Elin and Calliope: Writing Imaginative Histories of the Pacific

As I begin this paper this morning, I feel the need to echo the beginning to one of Wallace Stegner's essays on writing history in which he says, "One without valid membership in the community of historians is not entitled to opinions about the profession, but he may have impressions." Although I am not an historian, I have some definite impressions about what history is and what it can be to be most effective here in the Pacific. What it can be is akin to a joke an accountant friend of mine told me recently. It seems a lawyer, a statistician, and an accountant were all being interviewed by the president of a company for a position. This company was having some trouble with the IRS. During the interview, the president asked them a key question: What is the sum of 2 + 2? The lawyer, who was the first to be asked, said that before he could answer that important question he would have to check the laws involved, research out previous cases that dealt with the question, see what the precedents were, etc. The statistician was asked the same question: What is the sum of 2 + 2? He said he would have to gather some data, plot the possibilities and make a projection. Finally the accountant came in and was asked the same question: What is the sum of 2 + 2? He looked at the president, looked around him to make sure no one else was in the room, tried the door to insure it was locked, pulled down the window blind behind the president's desk, then whispered to the

president, "What do you want it to be?" The accountant of course got the job.

What you want history to be may not be as easy as this story suggests, but the impression that it often is what people want it to be has been on my mind a great deal lately. Many of these impressions have come because of recent revivals of a familiar controversy in the Church of what the spirit of writing LDS Church history ought to be. The current debate stems first from a general authority's talk a few years ago. In 1976, Ezra Taft Benson warned us in a BYU speech 'God's Hand in Our Nation's History' that an undesirable humanistic emphasis on history is not confined only to secular history; there have been and continue to be attempts made to bring this philosophy into our own Church history. Again the emphasis is to underplay revelation and God's intervention in significant events, and to inordinately humanize the prophets of God so that their human frailties become more evident than their spiritual qualities.

In the summer of 1981 in an address entitled 'The Mantle is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect,' Elder Boyd K. Packer declared to CES educators that 'There is no such thing as an accurate, objective history of the Church without consideration of the spiritual powers that attend this work.' To ignore these powers, Elder Packer said, is to "accommodate the enemy" in the history we write. He sees a strong testimony of Joseph Smith and his successors as prophets and a testimony of the Church as "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth" (D & C 1:30, quoted by Packer) as necessary qualifications. He emphasized this by saying:

Now, you obviously noted that I did not talk about academic qualifications. Facts, understanding, and scholarship can be attained by personal study and essential course work. The three qualifications
I have named come by the spirit, to the individual. You can't receive them by secular training or study, by academic inquiry or scientific investigation.

In a biaid, specific, and candid response to both the Benson and Packer statements, D. Michael Quinn, an Associate Professor of History at BYU, addressed a group of history students at BYU. In his paper called "On Being a Mormon Historian" he said both of these attitudes were "jaundiced ecclesiastical views of Mormon history writing" and then went on to write an apologia for his own attempts "to use the skills of scholarship in research and documentation. To emulate the examples of Sacred History in approach and philosophy and to help the saints understand the vitality of Mormonism from a position of knowledgeable strength." Professor Quinn found it "discouraging to be regarded as subversive" by men he sustains. Thus you see the polarities in perception.

Another commentator, Louis Midgley, in a paper delivered to the Western History Association in October, 1981 ("A Critique of Mormon Historians: The Question of Faith and History") rejects the Mormon writers who are trying to find a middle ground between Joseph Smith as a prophet or fraud. Much of the history they write "attempts to rationalize the messages and content of divine revelation...for certain human purposes." More important than his criticism of these middle grounders is Midgley's description of the spirit under which such controversies unfortunately occur:

In the context of the Mormon academic community it has been next to impossible to discuss important issues without generating hurt feelings and unfortunate factional animosities. This is, I believe, one of the primary reasons why we rarely, if ever, have a serious discussion of anything. We are like ships passing in the night. My previous attempts to discuss serious issues in public have been something less than fruitful simply because we all seem to find it difficult to stay on issues at hand and end up indulging, instead, in various evasions and ad hominem judgments. I can see nothing in principle wrong with making an argument that a friend or colleague, not to mention a brother in the gospel, has made an error in something he has written or that his beliefs are mistaken on some issues. Such an argument would clearly not imply that the person, against whose opinions the criticisms were directed, was immoral, or unwelcome in the Lord's Kingdom. Saying that there are errors or mistakes in the historical essays that chronicle, narrate and interpret the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ is clearly not a way of kicking the persons who wrote that history out of the Church. If errors or mistakes disqualified one for the Lord's Kingdom, there would be no community of Saints. And if errors or mistakes disqualified historians, we would not have written much history.

The various approaches in these controversies were recently classified by Dr. Howard Searle at a January 1982 panel at the University of Utah on "The Uses and Abuses of Writing Mormon History" as falling into three basic approaches: 1. extreme naturalism; 2. extreme supernaturalism; and 3. a combined approach. Surely part of the muddle that leads us to extremes is due to what we perceive history to be. Dr. Searle's definition given at this same forum was that history is "contemporary thought and analysis of all that has been done, said, felt and thought by people in the past." Now the "thought" and "analysis" part of that definition are OK, but what was "done, said, felt and thought by people in the past" can never fully be known, short of direct revelation, by mortals in this life.

Part of the conflict in debates about history is due to a failure to recognize that historians, like writers of literary fiction, place constructs on isolated facts. If we were more skillful in analyzing these constructs, we would realize that given the same "facts" the constructs will be different for every writing depending on that writer's views and motives.
History in this view, first, something we put into words—which have built-in cultural assumptions; second, it is a structure—that is something created, not occurring naturally; and third, it is a narrative—something that has a story-like rendering. It is not so much a record of "what actually happened" as it is an imposing of pattern and meaning on so-called "facts." The old Aristotelian distinction that history presents the "actual" and poetry the "imaginable" should always be qualified by remembering that when dealing with the past we are usually imaginatively recounting what might have happened. In the present, I can say "Sisone is on the mat," and verify it by looking. But in speaking of the past, we may never be sure with the finite senses if there ever was a mat, if Sisone was ever on it, when he was on it, or who Sisone was, for that matter. It is much like asking what really happened in the French Revolution; there are only about six hundred versions that try to answer that question.

I maintain further that the form in which we write our histories are perspectives that are arrived at mainly on the basis of conscious or unconscious aesthetic or moral judgments, not on the basis of a method that is, as supposed by many, to be objective, accurate, and scientific. I have, with Hayden White, "serious doubts about history's status as either a rigorous science or a genuine art." At least it is not a science like a natural science.

I am speaking rather abstractly, but I must continue on a little more with this idea.

If you are beginning to disagree with what I am suggesting here, think for a moment of a historian whose interpretations you disagree with. It is usually easy to see the false element in such writing, but difficult to see it in our own. To see that history is a kind of fiction would help us be more self-conscious about the whole process of writing it. We would not then be so compulsive about finding the one true rendering of an event; we would look more to the writer's artistic and moral motives for the rendering he comes up with.

Unfortunately, we are captivated by a view that gained prominence in the last century that fiction and history result in distinctively different written forms. As one commentator on the history of ideas puts it:

Most nineteenth-century historians did not realize that . . . the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is—by its representation—a purely discursive one. Historians might be dealing only with imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the object of a representation is a poetic process. Here the historians must utilize precisely the same tropological strategies, the same modalties of representing relationships in words, that the poet or novelist uses. In the unprocessed historical record and in the chronicle of events which the historian extracts from the record, the facts exist only as a congeries of contingently related fragments. These fragments have to be put together to make a whole of a particular, not a general, kind. And they are put together in the same ways that novelists use to put together fragments of their imaginations to display an ordered world, a cosmos, where only disorder or chaos might appear.

Thus we see that "many historians continue to treat their 'facts' as though they were 'given,' and refuse to recognize, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much found as constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him."10

It is this attitude toward history that has caused writers such
as Wallace Stegner, a non-Mormon who writes fairly successfully about us, in champion the writing of imaginative histories, histories which are well researched, but which are labeled as fiction or some other form of literature. When we recognize history as pattern, construct, structure, or whatever you wish to call it, which we impose on happenings in the past, this realization is motivation for some writers to want to create literary formats for historical events as an alternative to traditional expository history. Stegner relates the following story to emphasize the high position he gives to literature as a possibility for historical rendering:

Recently I asked a doctoral candidate who was embarking on a history of Berlin since World War II if he intended to dramatize the personalities and events of those twenty years. Was he going to write an analysis or a story? How would his book be affected if, as he uncovered his material, he came upon people who played protagonist and antagonist, embodying in themselves significant forces of the cold war? How would he handle the challenges and confrontations, the suspense, the climactic scenes? Clearly he would encounter such things . . . But when I asked my question he looked at me, and so did some of the eminent historians on his committee, with a slight quizzical smile. I was thinking like a journalist or a novelist, not like a historian. He had not studied, and they had not trained him, to approach his dissertation in any such mood as that. They had trained him to probe for cause and consequence, to exhaust sources, to analyze, to generalize from tested facts. Pretty obviously they considered the analytical approach the only intellectually respectable one. Obviously they thought treating those explosive two decades as drama would endanger the dependability of the result . . .

In holding him to an intellectually rigorous method they were, beyond all question, sound. But I think they dismissed too lightly an approach that would have been, for that particular segment of history, the most proper one. The postwar history of Berlin will not be properly written until it is narrated. A good book on Berlin may be a pastiche of communiqués, conferences, policies, ultimatums, and abstract forces. The great book on Iliad is going to be a sort of Iliad, a story that dramatizes a power struggle in terms of the men who waged it. Which does not mean at all that it will be intellectually deficient . . . it is not the presence of dramatic narrative that makes false history false. Falseness derives from inadequate or inaccurate information, faulty research, neglected sources, bias, bad judgment, misleading implications, and these afflict the expository among us as often as they afflict the narrative. It is true that the excitement of story-telling, like the excitement of phrase-making, often tempts a writer into misrepresentation. But the excitement of analysis, the excitement of generalization, can do the same; and the laudable lust for absolute accuracy can lead to dullness, can cause a man to proffer a set of notes instead of a finished book, as if one did not write history, but collected it . . .

Dramatic narrative is simply one means by which a historian can make a point vividly. To imagine historiography without this possibility is like imagining Christ without His parables, or Abraham Lincoln without his anecdotes. Calliope and Clio are not identical twins, but they are sisters. History, a fable agreed on, is not a science but a branch of literature, an artifact made by artificers and sometimes by artists. Like fiction, it has only persons, places, and events to work with, and like fiction it may present them either in summary or in dramatic scene. Conversely, fiction, even fantastic fiction, reflects so much of the society that produces it that it may have an almost-historical value as record. Objective and sociological novels come very close to history, the difference being principally that history reports the actual, fiction the typical.

Stegner further reminds us that the particulars may not be true, yet the message may still be valid. An example of a poem about the Pacific that may not square in every detail with the actual practice it describes is Vernice Pere's poem "Heritage," yet its message is unimpeachable. [At this point in the presentation, Vernice Pere read her poem, printed below.]

Heritage

Take the sharpened pipi shell,
piece of paua, bird-bone,
razor-blade if you like.
Carve upon my face the marks
of Moriranga. Let the blood spurt
and dribble down my chin
like the moke of the old women
wrapped in blankets round the cooking-fire.
Rub the juices in the wounds,
charcoal, vegetable dye, India Ink.
Make beautiful the design, like
the young fern curled across the moon,
or the kiwi feathers in grandfather's proud cloak.
Seek the patterns of the paua's inner shell,
the curl of kumara vine.
Trace the call of the karanga across the marae,
the nose-flute in the night.
Slice the flesh like the teko-teko's stare.
The soft flesh, lip, membrane, skin.
Cut statistics on my face:
name, age, place of birth, race, village, tribe, canoe.
Carve deeply, erase doubt
as to who I am.
Use the sharpened pipi shell,
bird-bone, razor-blade.
Use them harshly, lacerate
my legacy upon me
where all who can read
will perceive that I am
taking my place
on this vast marae
that is the Pacific
we call home.

Vernice read this poem recently to one of my literature classes at UH. Although they knew virtually nothing about Polynesian tattooing, they, almost to the person, saw the theme of identity in the poem and felt the power of the feelings as Vernice read it.

Stegner himself is a practitioner of his own theories. He writes
historical novels and novelistic histories. His history of the Mormon westward migration The Gathering of Zion is a special kind of history. He characterized his "intention" in writing that book as follows:

My intention in The Gathering of Zion was clearly novelistic in its emphasis on human interest, but historical in that I wanted to be truthful to fact and record... Where the events of the migration were not dramatic, I told them in summary. So except for a few chapters, this is essentially narrative history. But it is history, if I understand the term."

I recommend that you read the chapter "Ordeal by Handcart" in the book, or better still, the shorter version that appeared in volume four of Clark and Thomas' Out of the Best Books. That shorter essay is a beautifully-written, lyric piece which remains faithful to diaries and journals but which is literary in its artfulness.

His work called Preacher and the Slave is labeled a novel, but it is as well-researched as any expository history. Although he "invented characters, scenes, motivations, and dialogue," he spent four to five years interviewing people who knew Joe Hill, the World War I martyr in the book, read trial manuscripts, newspaper files, visited a state prison, and walked through a mock execution so he would know how a man in that situation would feel. He even utilized actual letters in the last part of the book. Yet he still called the book "an act of the imagination."12

Truth in labeling is important in these matters. If theoretically we have what we perceive as "pure, actual history" on one end and "pure, imagined, historical fiction" on the other end, there can be difficulty with the ground in between. Stegner's fictional work, it seems to me, is the type we ought to emulate. He creates an imagined structure for his historical novels, but only after he has exhausted the research possibilities, and he is careful to label his works either "fiction" or "history." Fawn Brodie, on the other hand, calls her biographies histories, but they are really something in between history and literature. They go under the guise of history, but her constructs are transparently fictional and rhetorical. It is no wonder that Vardis Fisher, in her review of Brodie's No Man Knows My History a number of years ago, saw that book was "more a novel than a biography" and predicted that Brodie would "turn novelist in her next book and that she should."13 Dennis Petrie, in his recent study Ultimately Fiction: The Writing of Modern Literary Biography, feels that the indiscriminate mixing of the two can lead to ultimate confusion. He gives the example of the novel Regime
in which "Doctorow has combined historical and imaginary characters in
a manner that makes many readers exceedingly uneasy about his distor-
tion of 'truth." 14

Perhaps I should summarize by now asking "Where should all this
be leading us?" It is to these points: In the midst of controversies
over the writing of Mormon history, we would do well to remind ourselves
of what history for the most part is: an act of the imagination in
which interpretative patterns are placed on events. In all except
simple chronicles, it attempts to convince us of some particular point
of view. Because most people still think it is an objective, "scient-
lific" exercise, we should be careful not to mix the actual or the
imaginative under the guise of one or the other. Truth in labeling is
crucial, especially in Mormon writing. If you accept these ideas, you
will be more open to some literature as history. Such literary render-
ings of history are lacking, particularly here in the Pacific. Dis-
muchanted as I am with many so-called "objective" histories, I would
like to issue a call for more imaginative Mormon histories. I make
this call for at least two important reasons.

First, I rank the artistic rendering of truth a little above the
historical rendering of it because a good work can be representative
of experience as a whole. It is for this very reason that the scrip-
tures use allegories, parables, poetry, and figurative language. It
is also part of the reason the temple ceremonies are presented as
dramatic narrative. In other words, it is often more universal than
history. Second, for the Pacific where public performance is so much
a part of the culture, Mormon histories rendered as poetry, fiction,
drama, or even song, will have a much wider appeal and audience than
other forms.

The theme of this conference today is "Make Friends with the Past";
I feel more friends will be gained through this method than through
other methods here in the Pacific. My impression is, however, that
certain standards should be followed. These are primarily Stegner's
own rules for writing imaginative history: "the trick is to make the
twin cutting tools of sound research and a sense of the dramatic work
a like scissor blades." 15 Let me give a few examples of how
this might be done successfully. Although Nordhoff and Hall's Bounty
Trilogy may not be in some estimates a literary classic, it does offer
some exemplary qualities for the writer of imaginative history in the
Pacific.

When Nordhoff and Hall began their work on a novel dealing with
the mutiny on H.M.S. Bounty, they had research done for them in the
British Museum and other sources in London on the history of the
Bounty, as well as life in the British Navy in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries. They obtained copies of Bligh's letters and
the court-martial, as well as plans of the ship. A man from the British
Navy even built a model for them of the Bounty. Various documents were
added by their American publishers and sent to the authors in Tahiti.

For Mutiny on the Bounty they chose a fictitious narrator named
Roger Byam who was based on an actual midshipman named Peter Heywood.
Although they did not follow Heywood's experience in every detail,
they did adhere to the essentials in the records of the British
Admiralty. Captain Bligh's log book of the 3,618 mile voyage after
he and eighteen of his men were set adrift in a twenty-three foot long
boat is the main source for the next volume in the trilogy, Men Against
the Sea. This voyage is narrated by Thomas Ledward, a surgeon who
actually survived the voyage. His medical experience qualified him as a reliable witness of the men's suffering during their remarkable voyage.

Pitcairn's Island, the last and bloodiest of the three volumes, is a somewhat softened view of those violent years because Nordhoff and Hall have the story retold by Alexander Smith years after the incidents have taken place. Smith was the only survivor of the original fifteen men who landed at Pitcairn. In an "Author's Note" to Pitcairn's Island, Nordhoff and Hall relate some of the problems in reconstructing the events of those years:

Various and discrepant accounts have been preserved concerning the events of the eighteen years between these dates....Each of these accounts is remarkable for its differences from the others, if for nothing else, and all contain discrepancies and improbabilities of human behavior which can scarcely be in accordance with the facts. The authors, therefore, after a careful study of every existing account, have adopted a chronology and selected a sequence of events which seem to them to render more plausible the play of cause and effect. Certain details which would add nothing to the narrative and are too revolting for the printed page have been omitted.

The history of those early years on Pitcairn was tragic, perhaps inevitably so. Fifteen men and twelve women, of two widely different races, were set down on a small island, one of the loneliest in the world. At the end of a decade, although there were many children, only one man and ten women were left: of the sixteen dead, fifteen had come to violent ends. These are the facts upon which all the accounts agree. If at times, in the following narrative, blood flows overfreely, and horror seems to pile on horror, it is not because the authors would have it so: it was so, in Pitcairn history.

But the outcome of those early turbulent years was no less extraordinary than the threads of chance which led to the settlement of the island. All who were fortunate enough to visit Pitcairn colony during the first quarter of the nineteenth century agree that it presented a veritable picture of the Golden Age.

In doing their rigorous research, Nordhoff and Hall formed a remarkably coordinated team, according to their biographer, Paul L. Briand.

Nordhoff proved the narrative specialist, having the talent to get a story started, keeping it going with the eternal variations of "and then, and then" which every writer must have, and knowing where to end it. Hall, true to his attentive, ruminative nature, was the descriptive specialist and the thoughtful philosophical pauser for the occasional "and yet, on the other hand," meditations. Nordhoff trimmed Hall's romantic excesses to the realistic bone; Hall added body and fullness to Nordhoff's austerity and leanness. Nordhoff, having the better ear, handled the dialogue; Hall, more discursive, did the expository sections. It was a perfect marriage of talent, the one making up for what the other lacked.

Ironically, had their research in finding what had already been fictionalized on this subject been better, they might never have written the three novels. They thought only one novel existed, a children's book. Actually, at that time there were really four novels. Fortunately for us they proceeded, thinking the story had been under- treated. This could be a valuable lesson for aspiring novelists who think some subjects have been overdone. Of the fictional accounts, virtually only Nordhoff and Hall's work is remembered.

I am much encouraged by Ned Williams attempt to do on a much smaller scale in his play on Napela what Nordhoff and Hall have done with the Bounty story. I am impressed after reading the source documents Ned used that his play is a coherent fusing of elements from a variety of quite carefully selected and researched documents. The play, which many of you will see this evening, uses reports of visitors to Kalaupapa; Napela's Hawaiian genealogy; chapters from George O. Cannon's My First Mission; Janer Michener and A. Grove Day's Rascals in Paradise; Andrew Jenson's Church Chronology; Walter Murray Gibson's diary; Thomas B. Trum's book The Shepherd Saint of Lihui; the 1864 Deseret News; letters between Edward Partridge, Hawaii Mission president, and W. M. Gibson; Lorrin A. Thurston's Memoirs of the Hawaiian Revolution;
and Frank W. McGhie's *The Life and Intrigues of W. M. Gibson* (M.A. thesis, University of Hawaii, 1958). From these and other sources Rees has gleaned several of the highlights and important events and woven them into a narrated dramatization that condenses many historical details into a presentation that has and will acquaint many of the saints in Hawaii with a key figure in the spiritual growth of the Church here. The play ends with one of the narrators, John Parler, saying "But the life of Ionatana Napaia is not just the story of my family, it is the story of the spirit and nobility of the faithful Hawaiian saints."

I hope it is only one of many such histories of this area that through historical research and artistic rendering will bring to the people of Hawaii and other islands an imaginative history of the people and events of the Pacific that they may never read about if they are only found in history textbooks. In this way we may, indeed, make friends with, and perhaps for the past.

NOTES

4. ibid., p. 273.
5. From Quinn's unpublished manuscript.
6. From Midgeley's unpublished manuscript.
7. Sunstone Review, 2 (Vol. 2), p. 15
10. ibid., p. 41.
12. ibid., pp. 206, 207.
15. Stegner, p. 205.