

Our Best Official Theologian

Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story. By Truman Madsen. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980.

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With the exception of a handful of stand-outs, such as Donna Hill's work on Joseph Smith, biographies by Mormons of Mormons have been scarcely worth the title. Often reminiscent of mimeographed Christmas letters, these books have tried to elevate their subjects while descending, themselves, to hagiography instead of true biography. Madsen's long awaited work is hardly of the hagiographical "family history" genre, but it is not fully biographical either. It partakes enough of that older tradition of Mormon writing that it cannot be a completely truthful portrayal of B.H. Roberts.

The best parts of this book are those one would least expect from someone of Madsen's training—the narrative sections. Roberts' life as near-orphan, immigrant, miner, missionary, mission president, editor, orator, writer, theologian and politician is fast paced, exciting stuff. Madsen writes of this life with verve and conviction. Roberts' rough, unsaintly youth is presented with warts and all. In these sections Madsen does his homework and he tells the story well.

Later on, however, the story lapses into subtle hagiography. There are hints of a problematic side to Roberts' character—his moodiness, his stubbornness, his readiness for a fight even with church superiors. But none of this is discussed openly or in depth. What primary materials I have seen suggest that others saw these things in Roberts and that it influenced their judgment of him. Surely, to give us Roberts the man is to give us this side too. Madsen only hints at it.

More to the point, the material in this book omits some of the more controversial but crucial aspects of Roberts the man and Roberts the thinker. This is unfortunate, for surely Madsen is singularly equipped to give us insight into the mind and the ideas of the man Sterling McMurrin has called our best "official" theologian. But this is precisely where the book is weakest. For example, Madsen includes pages on Roberts' hagiographical *Life of John Taylor* while the vastly more impressive *Seventy's Course in Theology* is mentioned only twice. In neither case does Madsen discuss content: the finite theism contained there, the doctrine of a progressing God which Roberts, like Brigham Young, firmly believed in, or even one of Madsen's favorite concepts—the eternal self. The Seventy's Course is a huge compendium, some good, some poor, but even its richer parts are ignored by Madsen.

The same may be said of other important Roberts works. There is a discussion of his classic *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity* but only of the manner in which Roberts supposedly demolishes classical theism. There is nothing about Roberts' own distinctive Mormon theology, which differed immensely from that espoused by others. What were the issues and why were they important? Why, for instance, did Roberts hold so tenaciously to the notions of a finite, progressing God and an eternal human self? What did he see in these doctrines that was so important, and how should we evaluate his reasons today? Someone of Madsen's training ought to help us here, but he does not.

Finally we come to Roberts unpublished masterwork, *The Truth, The Way, The Life*. Here Madsen does not even include as much as he had previously published in *BYU Studies*. By Roberts' own estimate, this was the most important book he ever wrote. To gloss over its contents as is done here is disturbing. More

disturbing is Madsen's complete failure to treat the acrimonious discussions that this manuscript generated among the General Authorities and the bitter denunciation of Roberts as a teacher of false doctrine that it stimulated from Joseph Fielding Smith. Given his access to previously unavailable materials (some of which he quotes on these matters) Madsen's failure to treat this episode in depth is distressing. What was it in Roberts' character or commitments that made him unable to make the changes in the manuscript that were necessary to secure its publication? Was it his old nemesis: stubbornness? Or was it an honest conviction that the Church could not duck the issues of "pre-adamite" races, the age of life and death on the earth and evolution itself without risking the faith of its educated members? I suspect that the truth includes a bit of both explanations. When an author deliberately refuses to do what is necessary to secure publication of what he believes is his masterwork his biographer should be compelled to do better by the episode Madsen does.

Another side of Roberts that is also incomplete here is his long flirtation with politics. To be sure, Roberts' fight to secure his seat in Congress does receive a whole chapter, but it is sketchy and strictly narrative. There is far too little about the tensions within the Church hierarchy between an increasingly influential Republican coalition led by Reed Smoot and Joseph F. Smith and the historically Democratic allegiances of the Church, represented by Roberts and Apostle Moses Thatcher. This broader setting is surely relevant to Roberts' own political aspirations. Moreover, it would draw a rounded picture of the situation that led to Moses Thatcher's refusal to sign the "political manifesto" of 1896 (and his subsequent dropping from the quorum). Madsen's account of Roberts' own agony over the "political manifesto" is vivid and moving, but he lacks the broader context necessary to make sense out of what he does discuss.

His account of the refusal to seat Roberts in Congress suffers in the same way. Why wasn't the Church prepared to do for Roberts what was later done for

Smoot? Was it only because Roberts was a Democrat and Smoot a Republican? This is an obvious question in the mind of a reader, but Madsen gives no hint of the answer. What made Roberts consider politics so seriously anyway? What was it that tempted him to leave his church duties to pursue such a career? And what was it that tempted him to run for governor of Utah in 1920? Surely his long flirtation with politics and his fleeting consideration of leaving the Seventies for a law career tell us something of Roberts the man. I wish Madsen had been a bit more bold and had fleshed out the story for us.

More significant is Madsen's dropping of any discussion of Roberts' political ideas. What did he stand for when he ran for Congress? Free silver is all we hear about. Surely there must have been more. What about his staunch support of the League of Nations and his almost millennial hope for it? What about his support of Roosevelt's "first new deal"—the closest thing to socialism ever tried in this country which Roberts compared to the United Order.

My final objection is the handling of references. There are far too many important points for which no source is given. Are these materials in private possession or in some little-used archive? The reader is entitled to know. When sources are cited, the archive where they are found is almost always omitted. Bibliography and secondary sources are another matter. There is no listing of secondary works, and Roberts' own list is incomplete. Even in the footnotes no mention is made of important secondary sources. For example, Davis Bitton's study of the fight for Roberts' seat in Congress is missing, as is his equally important study of Roberts as an historian. In some cases less than the best is cited. For example, Gordon Hinckley's superficial study of James Moyle is cited but Glen Leonard's better work is omitted.

I have dwelt at some length on the limitations of this work because I believe that they detract from its merit and because of the conventions of reviewing. Still, when measured against others in the field, this book is better than most Mormon biographies. If the warts recede too much as Roberts ages, if there is too