

Balance and Faith

The Latter-day Saints: A Contemporary History of the Church of Jesus Christ by William E. Berrett (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1986), 421 pp., \$12.95.

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THOUSANDS OF Latter-day Saints were first introduced to William E. Berrett and the Church's history when they were assigned in seminary to read his book *The Restored Church* (1940). Initially written in the late 1930s, this volume followed the historical tradition of B. H. Roberts and attempted to provide a balanced treatment of Latter-day Saint history.

One story, perhaps, will help to illustrate this balance as well as the tact and sensitivity that Berrett brought to his writing. Early one morning upon arriving at his office, he was told by the Commissioner of Church Education that a very angry apostle wanted to see him at once. The previous day, President Berrett, as he was called by all except his closest friends who referred to him as Ed, had given the apostle (who was on the reading committee for *The Restored Church*) the chapter about the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith entitled, "The Price of Greatness." Now as he walked to the apostle's office, he wondered what he had written to cause such wrath. As President Berrett entered the office the apostle jumped up from his chair and shouted, "Did you write this? Did you write this?"

Trembling, Berrett replied, "Did I write what?"

The apostle, pointing to the manuscript, his voice still loud enough to be heard by a partly deaf saint on the back row of the Tabernacle, asked again, "Did you write, 'A man of high position, Governor Ford was nevertheless weak and vacillating, anxious to please all parties and factions?'" (p. 265).

"I guess I did," Berrett, somewhat "weak and vacillating" himself, replied.

The Church leader then said, "Well, he was an S.O.B. [only he said the words], and you must say so!"

Much calmer now and suppressing a grin, President Berrett took out his pencil and said, "Fine, Elder So-and-So. Will you just write those words into the text?"

The apostle began to write, then stopped, looked up, and said, "I guess it's better the way you wrote it," and dismissed him.

William E. Berrett's writing was indeed better than most, balanced and delicate, displaying both a knowledge and an understanding of those forces that were causing conflict between the Latter-day Saints and their non-Mormon neighbors.

Notice I have described Berrett's history as balanced, not objective. William E. Berrett has always been convinced that God's directing hand is clearly evidenced in the records believing historians consult before writing their books. Thus, while those seminary students who studied his volume learned that not all Mormons were perfect and that not all non-Mormons were "mobocrats," they were also taught that Joseph Smith saw God, conversed with angels, translated golden plates by the gift

and power of God, and received divine authority under the hands of Peter, James and John. (Not "allegedly," or "perhaps," or "the Prophet believed that.") Moreover, there was never any doubt in his mind that Joseph and his successors were God's prophets and that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was true.

More mature college students, at least those who attended Brigham Young University, used his three-volume *Readings in L.D.S. History* compiled with Alma P. Burton (1958) as their textbook. In those books, graduate students were introduced to many of the documents from which historians write their history. They discovered that every piece of evidence does not vibrate with the divine calling of Joseph nor the truth of the Church. Those thoughtful academicians came to know that often a writer finds God in his or her own life before finding him in Church history. Historians frequently draw meaning from sources that have no significance in and of themselves.

Thus, some students found that those who do not believe in Joseph Smith can document support for their lack of faith, while those who do believe can footnote the reasons for their convictions. Generally a religious testimony comes from sources other than pen, ink, and paper. Many scholars of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine are indebted to William E. Berrett for at least the beginnings of their knowledge of Mormon history.

Now in the waning years of his distinguished life, President Berrett has written another one-volume history of the Church that attempts to chronicle the vitality of Mormonism as well as answering such questions as: How did it all begin? What is the source of the Church's power? How is it financed? Why do so many contribute time and talent without thought of pay? Berrett begins with the account of the boy Joseph's first vision and summarizes the forces that led people to forsake the true gospel taught and established by the Savior. He next discusses events just prior to

Joseph Smith's activities that made the fields ripe and ready to harvest. Then follow the familiar appearance of Moroni, the Book of Mormon translation, the organization of the Church, the subsequent moves to Kirtland, Missouri, Nauvoo, and the Carthage jail murders. The remaining chapters focus on the move west, colonization, the revelation on priesthood given to President Spencer W. Kimball, developments in genealogy and temple work, and modern efforts to proclaim the gospel and perfect the Saints.

An effective argument could be made that *The Latter-day Saints* tells us as much about William E. Berrett as it does about Mormon history. His own faith is sprinkled liberally on almost every page. For example, unlike Wallace Stegner (1964), Richard Bennett (1984), and Reed Durham (1981), who have written about the bleak exodus from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters, the disorganization, and disrespect for authority, and the suffering, President Berrett devotes nearly two pages to the bright side of the trek. Time and time again, he highlights the brass band, the dancing, the effective organization, and the Saints' loyalty to Brigham Young. In fact, the entire book is so upbeat and positive that it seems that the Saints' faith enabled them to transcend every obstacle, difficulty, and supposed tragedy. We are in reality provided with a journey deep into the Berrett heart, and we learn that for him the gospel has provided beauty, hope, and faith enough to overshadow any temporary setback. We see what this true believer has gained from his knowledge of certain aspects of Mormon history and doctrine.

While he is aware of the New Mormon History, Berrett chose to ignore the controversies, problems, and challenges to the faith unearthed by a bevy of writers. This book, as a result, is much like those histories written by faithful Latter-day Saints before the late 1960s. Nothing in Church history, according to Berrett, was left to chance. Instead, the hand of God quietly led the prophets and their followers

toward that rendezvous with the Second Coming. This volume represents in many ways the kind of history that President Ezra Taft Benson and Elder Boyd K. Packer have encouraged historians to write. Berrett's deliberate decision not to deal with much of the new information regarding Latter-day Saint history will cause many serious students of Mormonism to disregard this book. However, those who both love and admire William E. Berrett for his past scholarship and for his commitment to the Church will find him lovingly revealed in this book through his lofty prose, his clear and concise sentences, and his sometimes inspiring interpretations.

Now in his eighties, still serving as a stake patriarch, caring for his invalid wife, and completing an important volume on the history of the Church Education System, William E. Berrett is one of the fine men and devoted scholars of the Church.

He has both influenced and encouraged thousands of seminary and institute teachers to become students as well as Saints, has spoken plainly in defense of academic freedom while at the same time encouraging kindness, moderation, and faith.

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The photographs in this issue were taken by Craig J. Law, associate professor of art, who is teaching photography at Utah State University in Logan, Utah. A major portion of his photography deals with Mormon themes or related subjects. His documentary photographs of "Contemporary Mormon Life" were recently on display at the LDS Museum of Church History and Art in Salt Lake City. *Chesterfield, Mormon Outpost in Idaho* (Bancroft, Idaho: Chesterfield Foundation, Inc., 1982) included his photographic essay of the pioneer settlement. Photographs in this issue are primarily from a current series of western landscapes.

He comments, "I photograph subjects which I've been around all my life, intending to lead the viewer to a new perception of a common reality. I often compare manmade and natural landscapes — sometimes they are harmonious, sometimes discordant. At times, I am simply thinking how beautiful something is. I'm concerned about the viewer's experience and use the tools I have in photography to hopefully make visible what it is I'm seeing and thinking. In making these images I sometimes manipulate the tonal scale and alter space perception by using the inherent characteristics of camera vision. Even as words can be used to move people to new understandings, so can photographs."

The photographs in this issue, all taken in 1987, are black and white silver prints.

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