

Remembering B. H. Roberts

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IN MY EARLY YEARS, I HAD OCCASIONAL personal contact with B. H. Roberts. He was a friend of both of my grandfathers, and one of his daughters was married to my mother's brother, with whose family I had a close relationship. I was several times in Roberts's home in Centerville, Utah, and, although they were older, I knew all of his children by his second wife, Cecilia Dibble. I remember Roberts visiting my grandparents during the First World War, dressed in his chaplain's uniform. I was probably four or five years old. And I was present with his family at his funeral in the Salt Lake Tabernacle and his burial in the Centerville cemetery. That was sixty years ago, in the fall of 1933.

I never missed an opportunity to attend a lecture or sermon by Roberts. I had several conversations with him and, of course, read most of his books. He was the church's most prolific writer. His eulogy at the funeral service of my grandfather, Joseph W. McMurrin, who was his colleague in the First Council of the Seventy, was a powerful sermon.

Roberts was a quite remarkable person. He was a success in his public life but something less than admirable in his family life. At times he severely neglected his families. His success as a church leader and as a theologian and historian was due especially to his independence of mind, his intellectual adventurousness, and his determination and courage. He loved to fight, and if a good fight wasn't handy he would create one. He was too old to enlist in the army in World War I, but managed to get commissioned as a chaplain by demonstrating his physical ability. He was so persistent that they finally accepted him, and he saw action in France.

As a general authority of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Roberts battled for a number of things. He wanted a theology that squared with the basic insights of Joseph Smith, and as the author of the church's official history he wanted an honest history—something not easy to achieve. He was not a major figure as a theologian, nor was he a first-rate historian. But he was the best theologian that the church has had, and although it has better historians today, who have the advantages of high-level training in their craft, these scholars are usually highly specialized,

while Roberts covered the whole historical scene. His *Comprehensive History* will be a standard source of historical information and interpretation for a long time to come.

One of Roberts's crucial battles within the church was over the authority of his quorum, the First Council of the Seventy, of which he was the senior member in his late years. In those days they were usually called the Seven Presidents of the Seventy. In earlier days, the Seven Presidents were described as having equal authority with the Quorum of the Twelve. Roberts took that too seriously to suit the Twelve and the First Presidency. After he died, the status of his council was downgraded.

Roberts was essentially a political animal who wanted to be personally involved in politics. This was one of the causes of disharmony between him and some of his less liberal associates in the leadership of the church. However, he was prominent in the early political life of Utah after it became a state. When I began my first year at U.C.L.A. in 1931, my first class was in American government, and the first sentence of the professor, a well-known scholar in that field, referred to Brigham H. Roberts being refused a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives because of his plural marriages. His is a classic case illustrating the tendency of the Congress to make itself an exclusive club.

Roberts faced the rough-and-tumble of the world head-on. Born in England in 1857, he reportedly walked across the plains with a wagon train, without shoes, sleeping on the ground with only his sister's petticoat to keep him warm, from the Platte River to Salt Lake. He learned the alphabet when he was eleven years old, and while working as a blacksmith he read widely in the history of religion, such classical authors as Eusebius, Ederheim, Gibbon, and Draper. Although he attended the University of Utah, in its infancy in his day, he was for the most part a self-educated man. But he became the most powerful orator in the Mormon church—in the days when authentic oratory counted for something, before television, before general conference speakers began to read their prepared sermons from prompters while appearing to be speaking extemporaneously. In those days, for a Mormon to read a sermon in church or even to use notes was a clear indication of a lack of the Spirit. When the Spirit left with the coming of radio and television, genuine oratory, with the congregation's tears and laughter, disappeared. So now we have these tame, canned sermons that often offer little substance beyond the admonition to obedience and virtue.

Those of us who can remember conferences in the tabernacle back in the old days know something of the inspirational power of those events and their profound impact on the people. The speakers were sometimes far too dogmatic and highly emotional, but they had something to say that moved their listeners. There was real life in the place. No one had a greater impact

on the congregation than B. H. Roberts. He was a remarkably effective orator of the old school.

I well remember one of Roberts's visits to the old Adams Ward in Los Angeles, where I lived during my early years. Microphones had just come into the churches, and although our ward didn't need one, we had to keep up with fashion. Roberts was using a cane, and he would wander away from the pulpit. After the bishop had brought him back to the mike three or four times, Roberts swung his cane at the mike with great force, shouting, "Damn that damn thing—we've even got one now in the tabernacle." He missed the microphone but left a deep dent in the pulpit. For years afterward members would point out the place where the great man had landed his cane.

I am pleased that the Roberts autobiography was published in 1990, even though it is incomplete and not well balanced. My aunt Hazel Moss, Roberts's daughter, loaned me a typed copy in 1950. Thereafter, I urged the Roberts family to have it published and also to publish some of his more important writings that were out of print. Fortunately, now, after many years, there is a kind of Roberts revival, and the B. H. Roberts Society is doing a very good thing in perpetuating the name and spirit of the man. The publication of Roberts's *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, edited by Brigham Madsen, is a major event in Mormon intellectual life.

Roberts was a forceful writer, but his diction was inelegant and lacking in any kind of poetic quality. His main virtue as a writer was his directness and honesty. When you read his stuff you know what he is driving at. It has genuine integrity. His *Mormon Doctrine of Deity* is probably the best-argued piece on Mormon theology, but a more systematic statement on Mormon thought is Chapter 63 of the second volume of his *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, where he gives a quite full description of Mormon philosophy and theology.

Roberts apparently considered his treatise "The Truth, The Way, The Life" to be his best work, but he could not get church approval for its publication. I understand that it is now being prepared for publication. The trouble he had in his battle to get the thing published was his speculation on pre-Adamites, a theory which he advanced in his efforts to square Genesis with organic evolution. In my opinion, here he produced a lot of nonsense. He should have recognized the Genesis stories of the Beginning as cultural myth, but this was a blind spot in his thinking. Roberts was a strong supporter of science, and he argued for good biblical scholarship. But he seems to have been quite unaffected by the critical study of the Bible, which was well advanced in his time. He gave much attention to the problem of the relation of religion to science and constantly urged the Mormon people to accept the findings of the sciences, but beyond that he made no real contribution to the religion-science issue.

Roberts's most important lasting contribution to Mormonism is not his work as a historian but rather as a theologian. His philosophic temper and his historical approach to things contributed to his strength as a theologian. He sensed the importance, for instance, of the non-absolutistic conception of God that is fundamental to Mormonism, and he was not hesitant to break with traditional theology in his opposition to the doctrines associated with original sin and in his affirmation of freedom in an open universe. He was not a great theologian, but, as I have said, he was the best that the Mormon church has had.

Roberts was certainly a controversial figure. He was respected, but I cannot say that he was loved. He wasn't the lovable type. I think he was feared by some of his colleagues in the church leadership, even though they respected him for his intellectual stature and considerable learning. I have always felt that some of them heaved a sigh of relief when he died. He had been a thorn in their sides on theological, political, and ecclesiastical matters.

I think that some in the leadership of the church have wanted to pretend that Roberts never existed. When I came to the University of Utah in 1948, I had graduate students who were returned missionaries who told me that they had never heard of him. There seems to have been a serious effort to erase him from the picture. He is almost totally ignored in the recently published *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. The articles on Mormon philosophy and Mormon theology make no mention of him.

B. H. Roberts and James E. Talmage, the leading intellectual figures in the church in their time, died within a few weeks of each other in 1933. In my opinion, the church has been in intellectual decline ever since in matters pertaining to philosophic and religious thought.