

He was extreme, I used to say. Now I say, I think he was extreme in his devotion to his faith, extreme in his love of the scriptures, never in sympathy with splinter groups that sought to splinter the Church, never taken in by periphery interests, never taken with wild surmise.

His was a private personality that came gradually to stand for the retreat of fear and the embrace of love.

JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH: FAITHFUL HISTORIAN

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To record as truth that which is false, and to palm off as facts that which is fiction degrades [the writer], insults his readers, and outrages his profession.

— JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH

Joseph Fielding Smith began his service in the interest of Church history just ten days before the death of President Lorenzo Snow. The year was 1902, and though his arrival in the old Historian's Office at 60 East South Temple went unnoted in the official record, Andrew Jenson, a co-worker, recorded privately his arrival upon the scene of Church history: "Bro. Jos. F. Smith jun. commenced to work at the H.O., occupying the desk which Parley [Jenson's son] vacated yesterday."¹ During the seventy-one years that elapsed from that day until his death on July 2, 1972, Joseph Fielding Smith was singularly involved in the history-keeping activities of the Church, of "writing, copying, selecting, and obtaining all things which shall be for the good of the church, and for the rising generations that shall grow up on the land of Zion." (D&C 69:8)

Joseph Fielding's preparation, the reading and writing he did as a young man, seem to prefigure his later role in Church history. His missionary letters to his Prophet-father, Joseph F. Smith, reveal unusual maturity and comprehending observation. When as part of his work in the Historian's Office he was given charge of the office journal, his observant pen turned what had for several years been a mere record of employee attendance into an invaluable chronicle of the activities and accomplishments of the personnel.

During President Smith's early years in the Historian's Office he was associated with three of the Church's most talented historians: Brigham H. Roberts, who was then editing Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*; Andrew Jenson, whose world travels in the interest of Church history had assured the acquisition of vast amounts of historical information; and Orson F. Whitney, who was then writing his four volume *History of Utah*. Anthon Lund, at that time Church Historian, Andrew Jenson, and Roberts were all twenty years his senior, but it was the young Joseph-Fielding who proofread and critiqued each volume of the Roberts' *History* as it was prepared.

At the April General Conference of 1906, the same conference which sustained David O. McKay as an Apostle, Joseph Fielding Smith was presented to the assembled Saints as Assistant Church Historian to succeed Orson F. Whitney, also named to the Twelve. Following this appointment he began the compilation of the twentieth century section of the Journal History of the Church, a counterpart to the earlier section being prepared by Andrew Jenson. Reflected in his choice of "significant" material is the judgment which determined to some extent the shape of the archival collection as it developed: it focuses almost completely on the thought, the events, and the people well within the ecclesiastical boundaries of the Church.

But if his focus was singular, his activities demonstrated a breadth surprising in one who had little opportunity to be schooled in any of the disciplines in which he had to act.² In 1909 he visited the eastern United States to examine new methods of indexing and filing, but during those same early years he was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor to compile statistical data on the Church for the national census. At the same time, he was asked by the Church to prepare reports based on ward records and to collect biographical sketches of the presidents of the Church for B. H. Roberts. He was assistant editor of the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* when the first issue was published in January 1910. These varied activities helped him to gain facility in several disciplines: library science, archival science, records management, publication, and history.

He was involved in the cataloging, classifying, and indexing of the holdings of the library; a partial index to the *Latter-day Saints' Millennium Star* was one such achievement. His writings of those years covered a wide range: ward histories; articles for publication in encyclopedias, newspapers, and periodicals; and lesson manuals for Church classes. He assisted Anthon H. Lund, Church Historian, in correcting hymns for a new edition of the hymn book, compiled a Church Chronology, answered correspondence for the Church Historian and the First Presidency, and collected and compiled data used in defense of Senator Reed Smoot, then on trial before the Committee on Privileges and Elections in Washington, D.C.

During those early days as assistant historian Joseph Fielding demonstrated his characteristic dedication to his work: After the death of his wife, and left with two small children to care for, he married Ethel Reynolds, who had been employed in the office some months. On the day of their marriage, Joseph Fielding spent part of the day working on the Journal History for 1902.

After his appointment to the Quorum of the Twelve in 1910, President Smith was forced to be more selective in his activities in the Historian's Office; most of his time at the office then was spent in compiling the Journal History. By 1918 he had completed that work to the year 1914.

In 1921, five years after Andrew Jenson had carried the first books into the expanded facilities of the Historian's Office in the new building at 47 East South Temple, President Smith became Church Historian, succeeding Anthon H. Lund, who had died on March 2. He was set apart on March 17 of that year.

It was during his fifty-year tenure as Church Historian that President Smith wrote most prolifically: Of his fifteen publications on Church history and doctrine, eleven date from this period. President Smith answered huge volumes of correspondence, particularly with respect to doctrinal questions. For thirteen

years his “Answers to Gospel Questions” was a regular feature in the *Improvement Era*. His most significant historical work was *Essentials in Church History*, published in 1922, a volume which has passed through twenty-four editions and has been translated into French, German, Norwegian, and Spanish. It has seen extensive use as a textbook for students of Church history. Although *Essentials* has been criticised for the lack of “objectivity” because of its focus on those facets of history which bring credit to the Church, President Smith was not unconcerned with fairness and objectivity. In the article from which our introductory quotation is taken, addressed to writers of scurrilous “histories” of the Mormons, the young historian stated his own credo of historical responsibility:

In the degree that a writer of history departs from the truth, to that extent his writings become worse than fiction, and are valueless. The chronicler of important events should not be deprived of his individuality; but if he wilfully disregards the truth, no matter what his standing may be, or how greatly he may be respected, he should be avoided. No historian has the right to make his prejudices paramount to the facts he should record.

For such a writer, to record as truth that which is false, and to palm off as facts that which is fiction, degrades himself, insults his readers, and outrages his profession.³

“Objectivity” for President Smith meant seeing that the history of the Church was presented in a positive light, rejecting the extreme and irresponsible charges of the Church’s enemies. If such a conception is limited, his own position was forthright and clearly expressed. Moreover, his *Essentials* continues to serve a valuable purpose as a chronicle of our history and indispensable compilation of information.

When Wallace Stegner wrote in the preface to his *Gathering of Zion* that the materials of the Church Archives were “opened to scholars only reluctantly and with limitations,” he represented probably the loudest complaint raised against the Historian in his administration of the Office. President Smith’s hesitancy to make available all of the documents in his care can be best understood in the light of his awareness of the multitudes of anti-Mormon books which had appeared, and continued to appear, prior to and during his lifetime. Early in his career he had been advised by his father that “the more you say to [critics of the Church], the more opportunity is given them for criticism and faultfinding.”⁴ He was obviously not anxious to provide ammunition that would later be fired back at the Church. On the other hand, it is only fair to recognize that many patient scholars, both members of the Church and non-members, were allowed to see and use the rich resources of the Office pertaining to their project with virtually no restriction. The present writer was one of these. The last several years under President Smith’s administration, both as Historian and as President, saw a remarkable relaxing of the old policies. Scores of scholars have acknowledged the indispensable help extended to them by the Church Historian’s Office.

In his responsibility for the collecting and processing of the materials for the Church Archives, President Smith was involved in significant technological and administrative innovations that traversed the full spectrum of the Church’s record-keeping responsibility. These included a comprehensive microfilming program in 1949 that has assured permanent preservation of many important

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historical records; the adoption, in the early 1960's, of modernized methods of classification and processing to facilitate the filing and use of the holdings of the Historian's Office; the establishment in 1965 of a records management program to provide professional standards to govern the channeling of Church records into the archives for permanent preservation; and the present construction of a new office building which will house the Historical Department of the Church and meet the demands of the "paper explosion" of the coming decades.

As President of the Church, Joseph Fielding Smith contributed further to the advancement of Church history. A month after his call to the Presidency, Elder Howard W. Hunter was appointed Church Historian. In January of 1972 the Historical Department of the Church was reorganized, ushering in a new era for the collection, processing, researching, and dissemination of Church history. Members of the Quorum of the Twelve were named as advisors, and Elder Alvin R. Dyer, Assistant to the Council of the Twelve, was appointed Managing-Director.

As Assistant Church Historian, as Church Historian, and as President of the Church, Joseph Fielding Smith made contributions to the advancement of Church history unequalled by any of the fifteen men who preceded him in the office.

¹Andrew Jenson, Diary, October 1, 1902, MS., Historical Department of the Church, Salt Lake City.

²President Smith received a two-year liberal arts education at the L.D.S. College in Salt Lake City. In his professional preparation, he forged his own way, achieving the skills of his disciplines by dint of personal effort and experience.

³Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., "Libels of Historians," *Improvement Era*, 10 (December 1906), 103-104.

⁴Joseph F. Smith to Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., February 2, 1900, Smith Papers, Historical Department of the Church.