–63); and the *Deseret News*, Vols. II–VII (1851–1858).

copy whenever possible, making "corrections" or comments in footnotes, where they would clearly be the responsibility of the editor. Variant readings should have been noted in the same way. Admittedly, such a procedure would have required organization, infinite care, and several years of time, but the results — as witness the monumental edition of the Jefferson papers now being published — would have allowed later historians to use the compilation with confidence.

Measured against such a standard the *DHC* does not come off well. It does contain some editorial annotation, some comparing of different sources. But the basic text itself has not been treated with proper respect. When we compare the *DHC* with the earlier published versions, in fact, we discover that hundreds of changes have been made. These include deletions, additions, and simple changes of wording. A few examples follow:

> . . . I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak unto me, *or one of them did* [phrase omitted in the *DHC*]; . . .
>
> . . . I frequently fell into many foolish errors and displayed the weakness of youth and the *corruption* [changed to "foibles"] of human nature, which I am sorry to say led me into divers temptations, *to the gratification of many appetites* [phrase omitted] offensive in the sight of God.
>
> Preached on the hill near the Temple, concerning the building of the Temple, *and pronounced a curse on* [changed to "reproved"] the merchants and the rich, who would not assist in building it.
>
> Had a visit from *old Mr. Murdoch* [changed to "Mr. Joseph Murdock, Sen."] and lady. . .
>
> Learned men can *learn* [changed to "teach"] you no more than what I have told you.[14]

Many of these changes may appear insignificant. Others are of obvious importance for the historian interested in factual accuracy. Consider, for example, the following:

> [Nauvoo] now contains near *1,500* [changed to "3,500"] houses, and more than 15,000 inhabitants.
>
> Attended to *business* [changed to "baptism"] in general. . .
>
> It was reported to me that some of the brethren had been drinking whiskey that day in violation of the Word of Wisdom.
>
> I called the brethren in and investigated the case, and was satisfied that no evil had been done, *and gave them a couple of dollars, with directions to replenish the bottle to stimulate them in the fatigues of their sleepless journey* [italicized phrases omitted in the *DHC*].[15]

---

[14]Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Changes in Joseph Smith's History* (Salt Lake City, n.d.), pp. 11, 12, 56, 61, 79.

[15]*Ibid.*, pp. 55, 68, 72. Although I have referred to this recent work for convenience, it should be noted that early in the century the unreliability of the *DHC* was the subject of a perceptive review by the Reorganized Church historian H. H. Smith, "Proper and Improper Use of History," *Journal of History*, II (1909), 78–88.

True, Roberts was not himself the originator of all the changes in the text; some of the "corrections" may well have been the work of Joseph Smith himself, and others were quite clearly the work of clerks and appointed "historians" who began the rewriting of Mormon history long before Roberts appeared on the scene.[16] But whether he was hindered by censorship, by the lack of time, or by lack of familiarity with editorial standards, he did allow his name to be used on the title page. And he would not, I think, be proud of the fact that for researchers in early Mormon history Rule Number One is "Do not rely on the *DHC*; never use a quotation from it without comparing the earlier versions."[17]

II

Awareness of such editorial tampering cannot help but arouse the suspicion that all of Roberts' historical writing was special pleading. Aware of the pitfalls of bias, he stated his own position in the preface to Volume One of the *CHC*. "Frankly," he said, "this *History* is pro-Church of the Latter-day Saints." He hastened to add, however, that he did not intend to follow the example of Eusebius, who had ignored "those things disadvantageous to the Christian cause, and dwell upon those only which glorify it. This results in special pleading, not history." Nor did he wish to emulate Milner, who had chosen to concentrate on the lives of saintly persons. For Roberts, such writing was "not 'church history' but merely a history of piety within the church."[18]

He likewise assured his readers that he did not regard the early Mormon leaders as faultless or infallible; ". . . rather they are treated as men of like passions with their fellow men." If they possessed divine authority, "they carried it in earthen vessels; and that earthliness, with their human limitations, was plainly manifested on many occasions and in various ways, both in personal conduct and in collective deportment." Only "when they spoke and acted as prompted by the inspiration of God" — and clearly for Roberts this was not always — did they express the word and will of God. Yet while recognizing their human frailties, Roberts did not wish to imply "too great censure upon the leading men of the New Dispensation." His explanation may not seem overly enthusiastic:

---

[16]For examples of the "doctoring" of documents long before Roberts worked on the *DHC*, see *ibid.*, pp. 4–5, 12, and *passim*. The whole subject — particularly the activity of Church historians Willard Richards, George A. Smith, and Franklin D. Richards — deserves thorough study.

[17]See also LaMar Petersen, *Problems in Mormon Text* (Salt Lake City, 1957). One reader feels that Roberts should not be blamed, for "Heber J. Grant, Lorenzo Snow and others would not let him reproduce things accurately." One could wish to know about the workings of the Historian's Office and of the changes demanded by "reading committees." Still, we are considering Roberts' published historical work, not what it might have been under other circumstances.

[18]*CHC*, I, vii.

> While many of them fell into grievous sins, and all of them at times plainly manifested errors of judgment and limitations in their conceptions of the greatness and grandeur of the work in which they were engaged, yet doubtless they were the best men to be had for the work. . . .[19]

But the reader is not allowed to forget that for Roberts these men did possess divine authority and did act, if only "on occasion," under the inspiration of God. He did not wish to "destroy faith" in them or in their work.[20]

To avoid undermining faith and at the same time to be "historically exact" was, as Roberts acknowledged, a "task of supreme delicacy." Recognizing the difficulty, especially when dealing with opposing evidence or when describing untoward behavior of the early Mormons, he sought (a) to omit no "essential events" because they "might be considered detrimental," (b) to give evidence favorable to the Church in the text while adding any *per contra* evidence either "in modification of the text, or . . . in full in the footnotes," and (c) "where clearly reprehensible measures and policies have been adopted" — he does not say whether by Mormons or non-Mormons — to consider them "with the freedom that true historical writing must ever exercise."[21] Obviously he hoped to avoid both cynical materialism and saccharine faith-promoting stories.

Avoiding the extreme of credulous ancestor-worship was the more difficult challenge. Roberts, after all, was not a cloistered scholar writing for an audience of professional colleagues. He was one of the General Authorities of the Church. He attended frequent meetings with these Authorities. Some of them — George Q. Cannon, Franklin D. Richards, Orson F. Whitney, Joseph Fielding Smith — had also written on Mormon history, but their works were varied in quality and tended to be uncritical. Since Roberts had already acquired a reputation for outspokenness, for being somewhat of a political maverick, and perhaps (according to some) of "not hearkening to counsel" during the 1895 campaign, it would be easy to see his history, if he referred to Mormon failings and mistakes, as further evidence of disloyalty.[22] Such suspicions must not be exaggerated, for he was popular among the Saints and had unimpeachable credentials of service to the Church. He had published several works on Mormon history before the *CHC*, as we have noted, and he was affiliated with the Church Historian's office.

In such an atmosphere Roberts steadfastly insisted upon recognizing that Mormon history must admit the faults and foibles of the Saints. The Missouri persecutions, for example, he described as due in part to the untactful behavior of some Mormons. There was "something very irritating" in the claim to exclusive divine authorization, and their message was sometimes de-

---

[19] *CHC*, I, ix.

[20] *CHC*, I, viii.

[21] *CHC*, I, viii.

[22] The political controversy of 1895–96 is briefly described in the *CHC*, VI, 329–37. The atmosphere is more fully recaptured in S. S. Ivins, "The Moses Thatcher Case" (mimeographed; also published by Modern Microfilms Co., Salt Lake City, Utah).

livered "without due regard to the feelings of those to whom it was addressed." The anti-Mormon sentiment of the old settlers becomes partially understandable as a reaction to the boastful assertions of "certain over-zealous church members" who "may have said that the Lord would yet give them the land of Missouri for their inheritance."[23]

In describing the later opposition to the Saints in Illinois, Roberts again admitted that the Saints were sometimes unwise or indiscreet. He condemned several "unreasonable petitions and actions" of the Nauvoo municipal government.[24] Even more emphatically, he deplored the destruction of the *Expositor* press, the "official" action which triggered the events leading to the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in 1844: "It may not be denied that the procedure of the city council in destroying the *Expositor* was irregular; and the attempt at legal justification is not convincing."[25] The martyrdom itself he described in detail, relying on the testimony of witnesses. But the stories of heavenly manifestations which were part of the lore in many Mormon homes he rejected as "wholly apocryphal" because they rested on the testimony of "questionable witnesses."[26]

In pausing to evaluate Joseph Smith, Roberts did not want to be guilty of "unreasoning adulation." Smith's character was not without flaw, for "it is not given to mortal man to live an utterly blameless life nor stand forth before his fellows a character perfect throughout." Among Joseph Smith's "limitations" were a tendency to be "over persuaded by men," a "too fierce disposition to give way to reckless denunciation," levity, and a tendency to "autocracy."[27] Roberts was quite willing to concede that the Prophet carried divine authority in an "earthen vessel."

The period between the death of Joseph Smith in 1844 and the arrival of the first pioneer company in the Salt Lake valley in July 1847 Roberts described in a valuable, detailed account. Certain myths dear to Mormons he found wanting in historical accuracy. The planning of the westward migration, the choice of a settlement site, the recruiting of the Mormon battalion at the request of Church leaders, the petty squabbles of life in the wagon trains — these and other topics were treated briskly and forthrightly even at the risk of offending Mormons who clung to the old stories as cherished parts of their religion.[28]

Another sensitive episode was the Mountain Meadows massacre of 1857. For Roberts it was "the most difficult of all the many subjects with which he has had to deal in this *History*." He retraced the background, noting the atmosphere of imminent military invasion, the provocations charged to the Fancher train, the difficulty of restraining the Indians, and the inadequacy of

---

[23]*CHC*, I, 323, 328.

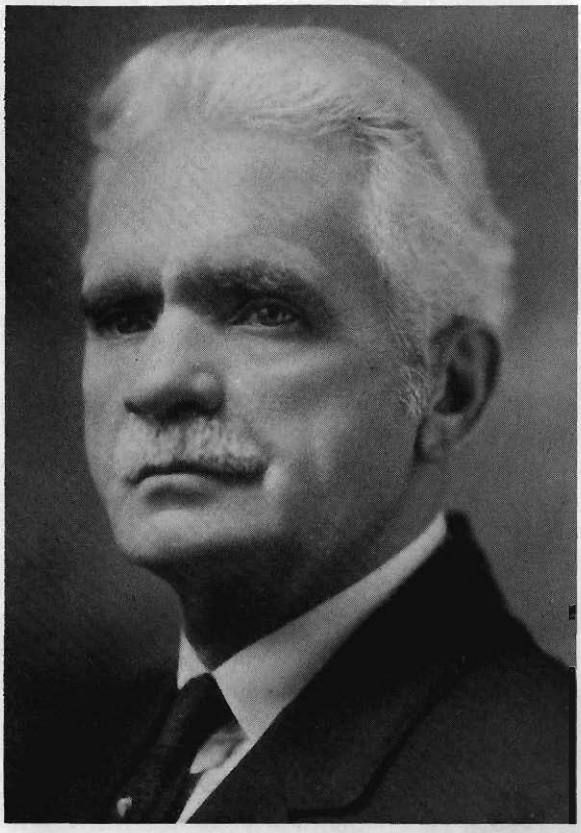
[24]*CHC*, II, 199.

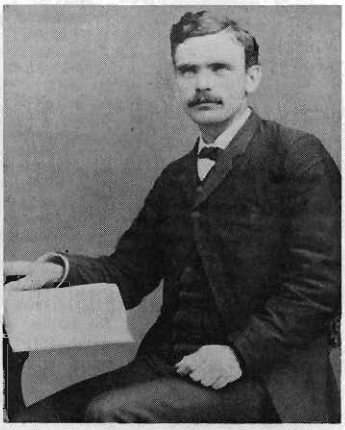
[25]*CHC*, II, 232–33.

[26]*CHC*, II, 332–34.

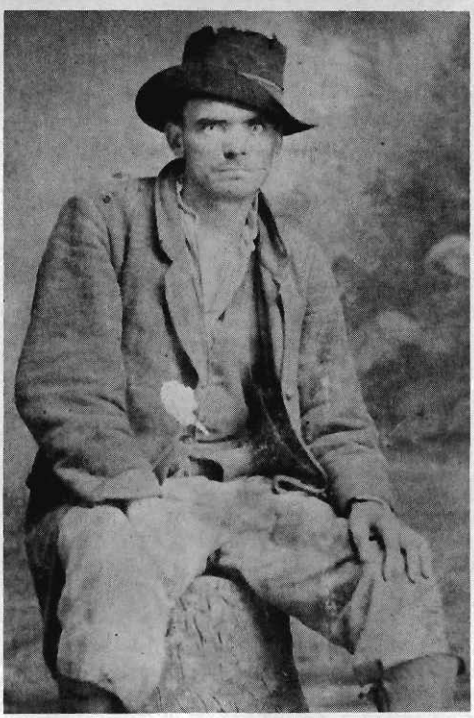
[27]*CHC*, II, 358–60.

[28]See, for example, *CHC*, III, chapters 74–75, 80, 82.





Above: B. H. Roberts as pictured at various times in his life from (top right) as a young man to (left) in his latter years.



Right: This is apparently a photo of Roberts in disguise when, as assistant president of the Southern States Mission, he ". . . went with three others to the place of burial, disinterred the bodies of the elders, and sent them to their families in Utah . . ." (See footnote 49).

communications between Southern Utah and Salt Lake City. But he did not excuse the massacre: "The conception was diabolical; the execution of it horrible; and the responsibility for both must rest upon those who conceived and executed it. . . ." If he did attempt to exculpate Brigham Young, he criticized Young's handling of the affair. And although he may have assigned too much of the guilt to John D. Lee, Roberts recognized that more than a few Mormons, including some Church leaders of local prominence, were implicated in the "diabolical, sanguinary deed."[29]

It is apparent that Roberts was willing, at least sometimes, to portray the early Mormons, "warts and all." He seemed willing to consider documents which blurred the nursery version of Mormon history. To a moderate degree he was a "debunker," attempting to portray the complexity of history and to separate fact from myth. Seen against the background of Mormon historiography, official or semi-official, and of Roberts' delicate position as a Church Authority, the *CHC* was a signal accomplishment.

But his success in providing a fair, balanced account was only partial. In treating the Missouri period, for example, he described the Missourians, the "old settlers," as having "no disposition to beautify their homes, or even to make them convenient or comfortable." They were "uneducated." They had "an utter contempt for the refinements of life." They were "narrow-minded, ferocious, and jealous of those who sought to obtain better homes." Many were outlaws, "outcasts," or "lovers of office." Their life was one of "Sabbath-breaking, profanity, horse-racing, idleness and . . . all too prevalent drunkenness."[30] By contrast, the Saints "had been commanded to keep the Sabbath day holy, to keep themselves unspotted from the sins of the world." Roberts was obviously anxious to vindicate the position of the Saints. The specific charges made by the Missourians in 1833 — some of which appear plausible enough to require serious discussion — he rejects out of hand as "utterly without foundation in truth."[31] This may not be the oversimplified history of the Sunday School manuals. It is full of detail, human interest, and documentation. But it is, to say the least, *histoire engagée*. Not that uncritical acceptance of the anti-Mormon claims would of itself create a more accurate or more balanced general impression.[32] It is simply necessary to recognize that Roberts spoke quite consistently from a certain point of view. To describe the Missourians as a "mob" of "fiends incarnate" who were guilty of "inhuman cruelties," which they inflicted on the Saints with "inhuman yells," "wicked oaths," and "brutal imprecations," is not neutral reporting.[33]

It begins to be apparent that, for all of his fine words about recognizing human frailties among the Mormons, Roberts saw the events of the past with

---

[29]*CHC*, IV, 139, 156, 179. The phrase "relentless, diabolical, sanguinary deed," quoted by Roberts with approval, was John Taylor's.

[30]*CHC*, I, 321–22.

[31]*CHC*, I, 330.

[32]The problem of bias in historical writing is a difficult one. For a thoughtful discussion of one aspect of it, see Dom David Knowles, "The Historian and Character," in *The Historian and Character and Other Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1964).

[33]*CHC*, I, 332–33.

a consistent two-valued orientation. As good an example as any, perhaps, is his description of the motivation behind the anti-polygamy crusade. The problem was difficult to handle, obviously, but we would nowadays tend to see obfuscation and self-justification on both sides. For Roberts it was quite simply a conflict between a sincere desire for self-government by the Mormons and a crass desire for political control by the "crusaders."[34] Not a word about minority rights, or about the tradition of political unity among the Saints, or about Church "influence" over the state. The whole "attack" was adequately explained, apparently, by the hypocrisy, perfidy, and covetousness of the Gentiles.[35] Roberts did try to recognize complexities. He denounced the "execrable" outrage committed by some young Mormons when they threw "filth pots" into the homes of three Gentile officials.[36] At another point he recognized that the "anti-Mormons" were only a minority of the "non-Mormons."[37] But there is no mistaking his general tendency to simplify the issues in terms of "good" and "bad."

A brief examination of affective adjectives and phrases should demonstrate the point. Judge Zane was "spiteful" and guilty of "prejudice, vindictiveness," and "unnecessary harshness."[38] The magazine articles about the Mormons were "personal and bitter," "viciously illustrated," and were full of "vituperation and venom," "vituperative epithets," and "vicious misrepresentation."[39] The Liberal Party was "bitter in its denunciations."[40] The American Party, using "sensational and unscrupulous" means, was guilty of "hysteria and extravagant verbiage."[41] Watterson was full of "bitter anti-Mormon prejudices," Haskel "spoke most bitterly," and the *Salt Lake Tribune* perpetrated "abuse" and "injustice." The *Tribune*, needless to say, was also "bitter."[42]

---

[34]*CHC*, VI, 133–41.

[35]*CHC*, VI, 133–41, 144.

[36]*CHC*, VI, 157–58.

[37]*CHC*, VI, 140.

[38]*CHC*, VI, 177–78.

[39]*CHC*, VI, 414–19.

[40]*CHC*, VI, 1.

[41]*CHC*, VI, 410–11.

[42]*CHC*, VI, 11, 25, 36, 61. In view of Roberts' fondness for the word "bitter" in describing opponents of Mormonism, one cannot help being amused at the following exchange during his testimony as a witness during the Smoot hearings. The subject being discussed was the Utah Democratic convention of 1895.

Mr. TAYLER. You were in that convention?

Mr. ROBERTS. Yes, sir.

Mr. TAYLER. Did you speak in it?

Mr. ROBERTS. I think I did.

Mr. TAYLER. In that connection and through that campaign you, in very bitter terms, inveighed against this intrusion of the church into politics?

Mr. ROBERTS. No sir. I should like to disclaim any bitterness in the matter.

Mr. TAYLER. I do not want to characterize improperly the language that you used — vigorously and most earnestly then?

Mr. ROBERTS. Yes.

Mr. TAYLER. So vigorously and so earnestly that the higher authorities of

In contrast to the bitter fiends incarnate who opposed Mormonism were the Mormon prophets. These, in truth, were Roberts' heroes. John Taylor, for example, was described as

> . . . nearly six feet in height and of fine proportion, that combination which gives activity and strength. His head was large, the face oval and the features large, strong and finely chiseled. The forehead was high and massive, the eyes gray, deep set, and of a mild, kindly expression, except when aroused, and then they were capable of reflecting all the feelings that moved his soul, whether of indignation, scorn or contempt. The nose was straight and well formed, the mouth expressive of firmness, the chin powerful and well rounded.

Taylor's manner was described as ". . . ever affable and polite, easy and gracious, yet princely in dignity. There was no affection in his deportment, no stiffness; his dignity was that with which nature clothes her noblest sons."[43]

President Lorenzo Snow was another leader for whom Roberts had enormous admiration:

> In person President Snow was of spare build, but well formed, and in manners elegant, refined, and gentle; persuasive, but forceful; and it was said of him that he could say and do the hardest things in the gentlest, quietest manner possible to man. His appearance would indicate to the casual observer, a delicacy, if not weakness, of physical constitution; but in reality he was strong and robust, and no man among his frontier and pioneer associates could endure more physical hardships or sustain more prolonged and intense mental exertion than he could. He possessed keen business instinct, as well as a highly sensitive spiritual nature; in him indeed were combined the mind qualities that go to the making of the practical mystic. . . .[44]

Doubtless there is much of truth in such descriptions. I have no doubt that Roberts saw his revered leaders in these terms. Leaving aside the question of how effectively such portrayals serve their purpose, we can perhaps agree that they reinforced Roberts' tendency to see the past as a struggle between "bad guys" and "good guys," between "fiends" and "saints."

Roberts was not, I think, trying to distort the "facts" of history. He called them as he saw them. If he had strong opinions, as he usually did, he made no effort to hide them behind a veil of objectivity. Of the presidential proposal to establish a Utah commission he wrote:

> It scarcely requires an argument with the citation of authorities to convince one that such a course here recommended by President Garfield, supported though it was by a vitiated public sentiment against

---

the church assumed a similar attitude toward you — of vigorous and earnest opposition to your position.

Mr. ROBERTS. I think that is right.

From *Proceedings Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the Matter of Protest Against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot. . . .* I (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 708.

[43]*CHC*, VI, 189.

[44]*CHC*, VI, 384–85. Also of interest are Roberts' eulogies of George Q. Cannon (VI, 48) and Joseph F. Smith (VI, 416–17).

> the Latter-day Saints, and I say it with all due respect to the revered memory in which President Garfield is held by the American people — was a plain apostasy from American principles of government and the adoption of that odious colonial policy practiced by Great Britain upon her American colonies, and which those colonies overthrew and forever destroyed by the Revolution of 1776, in the adoption of the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence.[45]

For Roberts the proposal was "un-American in spirit and beyond question unconstitutional." The doctrine of the sovereignty of Congress was "political heresy."[46] Summing up his account of the legislative–judicial efforts to eradicate polygamy, he later said, "We are here setting down the record of those crimes against the principle of 'local self-government' which are the best concrete examples of the crime against those principles in American history."[47] Although the issues were scarcely this simple, a case can probably be made that constitutional rights of the Mormons were being violated. But it does require making a case. In attempting to do this, in virtually ignoring the opposing arguments, Roberts' role was that of an advocate. We begin to gain a clearer idea of what he meant by his promise to describe "clearly reprehensible measures and policies . . . with the freedom that true historical writing must ever exercise."[48]

III

The partisanship of his writing is partially explained by the chronology of Roberts' life. Born in 1857, he belonged to a generation which knew personally many of the men who had joined the Church during the 1830's and 1840's. He was of the generation which felt acutely the intense anti-Mormon sentiment of the 1880's, and as a polygamist (technically guilty of "unlawful cohabitation") he continued to be on the defensive at least until World War I. As an articulate defender of the Church both in print and on the platform, he again and again found himself arguing the case of the Church against the charges of its "enemies." Such personal involvement was not conducive to a dispassionate telling of his people's story.[49]

---

[45] *CHC*, VI, 22–23.

[46] *CHC*, VI, 22.

[47] *CHC*, VI, 67.

[48] *CHC*, I, viii.

[49] In general, Roberts underplayed his own role. After a vivid description of the murder of two Mormon missionaries in Tennessee, he adds that "the assistant mission president of the southern states . . . went with three others to the place of burial, disinterred the bodies of the elders, and sent them to their families in Utah. . . ." *CHC*, VI, 93. No indication that Roberts himself was the assistant president or that the mission was fraught with danger. The World Congress of Religions incident of 1893 is described succinctly. After indicating that "the representative of the church appointed to this undertaking was Elder B. H. Roberts," he referred to himself only as "the representative." And he kept the details mercifully short. *CHC*, VI, 236–41. The constitutional convention of Utah was described only briefly, with no indication of Roberts' presence as a delegate or of his active role in opposing female suffrage. *CHC*, VI, 323–26. The campaign of 1895, which led to a reprimand of Roberts and Moses Thatcher, and to the "political rule" or "political manifesto" of 1896, is described briefly, with no attempt at self-justification. *CHC*, VI, 329–37.

Roberts was aware that his account of the earlier hostilities sounded harsh "over forty years removed from the period of bitterness and injustice under consideration." But it was faithful, he explained, to the atmosphere of the past:

> I am treating of the decade of 1882–1892, portraying the spirit of those times with such fidelity to truth as I may possess. It matters not that there has been a change wrought with the passing years, a better understanding had on the part of individuals on both sides of the controversy discussed. But I am concerned at this point of my work with the events and the spirit of the above decade, and fidelity to the truth of history requires no less than the statements here made.[50]

But in trying to recreate the atmosphere of the past Roberts did not give both sides a fair hearing. His approach rather was to introduce some of the anti-Mormons, sometimes but not usually allowing them to use their own words. Then he proceeded to demolish the criticisms, showing them to be factually in error, denying them without further explanation, or even impugning motives. Roberts was repeatedly, at least in imagination, getting back into the fray. Seldom did he maintain an adequate sense of historical distance.

It should be noted that his approach to history was decidedly not morally neutral, for he considered the historian to be a moral judge.

> The actions of men, like the facts of events, are peculiarly alike in this, that they admit of no denial in history. Let regret and repentance do what they may, the acts of men remain of record. . . . That is what is meant when men speak of the inexorableness of history. "History will vindicate us," say the men confident of the rectitude of their own intentions, desires, ambitions, or actions; so, too, men may be assured history will condemn them when their aims and ambitions are unholy and vicious. Before the bar of history as before the bar of God the actions of men will lie in their true light. . . ."[51]

History, Roberts explained, had little concern with the private lives and virtues of the judges who promoted the "judicial crusade" in territorial Utah, but with respect to their administration as public officials history called them "to the bar for judgment."[52]

A more difficult task than pronouncing on the morality of individuals or groups was to discern the hand of God in the working out of events. Although he probably did not consider this the duty of all historians, Roberts could not avoid relating the history of the Church to the plan and purpose of God. One of the most interesting of his many efforts to reconcile prophetic expectation and disappointing reality is his discussion of the Toronto journey of Joseph Smith. Of the failure of that journey and of Joseph Smith's explanation that all revelations are not of God, Roberts wrote:

> The question presented by this state of facts is: May this Toronto incident and the Prophet's explanation be accepted and faith still be

---

[50]*CHC*, VI, 139.
[51]*CHC*, VI, 139–40.
[52]*CHC*, VI, 177–78.

> maintained in him as an inspired man, a Prophet of God? I answer unhesitatingly in the affirmative. The revelation respecting the Toronto journey was not of God, surely; else it would not have failed; but the Prophet, overwrought in his deep anxiety for the progress of the work, saw reflected in the "Seer Stone" his own thought, or that suggested to him by his brother Hyrum, rather than the thought of God. . . .
>
> Then there must be taken into account the probable purpose of God in permitting the Toronto misadventure, the lesson he would teach through it. How important for the Prophet's disciples to know that not every voice heard by the spirit of man is the voice of God; that not every impression made upon the mind is an impression from a divine source.[53]

This is not the only place that Roberts permitted himself to speculate upon "the probable purpose of God" in allowing the Saints to pass through the trying experiences of their history. The introductory essays of the *DHC* volumes attempted to see each phase of early Mormon history *sub specie aeternitatis.* The *CHC* itself, however much it may appear to be strictly narrative, is replete with the author's editorializing. This is not merely the effort to understand past events from the perspective of a different age, the kind of reflective analysis one finds in the works of most historians. Roberts was concerned with meaning and significance, as all historians are, but for him these had to be understood in relation to the plans and purposes of God.

The "reflections" at the end of Volume Six help to reveal his frame of reference. To the charge that Mormonism was an outmoded sect based on fables he replied:

> My answer is that the history of one hundred years will be the vindication of the church; will effectively prove its claims to the world movement of both religion and church. Not a sect, but the universal religion founded upon Jesus Christ — his gospel and the New Dispensation of it, and the complement and fulfillment of all that has gone before, and prophecy of that which shall be hereafter. In that case, however, the history must be so full and frank and fair that truth and the spirit of it, will be what sunlight is to the atmosphere, so permeating it as to be in and through it, an everywhere present spirit of truth as the spirit of God is everywhere present throughout his creations. Such a presence that can no more be separated from that history than sunlight can be plucked from the atmosphere. Such a statement of, and such a treatment of the great truths brought forth in the Century I of the organized existence of the church of the New Dispensation, and so related to what must be the grand purposes of an All-wise and All-loving and Just and Merciful and Righteous Heavenly Father, that the truth will stand vindicated and self-evident to the minds of the men of good will; and largely enough accepted to make it the dominant kingdom of truth.[54]

---

[53] *CHC*, I, 164–66.

[54] *CHC*, VI, 554. In April 1930, before the publication of Volume VI, Roberts discussed his work on the *CHC* and his hopes for it. To critics who found it too long he explained that it was not the history of a sect but

> the compliment and fulfillment of all that has gone before, and prophecy of what

The tone is rhapsodic, the form that of testimony rather than history. In such passages, and less blatantly in his comments, explanations, and even narrative passages, Roberts produced a Mormon theology of history, nearly Augustinian in its vision of two cities locked in mortal combat. As subtitle for the *CHC* he might well have borrowed the title of another of his books — *A Defense of the Faith and the Saints.*[55]

IV

Mormons need not be ashamed of Roberts as an historian. He is still worth reading. To the extent that young Mormons read about the history of their religion he can serve a real purpose. Nor should the professional historian or the interested non-Mormon neglect his work. Refusing to treat the early Mormon leaders as figures of fun, he conveys to modern readers a sense of the issues as they must have appeared to Mormons of past generations. But Roberts was not, in fact, the personification of History the Judge. One can appreciate him as an historian while recognizing certain limitations. Among the most basic of these, in addition to those already considered, are the following.

1. Roberts lacked advanced historical training. Since the professionalization of history — through the introduction of German seminar methods and the establishment of Ph.D programs — was still in its early stages at the end of the past century, he was really of an earlier generation. This is not to say, of course, that graduate training inevitably produces historians of quality, or that amateurs or literary men were incapable of producing sound historical scholarship. Roberts had gifts which assured that his work must still be taken into account, and many a graduate student today, however long he perseveres, will never write a word of history worth reading. The point is simply that Roberts might well have benefited from the rigorous criticism of the seminar. At the very least such training would have helped him to avoid the editorial sins of the *DHC*.

2. His work was produced before the great quantitative increase in historical scholarship of the past generation. In a way this was fortunate. He did not have to plow through the mountains of secondary monographs which now exist. On the other hand, the fact is that recent scholarship has left many of Roberts' chapters obsolete. If the *CHC* still has its value as a point of departure, as an interpretation, no one can now afford to stop with its account of the Missouri persecutions, the Nauvoo period, the colonizing of the Great

---

shall be hereafter. To make this appear, however, your historic statement, your history must not be merely a recital of events. The events must be coordinated and so linked together that the *rationale* of successive events shall be made apparent; and how they link in with the world's movements which but spell out God's purposes struggling to get expressed. All this requires ample space — every word of six volumes!

Conference Reports (100th Annual Conference, April 1930), p. 45.

[55]Two volumes (Salt Lake City, 1907–1912).

Basin, the economic programs of the Church, the political conceptions of the Kingdom of God, the Mountain Meadows massacre, the Utah War, the anti-polygamy crusade, the transition to statehood in Utah, or many other topics of comparable importance. Not only have primary sources relevant to many of these problems been made available, but monographic studies by the score have added facts, interpretations, and insights which were unavailable to Roberts.[56]

3. Although he did utilize primary sources extensively, as I have pointed out, Roberts did not exhibit much interpretive sophistication. Obviously it is unfair to compare him to Marc Bloch or even to a nineteenth-century scholar such as Fustel de Coulanges. But it is important to recognize that exploitation of sources does not consist merely in reading through them and transcribing passages into footnotes. A quality of use is also involved. And when we ask to what extent Roberts subjected his sources to careful and analytical explication, the answer is disappointing but not unexpected.

4. Roberts' conception of history was that of the past century. I have already discussed his notion that history should function as a moral judge. It will not do to say that all nineteenth-century historians subscribed to this view, but many did. In general, Roberts was close to the leading historians of the Romantic period. Such Romantic historians as Prescott, Motley, and Parkman "concentrated on responding emotionally" to the past. They tried to keep in view "the most important, stirring affecting incidents." They often "dealt with character types." They compared history to drama and sought to present it dramatically. They considered it the duty of the historian to be "not only an artist but a judge." They saw history as "the unfolding of a vast Providential plan." They believed that "the historian had a didactic as well as artistic duty to arrange apparently disconnected events in their proper order."[57] These and other assumptions of Romantic historiography are well exemplified in the work of Roberts.

"I have not written what may be called 'argumentative history,'" he once said, "only so far as the statement of the truth may be considered an argument."[58] One may doubt that such an ambitious goal is possible of attainment by any historian. It is easy, from our present perspective, to discern the simplistic, apologetic features of his writing. But these might have been more naïve than they are; he might have produced a work with no redeeming scholarly merit. He resisted the prejudices of his generation — perhaps best compared to the sharp divisions and stereotypes of wartime — sufficiently that his work can still be studied with profit. His personality was so vivid,

---

[56]To become aware of what Roberts did not have available one has only to consult the superb bibliographies in Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), now ten years old. The past ten years have been more productive of valuable scholarship on Mormonism than any comparable period in our history.

[57]The quotations are from David Levin, *History as Romantic Art* (New York, 1958), pp. 8, 10, 14, 19, 20, 25–26.

[58]*The Missouri Persecutions*, p. iv.

his feelings so strong, that no one should find his history dull. And he did express some laudable objectives, as in the following fine statement:

> Gradually there is being built up in The Church a very considerable and stately literature, historical, doctrinal and poetical; and for one I hope to see it, first of all, of a character that will be in harmony with the great Dispensation of the Gospel which it celebrates, that is, that it be honest.[59]

If his reach exceeded his grasp, he nevertheless rendered services worth remembering. Mormon historians of the present generation have already surpassed B. H. Roberts in command of the sources, technical competence, and methodological sophistication. One can only hope that a few of the new breed will retain some of his zest, his empathy, and his sweep of vision.

---

[59] *Ibid.*, p. vi.