

APOSTLE EXTRAORDINARY— HUGH B. BROWN (1883-1975)

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When Elder Hugh B. Brown (the B also stands for Brown) passed from this stage of his eternal existence on December 2, 1975, the Church lost a remarkable leader. For a generation of Latter-day Saints he represented the kind of pulpit magic associated with names like Orson F. Whitney, Brigham H. Roberts and Melvin J. Ballard from an earlier day. For thousands of individuals with questions and problems he represented the kind of understanding and counsel associated earlier with John A. Widtsoe, James E. Talmage and Joseph F. Merrill. For me and many others who knew him personally, he was a multi-faceted, magnificent human being.

Hugh B. Brown brought an unusually rich experience to the callings of Assistant to the Twelve (1953-1958), Apostle (1958-1975), Counselor to the First Presidency (1961), Second Counselor in the First Presidency (1961-1963), and First Counselor to President David O. McKay (1963-1970). Farmer, cowboy, missionary, lawyer, businessman, speculator, public office holder (twice), candidate for the U.S. Senate, political party state chairman, mission president (twice), servicemen's coordinator, college professor, husband, father of six daughters and two sons—he was seventy when his appointment to be a general authority fulfilled the hopes of many and the confident predictions of some who had known him during that long career.

peril to humility which lies in such adulation as an LDS general authority receives:tracted attention while he was just a young Canadian farmer. Patriarch John Smith and Apostle Heber J. Grant saw it and foretold notable leadership service in the Church. Zina Young Card saw it and endorsed a marriage which took her namesake daughter away from her and back to the Alberta frontier. Twenty-year-old Zina saw it when she took Hugh Brown's name, and she devoted her life to polishing that diamond so that the whole world might share its brightness. At first it meant helping Hugh to acquire the social graces which befitted the spouse of a granddaughter of Brigham Young; the Brown children enjoy telling how "it took Mother two years to teach Dad to change his socks." Later it meant exerting gentle restraint when the fame-and/or-fortune-seeker in her husband seemed to threaten what she coveted for him and for her family. Most of all, it meant reassuring him in those dark moments when his own mistakes or life's vicissitudes brought him low—when the "current bush" was pruned.

Yet he retained enough of that "down to earth" quality to be at home with professional soldiers, oil prospectors and fishermen. His platform wit became a finely polished instrument for winning audiences, but his spontaneous humor sometimes brought from Zina a disapproving "Oh, Hugh!" She might have said so again had she been present when Gene Campbell and I met with President Brown a few months before his death (and a few months after hers). To our report that his biography was about to go to press, he responded, "You mean my obituary." And

when we hastened to assure him that it was nothing of the kind, he said with a wry smile, "Perhaps we should call it 'Son of Obituary.'" He once told a BYU audience, "Men without humor tend to forget their source, lose sight of their goal" There was never any danger of that happening to Hugh B. Brown.

His effectiveness as a speaker is the more remarkable when one recalls that his formal schooling was quite limited (his law license was obtained by the apprenticeship route when he was 38 years old) and for the last 28 years one side of his face was entirely paralyzed (the result of surgery to relieve trigeminal neuralgia). He liked to tell his grandchildren, "One side of my face is numb and the other is dumb."

President Brown may have possessed a natural gift for speaking, but he worked hard from his youth to develop it, declaiming to the open prairies of Alberta and reading voraciously to develop that feeling for rhetoric and language which formal schooling does not necessarily provide. He credited the faith-promoting stories of Joseph F. Smith, whom he first heard as a youth, and the oratorical flair of B. H. Roberts, whose Democratic politics he also adopted, with influencing his platform style. He collected witticisms and quotable quotes, kept informal records so that he would not repeat himself to an audience, and improved some of his favorite stories with repeated tellings until what started as real-life experiences eventually became parables. Each audience was both a challenge and an inspiration. Almost at the last, when he was brought to the Washington, D.C., Temple dedication in a wheelchair and had to be assisted to the pulpit, the impressiveness of his presence and the power of his testimony moved many to tears.

He said in an interview shortly before his ninetieth birthday, "Every man is supported by the public's opinion of him." That Hugh B. Brown had a sufficient ego, and that he enjoyed the favorable regard with which he was held by so many Latter-day Saints is reflected in an oft-told anecdote. After he had given an extemporaneous speech in the Tabernacle, a lady enthused, "Oh, President Brown, you are the only man in the Church who can talk without thinking!" He recognized the peril to humility which lies in such adulation as an LDS general authority receives:

. . . he is eulogized and almost idolized. What is said is taken as gospel and what he does is an example to all. . . . Sometimes men in such a position are inclined to think that they themselves are the object of this adulation when in fact what the people are doing is indicating their respect for the authority the man holds and the appointment that he has received. If we can keep in mind that fact and never arrogate to ourselves the honor which belongs to the office, we will be safe. . . .

It is probably accurate to say that Hugh B. Brown was as successful as others of the more charismatic Church leaders in avoiding this pitfall. He liked power and admiration, but he earnestly sought to do the will of God and he willingly subordinated his own preferences to the programs and requirements of the Church which, next to his family, was the most important thing in his life.

Hugh B. Brown was close to the leadership of the Church from the days when he came to the favorable attention of Elder Heber J. Grant in England in 1904 and was married to Zina Card by President Joseph F. Smith in 1908. There are reports that he was considered for an apostleship in the 1930's, but his position as first chairman of the Utah State Liquor Commission made appointment inadvisable. Close and sustained relationships with such Mormon leaders as J. Reuben Clark, Jr., Henry D. Moyle, Albert E. Bowen, Harold B. Lee and Presidents Grant and McKay preceded the call which finally came two decades later.

In the circumstances President Brown had no illusions that the modern prophets are infallible or that the will of God is always unmistakably manifested to them. He knew that differences of opinions were not uncommon in the Council of the Twelve and the First Presidency, and not merely on trivial and procedural matters. Topics as disparate as missionary policy, building programs and the John Birch Society produced sharp clashes, and the solutions which emerged were sometimes monuments to the willingness of strongminded and dedicated men to subordinate their personal choices to the position finally articulated by the President of the Church—whether that position reflected the recommendations of a majority of the Twelve or the judgment of his Counselors or not. Hugh B. Brown concurred in this arrangement, believing that the calling of a general authority carried with it this obligation. Responding to a student question about whether there was consensus in the presiding councils that the Negro ought not to hold the priesthood, he said in 1969: “As to the consensus, the Brethren are all united now that the time has not come until the President speaks on it. When he does we’ll be united in our response to his expressed wish.”

President Brown was particularly hopeful that the policy of excluding men of black African ancestry from the priesthood might be changed in his lifetime, and it is certain that the record will one day show that he exerted his influence toward that end. He was never able to defend the policy with conviction, and his usual response to the perennial questions was to call attention to the expected change in the future and to emphasize that the Church fully supports equal civil and political rights for all people. In a 1969 interview he suggested that the admission of Negroes to the priesthood will come about “in the ordinary evolution of things as we go along, since human rights are basic to the Church.” A few months after leaving the First Presidency, he wrote to a young woman who was upset about the subject:

In my own life I have found it desirable to lay aside some things that I do not fully understand and await the time when I will grow up enough to see them more clearly. There is so much that is good and true that I can and do approve and accept with all my heart that I can afford to wait for further light on some of these disturbing questions. . . . I too have had my struggle with some problems, but they have, I am glad to say, been worked out in my more mature years until I have no hesitancy in bearing testimony to you that the Church, the whole Church, is right and true.

As stake and mission president, military coordinator and university teacher, parent and grandparent and LDS general authority, Hugh B. Brown displayed uncommon skill and compassion in handling religious questions and problems. He had more patience with doubters than with dogmatists. Students in his BYU classes (1946-1950) remember that he often quoted Will Durant: “No one deserves to believe unless he has served an apprenticeship in doubt.” To the person who moved through that apprenticeship, the possibilities were infinite, though the answers were rarely absolute. He gave one class this definition of intelligence:

The combined powers of man *choosing* those things that are for his best—*ever* growing by experience—*ever* changing by development—*never* reaching an optimum point of progression. There is no such thing as a non-progressing intelligence, if the word *intelligence* is used to mean that it is eternal—and it is eternal.

At the last General Conference which he conducted prior to the death of President McKay, President Brown’s theme was Faith. At eighty-six, he was still emphasizing the eternal quest:

. . . every discussion of faith must distinguish it from its caricatures. Faith is not credulity. It is not believing things you know are not so. It is not a formula to get the universe to do your bidding. It is not a set of beliefs to be swallowed by one gulp. Faith is not knowledge; it is mixed with lack of understanding or it would not be faith. Faith does not dwindle as wisdom grows. . . .
Faith is not a substitute for truth, but a pathway to truth.

Recognizing the dangers which stem from imposing unnecessary limits on the individual capacity to choose and grow, President Brown preferred to leave many questions open. These are illustrations from his responses to written and oral inquiries during the First Counselor years:

. . . the Presidency is not disposed to undertake to enlarge the wording of the Word of Wisdom as contained in the Doctrine and Covenants.

. . . it is not the policy of the Church to define precisely for each tithe-payer what a full tithing would be for him.

. . . I would not presume to say whether or not the Holy Ghost prompts remarks made by men like Billy Graham, or any other. . . .

. . . I think that as a rule the Lord does not come down and take us by the ear and turn us around and lead us to somebody and say, "This is your future husband or wife."

. . . as a general rule, we say to our young people, the purpose of your marriage is to have children. If you wish to regulate or space those children, that's up to you. We're not going to follow anybody into their bedroom. I think freedom in this matter ought to be understood. . . .

. . . the Brethren are united on all principles and doctrines of the Church, all principles of the gospel. There is no division whatsoever. When it comes to expressing an opinion on some other organization or some political or quasi-political question, each one is entitled to have his own opinion and to express it.

As a college teacher, he told a freshman class: "I will not give you a creed to learn. I am hoping that we may come to feel religion and that it may influence us for good." This capacity to help people *feel* religion—not as an inhibitor but a motivator, not as a thing possessed but an infinite possibility—was President Brown's greatest gift. One who heard him speak to a special service for college-age women in 1968 wrote to her mother:

. . . He taught us about talking with God and told us a wonderful missionary experience of his when he first talked with God. He emphasized the importance of holding His hand, and to me and many of the girls I talked with later, it was apparent that he was holding the Lord's hand and that He was present with us. . . . At the conclusion he held out his arms as I have often imagined Moses to have done and blessed us—and indeed I had the feeling hands had been placed upon my head. . . .

No one who has shared that feeling—whether in the comforting quiet of a private conversation or the electric stillness of a spellbound congregation—will ever forget President Hugh B. Brown.