

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 *Positivismusstreit*; 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 Mulvey 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.

Later in his essay, Duffy moved to a discussion of perspectivism and post-modernism as strategies for promoting the serious study of religion. In this context, he cites George Marsden's work approvingly. What he seems to ignore in his haste to classify me as an objectivist and positivist is that I presented a defense of Marsden's *Soul of the American University* at a session with Marsden at the convention of the American Society for Church History-American Historical Association in 1994, the year of this book's publication. This was long before the published defense of Marsden by Jed Woodworth, Reid Neilsen, and Grant Underwood whom Duffy cites approvingly. I also approve their defense of Marsden, but I find it strange that Duffy should cite theirs and ignore mine unless it was part of his agenda to attack me.

In conclusion, I would call on Duffy to attempt to achieve a greater degree of accuracy in representing my work and that of other historians. Critics like Duffy would do well to adopt the ideals of understanding and honesty as models for their presentations.

Thomas G. Alexander
Provo, Utah

What Is a Revival?

I have read with increasing concern D. Michael Quinn's lengthy online essay defending an 1820 Palmyra "revival" ("Joseph Smith's Experience of a Methodist 'Camp-Meeting' in 1820," *Dialogue Paperless*, E-Paper #3, December 20, 2006, <http://www.dialoguejournal.com>, accessed April 2008); his letter to *Dialogue* ("Filling Gaps and Responding to 'Silences on Mormon History,'" 40, no.

2 [Summer 2007]: ix-x) declaring himself the victor; and Gerry L. Ensley's letter in the spring 2008 issue ("A Rigorous Examination," 41, no. 1 [Spring 2008]: vi-vii) lauding Quinn's "rigorous examination of historical evidence." While I found Quinn's research thorough enough, I think many of his arguments are strained and largely irrelevant.

Quinn's so-called "conservative revisionism" consists of redating the First Vision to the summer of 1820, instead of the early spring as Joseph Smith claimed in his 1838-39 official history. This redating is necessary to make the report in the local *Palmyra Register* of a camp meeting "in the vicinity" of Palmyra Village in June 1820 relevant. Quinn even asserts it was the very meeting that led to Smith's first theophany. He argues that an unusually cold spring caused Smith to misdate his vision. Thus, Quinn attempts to free himself from the text that has informed and restricted previous discussions. In my opinion, such speculation does not justify the certainty with which he then proceeds to criticize both critics and fellow apologists.

Quinn might find it difficult to believe Smith would go into the woods to pray in cold weather, but these were people who cut holes in the ice to baptize. Recounting events that occurred "late in the fall of 1840," Ezra T. Benson, for instance, wrote: "One evening, as the moon shone bright[,] I retired near a grove to pray, there was about one foot of snow upon the ground."¹ We are not talking about snow on the ground in Smith's case, only a temperature in the 50s or 60s. It is perhaps rele-

vant that in a December 1842 addition to his history, Smith said that, upon returning home after his vision, he spoke to his mother “as I leaned up to the fire piece.”² Some might find that image difficult to accept for June 1820. Apparently unaware that Quinn’s definition of “revival” is different from those he criticizes, Ensley naively concludes: “We may now safely ignore historical criticism that no such religious revivals occurred in Palmyra until 1824.”

There is good reason both Walters and his apologetic critics either dropped or ignored the June 1820 Palmyra camp meeting. It did not fit their criteria of evidence. Walters had challenged Smith’s claim that there were “great multitudes” of converts joining the competing sects in Palmyra in 1820. This was the definition of “revival” that informed that discussion; and for Quinn to change the definition to include any religious excitement, especially a camp meeting, regardless of the amount of conversions, is unfair. No one, not even Walters, claimed Joseph Smith could not have attended a camp meeting—just not the *one* he described in his history. So, despite Quinn’s excessively repeated and annoying accusations, Walters was not being dishonest when he downplayed the 1820 camp meeting; nor had the apologists “wrongfully conceded” the point when they expanded their search for evidence of “revivals” beyond Palmyra.

Ensley is impressed that “Quinn’s evidence shows not only an extensive Methodist (exactly as Smith stated) Palmyra ‘camp meeting’ religious revival in 1820, but also an interdenominational (Methodist and others) Palmyra camp meeting revival in 1818 as well.” How-

ever, a Methodist camp meeting occurring in Palmyra in June 1820 is not “exactly” as Smith claimed. According to Smith, the “religious excitement” that preceded and motivated his 1820 vision involved all the sects and led to his mother and other family members joining the Presbyterian church, which even Quinn admits probably did not happen until 1824.

Of course, Smith did not mention either an 1818 or 1824 revival. Rather than seeing Smith as pushing elements from 1824 back to 1820, Quinn speculates that Smith considered the 1824 revival a continuation of the 1820 camp meeting and therefore lumped all the details together. However, it was in the wake of the confusion created by competing sects and the pressure he felt to join a particular church, as his mother and siblings had done, that led to his prayer in the woods. Hence, in his conversation with his mother over the “fire piece,” he said: “I told my mother I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true” (*Early Mormon Documents*, 1:143), which is significant since Lucy dated her membership to shortly after her oldest son’s death in November 1823 (1:306–8). Considering how the anachronistic elements work in the narrative, Quinn’s speculation doesn’t solve anything.

Significantly, Joseph Smith’s 1832 history fails to mention a revival and confusion over which sect to join as motivation for praying. Instead, he was motivated by a need for salvation and forgiveness of sins. This need posed a problem to him because he had already concluded all the sects were apostate. Rather than trying to find the unifying

historical truth behind these texts, I think it is more beneficial to treat them as literary and rhetorical works and explore possible reasons for this shift in meaning.

Ultimately, after all his unnecessary and unfair attacks on Walters's character, Quinn agrees with Walters's main finding—that Joseph Smith's 1838–39 First Vision story contains elements from the 1824–25 Palmyra revival. That's more than some of the early apologetic defenders were willing to concede to Walters. Although Walters may have overstated its significance (which advocates on both sides of the debate have done), his observation about the text and its relationship to verifiable historical facts remains essentially legitimate.

Dan Vogel
Westerville, Ohio

1. "A brief history of Ezra Taft Benson, written by himself," copied into *Manuscript History of Brigham Young* by clerk Robert L. Campbell, 16:55–82 for July 16, 1846, quotation from p. 65. Holograph at LDS Church Library. This account is reproduced in Elden Jay Watson, ed., *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1801–1844* (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), 250, and serialized in *The Instructor* 80 (March 1945): 103. Benson's British mission journal records that he wrote his autobiography between June 11 and September 25, 1857, at the request of assistant Church historian Wilford Woodruff and that Elder O. F. Jones helped him write it. Photocopy and microfilm of diary in LDS Church library.

2. Added by Willard Richards to *Manuscript History*, Book A-1, Note B; reproduced in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1:143.