

WES JOHNSON: VISIONARY HISTORIAN

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The first time I met G. Wesley “Wes” Johnson was not long after I started teaching at UCLA in the mid-sixties. I had known of him earlier through his “Editorial Preface” in the first issue of *Dialogue* which I devoured at one sitting when my copy arrived. I still remember how excited I was to know there were people like me and that they had succeeded in doing what some friends and colleagues of mine at the University of Wisconsin had more modestly achieved, when we had actually published a small journal (*The Carpenter*). However, I recognized immediately that what Wes, Gene England, and a group of their friends had accomplished was far beyond our expectations or capabilities. *Dialogue* was the real thing. And it was a good thing.

In his editorial preface, Wes articulated the “general purposes” of the new journal of Mormon thought:

to stimulate excellence in writing and the visual arts throughout the Mormon community; to present fresh talent and to offer established authors a new vehicle of thought; to sustain a serious standard of objectivity, candor, and imagination in dealing with Mormon culture; to give students and thoughtful persons across the land a journal directly concerned with their quest for rational faith and faith-promoting knowledge; to provide professional people from a variety of disciplines a place to publish findings on Mormon topics which are of interest to the general public; to help Mormons and their neighbors develop understanding and concern for each other through an exchange of ideas; and perhaps most important of all, to help Mormons develop their identity,

uniqueness, and sense of purpose by expressing their spiritual heritage and moral vision to the community of man.¹

Ambitious? Yes, but also visionary; for what Wes, Gene, Frances Menlove, Paul Salisbury, Paul Jeppson and others began that day has immensely blessed The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormon culture, and the lives of many individual members in particular for more than fifty years, and shows no signs of wavering or waning.

Many considered Gene the visionary behind the *Dialogue* enterprise, but I think it is more accurate to consider Gene the visionary of the future and Wes, a consummate historian, the visionary of the past. That is, *Dialogue* has fulfilled the promise of its founders both by looking forward and by looking backward—by imagining a better Mormonism and by unveiling a history that had been occluded by ignorance, fear, and secrecy.

Wes understood the power of history as truly, truthfully and responsibly told as possible, and one of *Dialogue's* chief accomplishments over the years has been the publication of important historic documents and the scholarship surrounding them. It is perhaps difficult to fairly see the role *Dialogue* has played in the maturing of Mormon scholarship in face of all that has transpired since it began publication in 1966, which includes the inauguration of the *Journal of Mormon History* (in 1974), the improvement of *BYU Studies*, the proliferation of other professional journals publishing solid Mormon historical scholarship, and the Church opening its archives and publishing important articles on critical and controversial historical issues. Another way to make this argument is to recognize that it is unlikely that some of the seminal scholarly work *Dialogue* has published, from its first decades to the present, would have been published by any other journal. I cite Lester Bush, Jr.'s groundbreaking "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview" as a prime example. That article, like many others published before and

1. G. Wesley Johnson, "Editorial Preface," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 5–7.

since, has had a transformative influence on Mormon thought, theology, and culture.

Wes, who made important contributions to the larger field of historical studies during his illustrious career, set the tone for *Dialogue* (and dialogue) from the beginning by insisting, “Dialogue does not seek a particular editorial viewpoint. It attempts to serve as a forum for the encounter of diverse opinions, not as a platform for the promulgation of one kind of opinion. Thus, we conceive of Dialogue as a fresh idea in religious journalism—flexible, probing, and responsive to the needs of a variety of readers.”

As Devery Anderson’s excellent history of *Dialogue*² attests, launching an independent journal of Mormon thought was anything but assured. Some expressed fears that the venture was too risky, that it would quickly devolve into an anti-Mormon screed, that it would offend the Brethren, and that it would undermine faith. Considering the history of independent publications among the Mormons, those were reasonable concerns, but Wes, Gene, and others, like the founders of the new American religion itself, knew that, as Karl Keller wrote in a later essay in *Dialogue* “risk is the only kingdom.”³ By that, he meant, I believe, that without risk nothing, including the Kingdom of God, moves forward. As Wes’s children wrote in their father’s obituary, “Perhaps the greatest lesson he taught us was this, ‘Long shots are never as long as you think; they’re always worth going after.’”

Thanks Wes. We needed that.

2. Devery Anderson, “A History of Dialogue, Part One: The Early Years, 1965–1971,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 15–66.

3. Karl Keller, “Every Soul Has Its South,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 2 (1966): 74.