Intellect and Faith: The Controversy Over Revisionist Mormon History

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THE STORY OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST of Latter-day Saints provides invaluable insights into the birth of a new religious tradition in a nineteenth-century American setting. Among other things the Mormon experience affords an opportunity to probe social and intellectual cross-currents of the Jacksonian era. Anti-Mormonism holds clues to mass paranoid behavior, while the careers of Joseph Smith, the first Mormon prophet who was assassinated in 1844, and Brigham Young, the apostle who planted the new church in the American West, provide intriguing subjects for the study of charismatic leaders.

Literature on Mormonism also affords insights into the inherent tension between intellect and faith. Is it possible for scholars to report religious events within a naturalistic framework without casting doubt on the credibility of spiritual experiences? Can historians investigate their own church's past objectively without jeopardizing faith? To what extent do secular accounts of religious events pose problems for fundamentalist believers? Can religious communities accommodate a variety of historical interpretations without sacrificing a basic consensus vital for unity? In short, must honest intellectual study of a religion's past be compromised because of faith? Must faith necessarily be harmed by scholarly research? Emergence of revisionist Mormon histories after 1960 and introspection of scholars who engaged in research on their church, along with the reception their publications received from co-religionists, provide an opportunity to explore such questions.

The history of the Latter-day Saints has always posed formidable problems for objective scholarship. Most literature on Mormonism in the nineteenth century reflected bitter conflicts both among the Saints and with

their neighbors during the careers of founding prophets Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Non-Mormon authors generally divided into anti-Mormons who hated and feared Smith's movement and more neutral observers who wished to explain it. These two groups, along with Mormon writers intent on defending their faith, provided the major divisions of literature on the Latter-day Saints until about the mid-twentieth century.[1]

Significant works by such authors as Fawn M. Brodie, Dale L. Morgan, Juanita Brooks, Leonard J. Arrington, and Thomas F. O'Dea between 1940 and 1960 prepared the way for a transformation in historical literature on Mormonism. By 1970 historiographers began referring to a new Mormon history. No sharp line separated old Mormon history and new. Historian Robert Flanders considered Brodie's 1945 biography of the Mormon prophet, *No Man Knows My History*, a "landmark" which indicated a change in direction. According to Flanders, Brodie's "transitional" work influenced all subsequent scholarship on early Mormonism. James B. Allen, former Assistant Church Historian of the LDS church, cited Juanita Brooks's 1950 revisionist treatment of the Mountain Meadows Massacre as a "symbolic turning point" of the new historiography. Non-LDS historian Moses Rischin of the University of Uppsala in Sweden believed Thomas O'Dea's 1957 *The Mormons* set the new era in motion, while Mormon historian Thomas G. Alexander considered Arrington's 1959 economic history of the Saints, *Great Basin Kingdom*, "probably the single most significant bellweather of the new Mormon history."[2]

The efforts of Brodie and Brooks in Mormon history exemplify patterns which characterized subsequent work in the field. Although the two women diverged dramatically in their personal relationship with the Latter-day Saint church, Brodie having abandoned the religion of her youth, while Brooks remained a faithful Mormon who continued writing in Utah during a long, productive life, the two authors shared a number of experiences common to many historians who came after them. Both Brodie

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1. My interest in Mormon history began with graduate research on minority-majority conflicts during the Jacksonian era. Though a non-Mormon, I share with readers of *Dialogue* an interest in Mormonism cultivated through extensive research in both LDS history and historiography.

2. Robert Bruce Flanders, "Some Reflections on the New Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Spring 1974): 35; Moses Rischin, "The New Mormon History," *American West* 6 (Apr. 1969): 49; James B. Allen, "Since 1950: Creators and Creations of Mormon History," in Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, eds., *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 411; Thomas G. Alexander, "Toward The New Mormon History: An Examination of the Literature on the Latter-day Saints in the Far West," in Michael P. Malone, ed., *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 354.

and Brooks experienced difficulties with church authorities over access to archival sources; both labored under the burden of anticipated disapproval of their work within the Mormon community; both brought an insider's advantage to their study having been reared in Mormon families; both employed research skills honed from university studies outside Utah; and both provided revisionist interpretations on topics of great sensitivity within the Latter-day Saint community.[3]

Of all transitional works usually mentioned as bridges between the old Mormon history and new, Brodie's naturalistic study of Joseph Smith by raising questions regarding the prophet's credibility and the religious context of his work touched the rawest nerve in Mormon historiography. While several authors broke new ground, Brodie's book by opening a veritable Pandora's box of controversies regarding the origins of Mormonism inspired much vigor and passion in historical writing during the past four decades. Negative reaction to Brodie's biography by church officials which culminated in her excommunication in 1946, along with efforts of Mormon scholars to deal honestly with questions she raised, contributed much to shaping subsequent struggles between faith and intellect in Mormon historiography.

The "new Mormon history" produced in university graduate schools after 1960 has been distinguished by attempts to achieve scholarly detachment, use of professional methods of research, and concentration on secular themes of broad sociological significance. During the last few decades a coterie of specialists has explored such questions as the relationship between Mormonism and its parent American culture, the processes which forged the Saints into a separate people, whether the new religion sprang from a frontier or more sophisticated environment, of Puritan or other roots, whether it evolved toward democratic or authoritarian ends.

The appearance of Robert Bruce Flander's 1965 book on Nauvoo, Illinois, and Klaus Hansen's 1967 publication, *Quest for Empire*, heralded continuation of a more liberated Mormon history. A native of Independence, Missouri, and member of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Flanders evaluated Joseph Smith's secular leadership and explored various implications the Nauvoo era held for both the Missouri and Utah branches of Mormonism. A Canadian of Mormon

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3. Brodie recalled her Mormon roots and experiences connected with her biography of Joseph Smith in an interview conducted by Shirley E. Stephenson, Nov. 1975, excerpts of which appeared in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14 (Summer 1981): 99-116. For Brooks's Mormon connections, see Levi S. Peterson, *Juanita Brooks: Mormon, Woman Historian* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988). Also valuable for both Brodie's and Brooks's odysseys with Mormon history is John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

parentage, Hansen probed such political ideals of the early church as the Kingdom of God concept and the role played by the secret Council of Fifty.

Both authors brought independent attitudes to their work. Neither flinched from controversial issues. Flanders criticized Smith's economic policies, cast doubts on his motives as Nauvoo's chief real estate speculator, and pointed out inconsistencies between the prophet's revelations and actions.[4] Hansen characterized Mormon political ideals as a kind of religious imperialism and portrayed the early church as elitist, undemocratic, and authoritarian.[5] Their realistic portrayal of the Mormon prophet as an ambitious, fallible leader contributed to a de-mythologizing of the Mormon past.

Flanders, Hansen, and other scholars who wished to free Mormon history from polemical and didactic excesses found encouragement from the organization in 1965 of the Mormon History Association and the founding the next year of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Both independent of LDS church control, these vehicles, along with the establishment in 1975 of the Sunstone foundation, provided scholars new avenues for the exchange of opinion. The availability of *Dialogue, Journal of Mormon History, Sunstone,* Sunstone symposiums, along with *Brigham Young University Studies* and *Utah Historical Quarterly,* provided incentives for serious academic pursuit of Mormon studies and also forums for discussion of difficulties inherent in writing religious history.

A relaxation of restrictions on access to LDS archival sources also lured historians to engage in research. Prior to 1960 Brodie, Brooks, and other scholars had complained about the inaccessibility of documents deemed vital to their research. During the 1960s professional organization of materials and amicable relations with researchers invigorated intellectual inquiry within the Mormon academic community. After returning to Salt Lake City to work on the 1971 edition of her biography of Joseph Smith, Brodie found "a new climate of liberation" in the capital city of the Utah church. In the preface to her second edition, she remarked that "fear of church punishment for legitimate dissent seems largely to have disappeared."[6]

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4. Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 23-24, 117, 121-24, 49, 243, 92.

5. Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 10, 135, 74-79, 20.

6. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), ii. Leonard J. Arrington describes developments in the 1960s in "The Writing of Latter-day Saint History: Problems, Accomplishments, and Admonitions," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14 (Autumn 1981): 124-25.

The appointment of Leonard J. Arrington in 1972 as official LDS Church Historian seemed to confirm Brodie's optimism regarding improved relations between church officials and scholars. The transfer of authority to Arrington, dean of the "new historians" and a leading figure in organizing the Mormon History Association, gave encouragement to scholars who believed it possible to satisfy the intellectual requirements of their craft without jeopardizing their faith. As Arrington commented in a 1966 article, "Mormon historians act on the asssumption that the Mormon religion and its history are subject to discussion, if not to argument and that any particular feature of Mormon life is fair game for detached examination and clarification." Referring to scholars who promoted the Mormon History Association and *Dialogue,* he continued, "they believe the details of Mormon history and culture can be studied in human or naturalistic terms—indeed, must be so studied and without thus rejecting the divinity of the church's origin and work."[7]

As director of the LDS history division, Arrington led a team of dedicated Mormon scholars in vigorous efforts to professionalize the history of their religion. A virtual flowering of historiography ensued as scholars plied their craft with less apprehension of negative repercussions from their leaders. The next ten years became what one participant, Davis Bitton, later described as "a golden decade" for Mormons who believed it possible to reconcile intellectual endeavor with genuine faith.[8]

New leadership in the historian's office led to prodigious, enthusiastic efforts to fill gaps in Mormon history. An explosion of monographs, articles, and reprints on a wide variety of topics began appearing regularly in the press. Along with assistant church historians James B. Allen and Davis Bitton, supported by a staff of a dozen or so historians, and in cooperation with the LDS church's official Deseret Book Company, Arrington made plans to produce a sixteen-volume history of the LDS church to commemorate its sesquicentennial anniversary in 1980.

For a time LDS officials allowed Arrington's team a greater degree of intellectual independence than in previous decades. Although such materials as minutes of the meetings of general authorities, diaries of members

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7. Leonard J. Arrington, "Scholarly Studies of Mormonism in the Twentieth Century," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Spring 1966): 28; "Search for Meaning in Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 (Summer 1968): 3. For other evidence of introspection, see Richard Bushman, "Faithful History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Winter 1969): 11-25; Richard Poll, *History and Faith: Reflections of a Mormon Historian* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

8. Davis Bitton, "Ten Years in Camelot: A Personal Memoir," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (Autumn 1983): 20-33. This article provides both an insider's view of the Arrington tenure in the church historian's office and a bibliography of work produced under its auspices.

of the First Presidency, and church financial records remained sesquestered, available only with special appproval, many other valuable resources were opened to scholars during the Arrington era.[9]

Perhaps Mormon leaders had come to realize they had less to fear from professional history than they once believed. Perhaps image-conscious Latter-day Saints wished to project a more tolerant, democratic posture for their church. Perhaps Arrington's appointment was merely one of many moves in the late 1960s and early 1970s to reorganize church institutions by placing them in the hands of experts. Whatever the motives for this move, according to Davis Bitton the history division during the Arrington tenure was never altogether free from criticism.

Although efforts to professionalize Mormon studies won praise from academicians, revisionist history evidently stoked smoldering fears and resentments in some Mormons opposed to secularized, humanistic treatments of their church's past. Arrington's optimism regarding honest discussion of Mormon history was tested in 1974 when Reed Durham, director of the LDS Institute of Religion at the University of Utah, presented a presidential address at the annual conference of the Mormon History Association in Nauvoo, Illinois. In his paper, Durham explored Joseph Smith's links with Masonry and his possession of a magical Jupiter talisman. Negative repercussions following Durham's appeal for an open discussion of the influence of folk magic and Masonry on Mormonism led to his public apology and reaffirmation of faith.[10]

The backlash which caused some Mormons to question Durham's faith continued in a number of public speeches made by Ezra Taft Benson in 1976 during which he criticized efforts to revise traditional interpretations

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9. Arrington discusses the problem of availability of historical sources in Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 163-67. Other sources which discuss tensions over historical research include: Lawrence Foster, "New Perspectives on the Mormon Past," *Sunstone* 7 (Jan.-Feb. 1982): 43-44, and "A Personal Odyssey: My Encounter with Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (Autumn 1983): 87-98. Martin E. Marty comments on these tensions from the point of view of religious history in "Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography," *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1984): 3-19. One of the best defenses of revisionist history is Thomas G. Alexander, "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Fall 1986), 25-49. Marvin Hill contributes to the discussion in "'The New Mormon History' Reassessed in Light of Recent Books on Joseph Smith and Mormon Origins," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21 (Autumn 1988): 115-27.

10. Mormon critics Jerald and Sandra Tanner discuss Durham's speech in their 1980 *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 88-91. For reaction to his address, see Patricia Lyn Scott, James E. Crooks, and Sharon G. Pugsley, "'A Kinship of Interest': The Mormon History Association's Membership," *Journal of Mormon History* 18 (Spring 1992): 156n.

of the history of his church. Among other things, Benson, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, objected to emphasis placed by scholars on environmental influences on early Mormonism and use of such terms as communitarianism to describe the economic theories of early church leaders.[11]

In linking the roots of Mormonism with primitivist and millenial movements, and in portraying early Saints as seekers motivated by anxieties similar to those of many other Jacksonians, historians ruffled sensitivities of conservatives who treasured the uniqueness of their prophet's mandate to restore the true church. Linking the Word of Wisdom with the nineteenth-century temperance movement, for example, seemed to deprive this doctrine of its singularity as a revelation of God. While scholars experienced little difficulty accepting environmental influences as predisposing human instruments for God's work, naturalistic history posed difficulties for literalists who believed their religion originated in no other foundation than divine inspiration.

Some Mormon scholars were well aware that realistic recreations of the Mormon past might upset the faithful. In the foreword of his book *Establishing Zion*, published in 1988 two years after his death, Eugene E. Campbell's musings over the challenge of writing LDS history is quoted: "How do I bring a fresh, new approach to a subject that has been heard many times before by church members without upsetting their faith or—better yet—while strengthening their faith?" It might not make much difference to a scholar's faith whether Brigham Young named the Salt Lake Basin a divinely inspired place before or after settlement began, or whether early pioneers were actually saved from starvation by the miraculous appearance of sea gulls which ate rapacious crickets, but many rank-and-file Saints treasured such innocent myths.[12]

For their part Mormon historians had reason to resent lack of confidence in their work by some co-religionists. From their point of view intellectually credible history served the interest of their church better than pietistic works which disregarded evidence. It would be sheer folly to write modern histories of Mormonism without an honest discussion of polygamy, Masonry, or folk magic. If faithful Mormon scholars did not produce

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11. Benson's opposition to revisionist history is discussed in Bitton, "Ten Years in Camelot," and in D. Michael Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian," 1981, privately circulated.

12. Campbell's book, *Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847-1869* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), is considered one of the best revisionist works on the early Utah period in LDS church history. Commissioned by Arrington's office to become one volume in a projected multi-volumed history of the church, it illustrates the move to independent publishers after withdrawal of official support.

credible studies of their religion's past, the field would be left to their enemies.

Actually, in varying degrees, most history written by Mormons in the more "liberated" 1970s and 1980s often betrayed a sympathetic, patronizing tone toward the humanized story which unfolded in their books. Many authors fluctuated between a defiant "let the chips fall where they may" bravado, a barely concealed sense of relief when research supported their church's position, and a defensive reaffirmation of faith when evidence posed any serious challenge to their beliefs.[13]

Some Mormon revisionist histories, although far less apologetic than official church texts, betrayed in their tone a natural tendency to empathize with past generations of Saints. Brethren were not always exemplary in their behavior but usually had good reasons for their actions; Mormon leaders made mistakes in worldy matters, but on crucial religious questions they were invariably guided by inspiration; brothers and sisters fought bitterly among themselves; sometimes they provoked the antagonism of their enemies. In short, as typical products of a rugged frontier, Mormons as a people were no better nor worse than their contemporaries as far as human behavior is concerned.

The courage and independence of Mormon researchers were tested most vigorously when discoveries seemed to pose a challenge to fundamental tenets of their religious faith. On such questions as the historicity of the Book of Mormon, the relationship between Mormon temple rituals and Masonry, the origin of Mormon plural marriage, and the credibility of their prophet, Joseph Smith, even the best revisionists betrayed in their work a nervousness as though compelled to look over their shoulders. Determined to tell the truth as they read the evidence, Mormon authors often betrayed apprehension lest their church as an institution be harmed and concern that their co-religionists might not understand and accept their work on its merits as honest history.

Many of the most highly regarded revisionist works contained professions of personal religious convictions in their authors' prefaces. Some Mormon historians openly affirmed their belief in the primacy of religious motivation in the human story they were relating. Whether overtly stated or intrinsically present in their interpretations, most revisionists made clear their faith in their religion. Although few scholars omitted controversial topics in their texts, many treated sensitive subjects circumspectly.[14]

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13. These general, admittedly subjective impressions are based on my own reading of literature on Mormonism since 1960.

14. For professions of faith, see the prefaces of James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976); Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New

In their well-received book, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, for example, James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard denied knowledge of any convincing evidence Joseph Smith ever lived with any of his plural wives. They defended Smith's cover-up of the practice and underplayed charges of immorality as a cause of apostasies within the young church. These Mormon authors employed one sentence in their 638 pages of text to acknowledge similarities between Mormon temple ordinances and Masonic rites yet omitted any mention of the rapid growth of Masonic lodges in Nauvoo and the rivalry which erupted between Mormon and gentile Masons in Illinois in the 1840s.[15]

Most revisionist works left little doubt the authors revered Joseph Smith as a true prophet whose human weaknesses, as those of many other religious leaders, in no way compromised his ability to serve as a legitimate spokesman of God. Most interpretations of early Mormonism resembled Richard L. Bushman's. In his 1984 book on Mormon origins, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, Bushman portrayed Smith as a person "who outgrew his culture." While some aspects of early Mormonism resembled the environment, other parts could not be explained by existential experiences. This interpretational framework allowed historians to report the human story of the early church without discrediting its spiritual foundation.[16]

Regardless of sincere affirmations of faith by revisionist historians and their sensitive treatment of controversial issues, Latter-day Saint officials after 1980 escalated criticisms of the new Mormon history. In July 1980 Arrington moved from Salt Lake City to head a new Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History located on the campus of Brigham Young University. Although Arrington gamely accepted President Spencer W. Kimball's explanation for this relocation as an effort to enhance historical study, many omens pointed to other motives for moving scholars away from the archives in Salt Lake City. Valuable journals and letters of such nineteenth-century Mormons as William C. Clayton, John Taylor, George Q. Cannon, and Francis M. Lyman, selectively available in the 1970s, disappeared from scrutiny. Mormon officials withdrew

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York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); and D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

15. Allen and Leonard, 171, 70.

16. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 7. For similarities in tone, see Arrington and Bitton's *The Mormon Experience*. For a less restrained treatment of environmental influences, see Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

support for many projects initiated by Arrington, including the sesquicentennial history.[17]

Arrington's division had fallen victim to the antipathy orthodox Mormons felt toward naturalistic versions of their religion's past. As Davis Bitton recalled, some Saints perceived the history division to be a "conspiratorial, anti-church cabal." Pestered by "negative rumblings" from the beginning of their work, under attack for secularizing sacred history, and suspected of affording ammunition to anti-Mormons, Mormon scholars in the 1980s began turning to independent and secular publishers as outlets for their work.[18]

In 1981 Boyd K. Packer, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, renewed public attacks against Mormon historians which echoed those in Benson's 1976 speech. Packer's address before a symposium of Mormon educators went much farther than Benson's criticism five years earlier. Packer questioned the faith, motives, and prospects for salvation of Mormon historians who produced overly objective, impartial, honest, and neutral history. According to Packer, "Those of you who are employed by the Church have a special responsibility to build faith, not destroy it . . . Those who have carefully purged their work of any religious faith in the name of academic freedom or so-called honesty ought not expect to be accommodated in their researches or to be paid by the Church to do it."[19]

Packer warned Mormon historians not to include in their work controversial or sensitive material which might endanger faith. Nor should they portray church leaders as merely human beings, but should stress their spiritual strengths as prophets of God. Referring to stolen archival materials and circulation of publications harmful to faith, he chided scholars who employed pirated sources for lending support to their brethren's enemies.

In a rare public challenge to Mormon authorities, a BYU history professor, D. Michael Quinn, responded to Benson's and Packer's criticisms in a 1981 speech before the Student History Association at Brigham Young University. Quinn defended the work of professional scholars as healthier for Mormonism than "timid, defensive, or public-relations oriented" history. Scholars should not be asked to debase their work by

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17. Arrington discusses this move in "The Writing of Latter-Saint History," 127. For complaints regarding disappearance of sources, see Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985), 503; Edward Leo Lyman, *Political Deliverance: The Mormon Quest for Utah Statehood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 148; Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet's Wife, "Elect Lady," Polygamy's Foe, 1804-1879* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 329.

18. Bitton, "Ten Years in Camelot," 16-17.

19. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect" (Salt Lake City, 1981), 8.

omitting important evidence. Rather than protecting faith, oversimplified versions of history which offer "a mixture of platitudes, half-truths, omissions, and plausible denials" represent a "Maginot line," easily breached by the enemy.[20]

Further evidence of strains in the Mormon community surfaced in 1983 when BYU officials banned circulation of an independent student newspaper, *Seventh East Press*. Its 11 January issue had carried an interview conducted in 1981 with Mormon educator Sterling M. McMurrin in which he criticized efforts of officials to control the writing of LDS history as "reprehensible and odious." In McMurrin's opinion, suppression of honest research had created a climate within his community more detrimental to intellectual inquiry than he had ever before experienced. Expressing personal reservations regarding the emphasis placed in his church on its origins, McMurrin regretted efforts to indoctrinate members in a manipulated version of Mormon history. He believed it would be wiser for LDS officials to detach their religion from such close association with its controversial past.[21]

Escalating tensions over revisionist history created a climate in the 1980s conducive to the kind of extremism exemplified by Mark Hofmann's career. Hofmann's tragic interlude in Mormon historiography was both a product of and catalyst for polarization caused by the new history. The forgeries he pedalled in an effort to provide evidence supporting revisionist versions of the Mormon past highlighted and publicized tensions in his church. They also fueled a conservative backlash against the new history.

Hofmann's career, which ended with his confession in 1987 of the brutal slayings of fellow Saints Steve Christensen and Kathy Sheets, was motivated at least in part by his family background and obsession with Mormon history. Many of his most notorious forgeries, including the White Salamander letter, provided evidence supporting anti-Mormon portrayals of Joseph Smith. Several of the letters Hofmann marketed as the work of Smith or members of his family and associates sought to substantiate a close association between early Mormonism and folk magic. Evidently Hofmann's investigations of anti-Mormon sources had convinced him the founder of Mormonism was a fraud.

Without attempting any comprehensive psychological analysis of motives for Hofmann's criminal activities—the challenge of duping the experts, for example, or an inordinate desire for material success and enjoyment of attention won through his forgeries—it seems plausible that one of his rationalizations was a desire to embarass those responsible for

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20. Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian," 20-21.

21. Later reprinted in Blake Ostler, "An Interview with Sterling McMurrin," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Spring 1984): 18-43.

promoting what he considered to be a fairy-tale version of Mormon history.[22]

The most damaging Hofmann forgeries as far as early Mormon history is concerned included a letter dated 1825 in Joseph Smith's handwriting to Josiah Stowell, which contained a discussion of their mutual involvement in a treasure hunting project, and one dated 1830 from Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps, which described how a white salamander prevented Smith from retrieving gold plates from the ground. By seeming to substantiate Smith's involvement in folk magic at the very time he was acting on the angel Moroni's instructions, the contents of these letters cast doubt on Smith's version of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Money digging and involvement in folk magic by the founders of Mormonism were not new issues. Mormon scholars had responded to growing historical evidence of these activities by explaining them as normal manifestations of early nineteenth-century mores. The Mormon prophet may have engaged in contemporary superstitions as an immature youth but had outgrown such foibles before being called to his work of translation and prophecy. By seeming to confirm Smith's intimate involvement with the occult at the same time he was founding a church, Hofmann's forgeries would have discredited this interpretation.[23]

Although Hofmann's crimes caused a spate of anti-Mormon publicity in the national press and certainly must have embarrassed church officials, historians, and experts who accepted his documents as authentic, from the perspective of the past 160 years of Mormon historiography, and in view of work already in progress before Hofmann, it is doubtful his forgeries made any significant permanent impact in the field. Many outstanding scholarly works on Mormon history, most produced by such independent publishers as University of Illinois Press and Signature Books, rendered the decade of the 1980s memorable without the sensationalism Hofmann provided. His documents did spur the efforts of such Mormon scholars as Ronald Walker and D. Michael Quinn into the influence of folk magic on the early church.

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22. The best source on Mark Hofmann's story from inside the Mormon community is Linda Sillitoe and Allen D. Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988). Roberts provides valuable insights into Hofmann's motivation in "The Truth is the Most Important Thing: The New Mormon History According to Mark Hofmann," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (Winter 1987): 87-96.

23. Sources on money digging before the appearance of Hofmann's forgeries include Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), and articles in *Brigham Young University Studies* 9 (Spring 1969). For discussion of the subject after the appearance of Hofmann's forgeries, see *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Winter 1986).

Before the appearance of his 1987 tome *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, Quinn had already earned a reputation as a defender of both his faith in Mormonism and the canons of rigid scholarship. In his controversial book Quinn explored a gamut of occult influences on early Mormons including seer stones, divining rods, talismans, and astrology in the context of early nineteenth-century society without overtly calling into question the divine origins of his religion. Coming thirteen years after Reed Durham's address to members of the Mormon History Association in 1974, Quinn went about as far as a believing Saint could possibly go in probing the relationship between the occult and early Mormonism. Reviews of Quinn's work revealed how deeply divided his community had become over revisionist history.[24]

Not only on the question of Smith's connections with magic, but also on most other key issues regarding his career, the process of revisionism reached a crescendo in the 1980s. On polygamy, for example, few honest historians could question evidence that Smith began sexual experimentation outside traditional marriage as early as the 1830s; that he lived with many women; that he pursued women who were already married; that Emma Hale Smith vehemently opposed her husband's liaisons; that the marriage revelation of 1843 was partly motivated by a desire to placate Emma; or that Smith's unconventional views of marriage and sex played a major role in both internal and external conflicts which dogged the early church. The work of Lawrence Foster, Linda King Newell, Valeen Tippetts Avery, and Richard S. Van Wagoner convincingly supported revisionist positions on these controversies.[25]

As scholars moved closer together on the factual threads of their story, divergent interpretations established during the first 160 years of LDS church history lost some of their sharpness. Willingness to credit such sources as Lucy Mack Smith's biographical sketches, Philastus Hurlbut's interviews of Smith's neighbors, and exposés led revisionists in the 1980s near a consensus on what happened during the prophet's life but did not end disputes over motivation. It is one thing for scholars to concede that Smith lived with some of his plural wives; it is another question to surmise why he initiated and encouraged the practice.

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24. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987). Quinn's book is reviewed in *Brigham Young University Studies*, Fall 1987, 88-96. For a sample of Walker's work, see his address on Martin Harris presented at the 1986 annual meeting of the Mormon History Association reprinted in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (Winter 1986): 29-43.

25. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*; Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*.

In interpreting motives polarization persisted in the 1980s, not always on the basis of a Mormon-gentile division but according to the individual scholar's predisposition toward religion. Authors with a more skeptical intellectual attitude toward religious experiences were more apt to agree with anti-Mormons in seeking naturalistic explanations for Smith's career. Fawn Brodie and Dale Morgan provide the best examples of this category. Morgan's portrait of Smith as a talented youth who stumbled into his religious role by accident, then evolved in it to the point of believing himself a prophet, was close to Brodie's. The appearance of his unfinished work on early Mormonism in 1985, though a product of an earlier era, represented a significant contribution to early Mormon history.[26]

On the other hand, non-Mormons with religious backgrounds and scholars who specialized in religious history, sociology, or anthropology were less likely to question the testimony of their Mormon subjects. Mario De Pillis, Jan Shipps, and Lawrence Foster explored the meaning of Mormonism within a broad context of religious history. Deeming it more important to understand the consequences of Smith's religious career than to speculate regarding his motives, these authors compared Latter-day Saints with other religious traditions and analyzed differences between nineteenth-century Mormonism and the twentieth-century church. Some non-Mormon authors, Shipps and Foster, for example, displayed in their work as much empathy for their subject as many Mormon scholars.[27]

Three decades of revisionism in Mormon history may have made a more positive impact on the LDS church than its conservative leaders will probably ever be willing to acknowledge. The contribution of scholars in providing an intellectual foundation for the 1978 lifting of the priesthood ban on black men and revisions in the temple endowment ceremony in April 1990 which rendered them less offensive to women and rival denominations strengthened contemporary Mormonism.[28] In facilitating removal of practices detrimental to the public image and internal peace of their community, Mormon revisionists served their church well. As scholarship

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26. Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism.*

27. See Klaus J. Hansen's review of Shipp's book *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), in *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 135-45.

28. Contributions by scholars to the race controversy include Armand L. Mauss, "Mormonism and the Negro: Faith, Folklore, and Civil Rights," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2 (Winter 1967): 19; and Lester E. Bush, Jr. "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Spring 1974): 11. For revisions in temple ceremonies, see David John Buerger, "The Development of the Mormon Temple Endowment Ceremony," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (Winter 1987): 33-76; and Armand L. Mauss, "Culture, Charisma, and Change," ibid., 77-83.