

Bernard DeVoto and the Mormons: Three Letters

Edited and Introduced by Wallace Stegner

As Mr. Fetzer's article in this issue of *Dialogue* makes clear, Bernard DeVoto grew up a Catholic, not a Mormon. What is more, he grew up in a house dominated by his father, and his father had been a part of the struggle for control of Ogden between Mormon and Gentile forces around the turn of the century. That is to say, his father was a Mormon-eater and a friend of Mormon-eaters. His mother, often described as an apostate, was nothing so official; she was a jack-Mormon. Bernard himself, growing up insecure, gifted, romantic, and literary, always felt himself an outsider; and partly because of his dubious religious background, partly because of his personal traits of brashness, youthful boastfulness, and a tendency to profanity, he was not welcome in the homes of some good Ogden Saints whose daughters and sons were his contemporaries. When he returned to Ogden after finishing at Harvard in 1920, a broken love affair, a nervous breakdown, and the absence of the intellectual excitement that had made Harvard a sort of Heaven all combined with the literary fashion of the time to make him revolt from his small-town provincial home. When he came to write about it, he blasted it — first in the novel *The Crooked Mile*, then in the essays which, as Mr. Fetzer points out, so infuriated Utahns in 1925 and 1926.

Those essays, DeVoto admits in his letter to Jarvis Thurston, were written in the Mencken mood. From that jeering mood DeVoto quickly recovered, to become one of the stoutest defenders of the native American traditions against the literary internationalists and modernists and Marxists and other critics. Mr. Fetzer is absolutely right in suggesting that any Mormon or resident of Utah who retains in his mind that taint of those early youthful and bumptious essays should read "The Life of Jonathan Dyer," one of the most touching tributes to Mormon pioneers ever written.

The correspondence in the DeVoto archive at Stanford University is full of DeVoto's feelings about Utah, and his feelings were always complex and mixed. Even at the height of his disgust with the civilization of his home state, he was lyrical about its mountains and deserts, in love with its girls and its fruit and its weather, fascinated by its history. So his "revaluation" in the letter to Thurston is less a revaluation than a clearing away of personal grievance and literary fashion, to reveal his real love for the place.

He was never a believer; to the end of his life he refused to take Mormon doctrines seriously. But he learned to take the Mormon people and Mormon history and Mormon virtues seriously, and to respect them, and it troubled him all his life that he was hated in his home state. When the University of Colorado

gave him an honorary degree in 1948, he was touched because it was the first recognition he had received from his native region. No such recognition ever came to him from Utah; while he apparently outgrew his youthful vituperations, Utah never forgave him.

Though many letters in his files contain passages referring to his relations with Utah and the Mormons, the letter to Jarvis Thurston remains the fullest and most explicit statement of his attitudes both early and later. The early attitude hardly outlasted the articles that expressed it: the letter to Robert Elliott of the Salt Lake *Telegram* in 1930 is already well on the way to the position expressed in the Thurston letter of 1943, reprinted here in its original form. And if DeVoto's repudiation of Mormon religious doctrines in the Kostbar letter of 1951 referred to by Fetzer is still so strong it would be offensive to any Mormon, it should be noted that he would never have *published* any such opinion by then, and that his 1946 letter to Apostle Widtsoe is respectful, friendly, and grateful for a kind word from the place he fled from as a young man but never ceased to think of as home.

I

November 4, 1930

Robert C. Elliott, Esq.
Salt Lake Telegram
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear Mr. Elliott:

I must ask you to regard this letter as purely a private communication and must insist on your not publishing any part of it. Later I will write an extended answer to your questions, which you may publish in the *Telegram* or put to any other use that pleases you. Here, however, I desire to speak personally and so cannot allow you to print what I have to say.

You say, "Tell us explicitly how it may be done." — that is, how Utah can be made to produce fine literature. This seems to me a naive request. There are no recipes for the production of good literature, and no community can add a cubit to its literary stature by taking thought. Any formula or prescription that I, or any one else, might give you would be utter nonsense. There is no specific for art. I can, however, mention a few characteristics of life in Utah which seem to me to inhibit the growth of literature there, and which in my opinion must be obviated before writers or artists of any kind can flourish there.

Let me begin with my own experience and your remarks about me. The first, foremost, and indispensable condition for art is a society intelligent enough, or educated enough, or sophisticated enough, to permit the free play of intelligence. This requires that ideas of any kind, however offensive to anyone, be discussed purely as ideas. It means intelligent interest in ideas as ideas. It means sincere insistence on the right of your most violent opponent to express himself on any subject even if it be violent denunciation of your ideas. It means a society eagerly interested in the interplay and mutual interaction of ideas. And

what is more immediate to my theme, it means the assumption that an idea is no less sincere for being contrary to what oneself believes. Specifically it means that when I express ideas about Utah which differ from those which you hold, you are displaying an offensive form of the obscurantism which prevents the growth of literature, when you assume that they are not honest and sincere opinions but dictated by what you speak of as mercenary in one place and as immediate cash value in another.

Parenthetically I may say that your allegation is by far the decentest that has been made against me in Utah. I do not object to your particular form of assumption about me, since it is only impersonally insulting, but my collection of letters from Utah, now numbering over six hundred (hardly a fifth of them signed), contains a much more obnoxious obscurantism. I have been called a thief, a coward, a moral leper, a homosexualist, a defaulter, an adulterer, a sensualist, and every other opprobrious and obscene term that the resentment of Utah could devise. The natural impulse of uneducated and Philistine people is to denounce as some form of immoralist any person whose ideas differ from their own. Until some change in this habit of mind occurs, no artistic progress is possible in Utah.

Let me answer your allegation before I go on. I do not remember how much I received for my first article on Utah in the *Mercury*, but it could not have been more than \$125.00. The second, I happen to remember, paid me \$180.00. Is it your honest opinion that a man whose fee from such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* is considerably in excess of ten times this price will write for such magazines as the *Mercury* unless he has something to say and believes in it? Prices apart, why assume, in any event, that the motive is mercenary? Why not do yourself the credit of assuming that your opponent is as sincere as you? More than that, why scrutinize the motive at all? An idea is true or false, or partly true and partly false. What has the motive behind its expression to do with its truth? The way to oppose an idea is to scrutinize and analyze it for truth, not to attack the moral character and veracity, or the mercenary motive of the man who utters it. If the idea is true, it makes no difference what sort of a man utters it or what his motives are. If it is false, your job as antagonist is to point out its falsity. If it is a mixture of truth and falsehood, your job is to determine the amount of each. True or false it must be opposed by ideas not by insulting accusations about its author.

The first step toward the naturalization of polite letters in Utah must necessarily be an increase in the ability of Utahns to stand criticism. They must learn that the man who honestly points out what seem to him defects in their civilization is not necessarily a murderer or an adulterer. They must learn to deal with ideas as ideas, not as a means of personal defamation. They must learn the necessity of upholding the right of anyone to say what he pleases. Freedom of thought and speech is the first essential of the intellectual life, and until it becomes possible in Utah any attempts to improve the status of literature must necessarily fail.

Another essential is the stringent development of self-criticism. This is especially necessary in the production of literature, even more than in the allied arts. There is a very definite provincialism in the West, by no means confined to Utah but characteristic of it. Let any native tenth rater however stupid and inept, write anything, however tawdry, and the West will pronounce it a master-

piece merely because a Westerner did it. This is a trait of undeveloped or unsophisticated societies, and a perfect suffocation of art. When Utah is able to forget the question of a writer's birthplace and to concentrate on the worth of what he writes, literature will look up in Utah. If a Utahn produces first rate art, let us accept him as an artist, a cosmopolitan. Let us not praise him as a home-town boy. If a Utahn produces something silly and worthless, let us call it silly and worthless and not excuse him as a home-town boy who must be encouraged. The best way to encourage good art is to denounce bad art. And of all places for denunciation to begin, the best place is home.

Again, ability in criticism must develop before there can be progress in literature. Utah must raise its standards and increase its knowledge. In my own case three novels, each one of them the product of the most intense work I am capable of (two of them, incidentally, about Utah — a fact which you seem unaware of) fell into the void with hardly a sound from Utah, whereas every trivial and commonplace yarn I published in the *Saturday Evening Post* is received with yells of delight from my former companions in the state. That is one aspect of what I mean. I find another aspect in your editorial. You link such ephemeral and fourth-rate people as Riley and Nicholson with first-rate artists like Tarkington and Cather. You join such a pretentious sentimentalist as Ruth Stuart with a fine artist like Cable. You throw the ephemeral Page into a serious discussion which includes names like Robert Frost. You join O'Neill and Marc Connelly in one sentence, which is equivalent to joining Shakespeare and Ella Wheeler Wilcox. And you call a tenth-rate bit of fiction by Vardis Fisher a classic. This is a woeful lack of discrimination. It springs from enthusiasm about the literature of the West and things near your heart, but enthusiasm and optimism are no substitutes for critical judgment, and a *sine qua non* for the development of literature is a critical standard that will distinguish the ephemeral from the permanent, the trivial from the significant.

I may even say, again purely for your ears, that the opinion of Edgar Lee Masters is hardly important. Precisely as Utah must give up believing that all adverse criticisms of it are the work of devils, so must it give up the idea that all flattering criticisms are the work of angels or of geniuses.

With the other side of your polemic I am heartily and wholly in accord. In Utah and in the Western experience generally there is latent and almost untouched treasure for the artist. I will say more about this when I write a public answer to your editorial and letter. I have, of course, published far more on that side of the ledger than on the other — a fact of which you and my other Utah antagonists seem completely ignorant. So far as I have a public personality, it consists almost wholly in arguing in behalf of American themes and in particular of Western themes. I remember to have received from Utah not one word of recognition of what I have written in celebration of the West, and in what you print about me there is no hint of it. Yet my reputation in the East is almost wholly that of an enthusiastic upholder of Western civilization. It seems to me demonstrated that the West does not read me except when I grow violent about the West, and then it decides that I probably beat my wife, or in your case, that I make untold sums from such cautious and canny people as Alfred Knopf and Henry Mencken.

If after reading this letter your desire still holds, I will write an article of three or four thousand words on the subject you propose and give it to the

Telegram with my compliments. I cannot do so until some time after the middle of December. I have at last snatched a couple of months free from my manifold activities and must devote them to finishing my life of Mark Twain. Sometime between December 15 and January 15, however, I will write such an article, if you still want me to. It must necessarily be impersonal since I do not care to discuss my private experiences in print. Let me know if, after this frank reply, you care to have me do it.

Sincerely yours,
Bernard DeVoto

II

May 14th, 1943

Dear Mr. Thurston:

I have long intended to thank you for your understanding and uniformly generous reviews of my stuff and defense of me generally in Ogden. I am once more in debt to you now for an excellent and unquestionably over-kind review of my new book. But what finally pricks me out of amiable intention into action is not that review but a clipping which I take to be from Frank Francis' column in which he quotes you. I gather that Frank had said something about me in his column previously but, if he did, my clipping bureau missed it. Well, you bring up the old question of those two early articles of mine and I'm in a mood to make a statement about them. I make it to you, to show you how I feel and think about them today, for your private information. If at any time you care to quote any part, or all, of what I say, you have my full permission to do so. But I am not interested in your doing so: I am making an explanation to a man whom I recognize as a supporter of mine in my home town.

Many years have passed since I would have attempted any justification whatever of those two articles. They were ignorant, brash, prejudiced, malicious, and, what is worst of all, irresponsible. They were absolutely in the *Mercury* mood of illegitimate and dishonest attack. They represented the only occasions in my career when I yielded to that mood. I have spent practically all my literary life attacking other manifestations of that mood, and I have always regarded my yielding to it on those occasions as an offense which can be neither justified nor palliated.

There was, and doubtless remains, much in the life and culture of Utah which could be legitimately criticized. Some of the things I said in those articles made points which would have been legitimate criticism if I had said them fairly and objectively — and if the entire mood and atmosphere of the articles had not been atrociously offensive. It was, and doubtless remains, thoroughly possible to oppose some of the tendencies and manifestations of civilization in Utah on reasonable, empirical grounds. But the consideration is irrelevant, since my criticism and opposition were embodied in a lot of prejudice, irresponsible humor, and a general yanking out of shirttails and setting them on fire.

I cannot now remember whether I realized as much when I was writing. Certainly I realized it soon afterward. I believe that everything I have written

about Utah and the Mormon Church ever since has been fair-minded and objective. I go farther than that: I think that everything I have written about them since those articles has been informed by a basic sympathy. But again, that does not matter . . . except that very little I have since written about them has been taken into account by the people who go on denouncing me.

Why did I write them, and write them as I did? Well, for one thing I was a young buck, intoxicated with the newly achieved privilege of publication, full of wild and yeasty irreverence, and obviously gifted at burlesque and extravaganza. (That last, I may say parenthetically, is an embarrassing, occasionally dangerous gift. It has recurrently thrown me throughout my career and even now sometimes prods me into writing passages which react against the serious intention of my work. We have been told that a sense of humor is fatal to a career in politics. It is a handicap to any career in literature and an extremely serious handicap to a career in social criticism. It has joined with a habit of using concrete words to keep my stature in contemporary letters considerably smaller than it probably would have been if I had expressed myself solemnly and abstractly. In beautiful letters, the light touch is dangerous.) For another thing, I was, if a cocky young fool, also an over-sensitive young fool — and I had, or thought I had, been widely snooted and derided in Utah for presuming to desire a career as a writer. Ogden, Utah generally, is a far more sophisticated, far more cultivated society now than it was when I was growing up there. In my adolescence I was certainly the only person in the State, male or female, who aspired to such a career. The fact that such an ambition is now fairly common there and is treated as a matter of course is a sign, not that I was wrong and the attitude toward me right, but that the local culture has progressed in thirty-odd years. At any rate, I was widely treated as a fool on the one hand, for it must be foolish of me to suppose that I could ever be a writer, and as a kind of pansy on the other hand, for obviously only the epicene would aspire to a career so obviously trivial and even sissy as that of a writer. I was, I repeat, widely snooted and derided on just those grounds. Now unquestionably I exaggerated this, but unquestionably also it existed. The attitude was not, at that time, confined to Utah: it was characteristic of provincial America everywhere although I think it was more evident in Utah than in most places, for Utah was nearer than most places to the pioneer society in which literary activity has always been considered foolish and sissy. I resented it violently — much more than I should have resented it if I had been older, wiser, more cultivated myself, or more sophisticated. So I reacted against it when I came to write those articles. In some degree they were acts of self-vindication, in some degree acts of revenge.

Later on, I deeply regretted having written them. I do not regret them now. I conceive that the damage they did to Utah was nil — was wholly non-existent. (In all those years of the *Mercury's* slam-bang, indiscriminate derision of American life, was any attack on any community written that is now remembered in the community attacked, save only mine? I doubt it. An antiquarian, a historian of that period, I am familiar with most of those attacks and as I go about the country I inquire about them. I never find anyone except antiquarians and historians who remembers them. And most of those people do not remember them at first hand but have encountered them in research.) They did Utah no harm and they did me much good. For one thing they succeeded in rousing a historian's conscience in me, so that I have never again written anything with-

out knowing what I was talking about. But, what is much more important, they have enabled me to understand that period, the youth and young manhood of my own generation, as I should never have been able to understand it if I had not both written and repented them. They were absolutely and altogether of my literary generation. The revolt against the home town and the dishonest attack on it are type-specimens, absolute stigmata, of the period. My own career in letters has been in absolute opposition to the main literary current of my time. From my second novel on to my present book and the one now in manuscript, I have set myself to oppose the ideas, concepts, theories, sentiments, and superstitions of the official literature of the United States between the two wars. If I have any significance as a writer, it derives entirely from that fact. And that fact in turn rests, intellectually, on two realizations; my realization of what I had done in writing those articles and my realization of what Van Wyck Brooks had done in evolving and elaborating his system of thinking about American culture. I could not have understood my literary generation, and certainly could not have taken a stand in opposition to it, without either experience.

So much for my part. Let me add what I believe to be true about the reception of those articles in Utah and their subsequent reputation there.

We cannot imagine those articles being written today: the world has changed too much. *Mutatis mutandis*, granting the idioms and sentiments of this later time, if the equivalent of those articles were to be published today, they would, I think, cause considerably less stir and offense in Utah. The State has grown more sophisticated, it has come to understand more what intellectual and literary discussions are, it has become at least a little more tolerant. More people are accustomed to the play and interchange and expression of ideas. Ideas are more likely to be received as ideas, not epithets, not insults, no imputations of dishonor. The booster state of mind, which in the West of the 1920's was the equivalent of the vigilante state of mind of earlier days, has lapsed considerably. If I or someone else were to say the same things today, in today's idioms, there would be a lot less fuss.

And yet it is true, I think, that Utah, and especially the Mormon culture, is extremely sensitive and intolerant to criticism and even to difference of opinion in which there is no criticism whatever. That is probably true of the West in general, as distinguished from other sections, even the South, but it is more true of Utah and the Mormons than the rest of the West. I have been, not surprised, but exceedingly interested to see the old patterns repeated in the comments I get, in correspondence mostly, about my current book.* There can be no question whatever that that book contains the most sympathetic treatment of the Mormons ever published by a Gentile. Any dispassionate mind need only compare it with, say, Linn or Werner. It is packed full of the most flagrant and even fulsome praise of the Mormons, condemnation of their oppressors, admiration of their achievements, sympathy with their suffering, patient exposition of their point of view. Yet I receive a steady stream of vilification on the old, familiar grounds (you're a liar, you're a mobocrat, you're a homosexual, you're a publicity seeker, you're a cheap sensationalist, you're a defiler of the prophet and an author of filthy pornography, etc.), the Deseret Book Company holds up its order until it determines whether the book is sanitary or should be burnt by the public hangman (and how it finally made up its mind I haven't

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bothered to investigate), and somebody to me unknown sends my publisher a copy of a radio script which discusses the book purely in terms of those two old articles, as if there were nothing else in it. Except for you, nobody in the State reviews the book. Except for three or four people, and they are friends of mine mostly, everyone who writes to me damns me for having blasphemed the religion of which, it is repeatedly pointed out, my mother was a communicant.

Now in the first place I think it is true, as you say in Frank Francis's column, that most of these people who are so sore at me have not read the articles. They know my name as that of a son of a bitch who once wrote a lot of damned lies about Utah, and then relieves them of any obligation to know either what those damned lies were or what the present book is. But in the second place, it is lugubriously true that the orthodox Mormon mind cannot tolerate any objective treatment of Mormon history whatever. All treatment of the Mormons must completely accept the Mormon doctrinal, metaphysical, and supernatural assumptions. If it does not accept them, then it *ipso facto* prejudiced, unjust, and libelous. All Mormon actions have always been pure and sanitary; all criticism of them has always been evil and mendacious. Who is not for them is against them. That is why the fact that I have presented the Mormons to the readers of American history more sympathetically and with a more careful exposition of their relationships to their time than anyone has done before me goes without recognition in the abuse heaped on me. It is enough that I do not accept the Mormon assumptions. This is what I have sometimes called the Mormon inferiority complex. Something of the sort is, of course, a part of all religious orthodoxy. Yet it is perfectly possible for any writer to handle any other religion in America objectively and to be answered objectively in turn. It is not possible of the Mormons, and that is further evidence of their cultural lag.

All this makes no difference to me. I have no desire for Mormon praise and no need of Mormon approval. Neither do I desire the people of my home town to pay me any respect whatever. It certainly matters nothing to them that I have become a writer and, as one, have frequently written about the West. I should rather have them friendly toward me than otherwise, but I have become so thoroughly a part of a different society that I am fundamentally indifferent. I dislike it when I get a letter of fulsome praise from some Ogdenite who has seen my name in the papers and is impressed by the publicity without giving a damn for the work and, most likely, without having read it. To the same degree, I dislike it when I get a letter full of equally ignorant abuse. I should like to know that there are a few people in Utah who like me, without reference to my work, and a few who like my work, without reference to me. And I should like those who dislike my work to dislike it with reference to the work itself, not with reference to idiocies I committed long ago, which they may know, besides, only by hearsay.

When one is young and idiotic there may be some ambition to be known as a final authority, an important writer, a man of distinction and publicity or even fame. It doesn't last: one matures. One comes to understand that what counts is the honesty and thoroughness of the work. I should find it hard to state exactly what my ambition as a mature man is. It would run something like this: to do good work, to do work in which I may take some satisfaction and my friends some pleasure, at the utmost, as Frost once said of Robinson, to put something on the record that will not easily be dislodged.

All this doubtless sounds vague and inconclusive. Some weeks ago I came down with a streptococcus infection, the most serious illness I can remember having had, and my mind has lacked teeth ever since. I began with some notion of expressing my thanks to you and my feeling that you read me with much more understanding and sympathy than most writers get from most readers, and that in a very warming way you are a friend of mine.

Sincerely yours,
Bernard DeVoto

III

January 8, 1946

Apostle John A. Widtsoe
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
The Council of the Twelve
47 E. South Temple Street
Salt Lake City, Utah

My dear Apostle Widtsoe:

I have not seen the *Rocky Mountain Review* and your letter alarms me just a trifle. I know what you are talking about for it is a letter that I wrote to Jarvis Thurston a couple of years ago. The editor of the *Review* asked me if he could run it as an article. I told him no and said he could run it as it was, a letter. What alarms me is your word "essay" which indicates he has not followed my specification. I dreadfully dislike being put in a position of taking myself and my work too seriously as must appear if the letter form is not observed. I am not, I believe, priggish and if anybody is going to talk about what I write I should prefer to have someone else do it.

I should not have let the *Review* publish it even as a letter except that I did welcome the chance to make a public statement that I realize I wrote like a bumptious fool when the article on Utah came out — something like a century and a half ago. This is not to say that I haven't written as various kinds of a fool since then but I haven't been that particular kind.

I am very grateful indeed for your letter. I hope there are some others in Utah who are willing to grant that I feel a deep sympathy and respect for the Mormon Church although I am a non-believer.

Sincerely yours,
Bernard DeVoto