

## LETTERS

### *Faithful Historian Responds*

I consider myself a faithful historian so I was extremely disappointed and felt misrepresented when I read John-Charles Duffy's article, "Can Deconstruction Save the Day? 'Faithful Scholarship' and the Uses of Postmodernism," (*Dialogue* 41, no. 1 [Spring 2008]: 1-33). This article is certainly not an example of careful scholarship. If I grant that Duffy is at least sincere in his evaluation of my work, I am forced to conclude that he has an exceedingly superficial grasp of it. As I reflected on the matter, I thought that there has to be a continuum from mistake to misrepresentation to half-truth to falsehood. I am not sure just where on this continuum Duffy's article rests; but since I have written a number of articles, given public lectures, and taught historical methodology during forty years as a professor at Brigham Young University, I have to wonder.

Duffy seems to believe that I arrived at my views only in an attempt to defend myself and the way I write history after being attacked by anti-positivists. Nothing could be further from the truth. I took a class in historiography and philosophy of history from Raymond Sonntag at Berkeley in 1961. If nowhere else, that class solidified my view that historians could neither be objective nor use the method of positivists. In particular, the writings on the historical theory of Charles Beard, Carl Becker, and Frederick Jackson Turner as contrasted with the views of Samuel Eliot Morison and other objectivists convinced me that history was always perspectival. I wrote my

paper for the class on Turner. A wide reading in history and historiography established quite firmly in my mind that historians could easily come to different conclusions on the same subject depending on which factual information or interpretive scheme they privileged. No objectivist or positivist could hold that view.

After I arrived at BYU in 1964, I taught the students in my classes in historical methodology that objectivity was impossible. However, I did not write about those views for publication until after 1980. In some of my presentations and publications, I tried to explain my views by examining their historiographical and philosophical underpinnings. In an article published twelve years ago, which Duffy ignored or of which he was unaware ("Relativism and Interest in the New Mormon History," *Weber Studies* 13 [Winter 1996]: 133-41), I offered a personal essay with examples on the topic. In the first paragraph of the essay, I wrote, "Our understanding of the past is relative to our own interests." This is a restatement of a point of view published by Frederick Jackson Turner long before Duffy and I were born.

Contrary to the articles by various people whom Duffy cites approvingly, this argument is not part of a *Positivismustreit*; it is rather part and parcel of an *Ehrlichkeitstreit*. It is about whether those who dislike the type of history that I write can critique my work honestly and accurately rather than classifying it as something which it is not: objectivist and positivist. Contrary to the title of Peter Novick's book, I do not believe that objectivity is "*That No-*

ble *Dream*.” Rather, as I have said repeatedly, I believe that objectivity is impossible. I wonder whether those who have classified my work as objectivist and positivist are really honest because they do such extreme violence to my views.

Now, how do I believe historians should treat religious topics or spiritual experiences, the topic which is at the crux of this discussion? In my 1986 *Dialogue* essay “Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian’s Perspective” (19, no. 3 [Fall 1986]: 25–49) to which Duffy alludes and which he apparently does not understand, I argued that historians should treat revelations and other supernatural events just as they do natural events for which there is only one observer. If the subject acts consistently with a revelation that he or she reports, then historians are bound to write about the revelation as a real event instead of trying to intuit or ferret out some naturalistic explanation. Recasting the event through a naturalistic explanation is, of course, something positivists would do since they believe that statements confirming the supernatural are meaningless. This explanation of my methodology earned me a rebuke from Charles S. Peterson in “Beyond the Problems of Exceptionalist History,” in *Great Basin Kingdom Revisited: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Thomas G. Alexander (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1991, 148). He considered it outside the mainstream of historical method.

Peterson’s rebuke notwithstanding, treating revelation as a real event is the only way I know to be honest about historical subjects who are also religious people with spiritual experiences. In-

stead of objectivity, I believe that honesty is the most important ideal of the historian. *As I have said and written elsewhere, honest historians must try to understand historical figures as they understood themselves.* Understanding should be the ideal. I hasten to emphasize that understanding and honesty as I use the terms are not synonyms for objectivity. Understanding others as they understood themselves is difficult, most likely even impossible to achieve, but historians should try to do so.

Because I set that as an ideal, in my biography of Wilford Woodruff, I treated the revelations he received as actual events—communications from God. I did this because he believed that is what they were, and he acted consistently with those revelations. Significantly, Richard Bushman, whose work Duffy cites approvingly, used the same technique in both his *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* and *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*.

Beyond this, however, an honest historian will try to deal truthfully with the problems historical figures had in their lives. I heard second or third hand about the comments of others, and directly from one critic, that some people did not like my biography of Wilford Woodruff because I dealt forthrightly with some of the problems in his life. I have heard also that some people criticized Bushman’s prize-winning, brilliant, and excellent biography of Joseph Smith for the same reason.

I would hasten to add that Church leaders recognize that you can’t simply hide things that are unpleasant; you have to deal forthrightly with them, but with understanding. The Church has

nothing to fear from an honest treatment of its history. For that reason, the Church leadership gave Richard Turley Jr., Ronald Walker, and Glen Leonard access to every source available on the Mountain Meadows Massacre as well as the funds to search archives throughout the United States for additional sources. I know something of the work they did because I served for more than a year and a half as an editor on their project, part of the time as a full-time missionary. Their book was published in August 2008 by Oxford University Press. In the fall of 2007, President Henry B. Eyring gave an honest and excellent address in which he pointed out that, contrary to previous stories, Mormon settlers in Cedar City bore responsibility for the massacre. (See <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/150th-anniversary-of-mountain-meadows-massacre#continued> [accessed June 29, 2008]). It was not perpetrated by John D. Lee and the Paiutes as had often been alleged, nor did Brigham Young order it as some mistaken souls have insisted. Moreover, the Church has undertaken the publication of all of Joseph Smith's papers in part because of this commitment to forthrightness.

In addition to his poorly informed attack on me, Duffy is highly critical of Leonard Arrington. Leonard is on record as believing in the ideal of objectivity. He was by training an economist, so it is not surprising that he believed in objectivity. After he joined the faculty at Utah State University, he took a course in historical methodology from George Ellsworth to help retool his skills as a historian. Nevertheless, he and I believed differently, *but respectfully*, on objectivity,

as on some other subjects. Duffy insists on conflating our views, apparently assuming without evidence that Leonard and I agreed on virtually everything having to do with historical methodology.

Duffy also forgets that Leonard was director of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church (later Latter-day Saint) History, an organization that Duffy mentions approvingly. He hired and supported the work of Ronald K. Esplin and Jill Mulvay Derr, whom Duffy calls faithful scholars.

I first met Leonard while I was a student at Utah State. At the time he was a member of the USU Stake presidency. He was active, faithful, and committed to the Church throughout his life. At the time of his death, President Gordon B. Hinckley telephoned his widow, Harriet, asking her to allow him to speak at Leonard's funeral. He spoke along with Davis Bitton, others, and me. Jan Shipps told me that, of the two recent histories of the Latter-day Saints, she considered the language in *The Mormon Experience*, which he wrote with Davis Bitton, more faith-affirming than *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*. One of Leonard's great strengths was that, perhaps more than any other Mormon historian or economist, he was the earliest to reach out to all people. More recently, historians like Richard Bushman and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich have assumed that role. During his lifetime, he was arguably the Church's most effective ambassador and missionary in the historical and economic disciplines. Considering him to be someone who was not a faithful scholar as Duffy does is grossly inaccurate.