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B.H. Roberts: A Biography Robert H. Malan

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ROBERT H. MALAN. *B. H. Roberts: A Biography*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1966.

Toward the end of his life Brigham Henry Roberts expressed the thought that what he had said and done was not important enough to warrant the publication of a biography. However, Roberts partially justified dictating his memoirs by saying that he wanted to prevent someone from just half doing the story of his life. The experiences Elder Roberts had are more thrilling and important than he believed. He was a man who loved, hated, sorrowed, rejoiced, and passionately lived; a man with few close friends who spent much of his time by himself. Alone he walked the streets of English villages at the age of five, virtually alone he crossed the plains at ten, alone he served many missions, and almost alone he fought against prohibition when a large number of his colleagues favored curtailing the sale of liquor. His only really intimate associate was a man who was nearly his opposite, J. Golden Kimball.

B. H. Roberts fought a valiant though vain fight to have the Church represented at the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. When this parliament denied his request, he went to the public press in an effort to win support for the cause of the Church. He verbally fought in the halls of Congress for the right to take his seat as the representative from Utah, and his speeches on that occasion are filled with feeling and emotion, revealing the certainty he had that his religious beliefs were the major cause for this rejection. He campaigned for many years on behalf of Democratic candidates running for territorial, state, and national offices; and one can feel the strong-willed passion of a man who believed in his political party.

On his many missions he preached, wrote, and energetically proclaimed the convictions of his heart—that Joseph Smith had seen God and that the gospel had, in fact, been restored. His early life of hunger, poverty, and longing for love and acceptability; the fact that he believed himself deformed; and his almost overwhelming compulsion to learn to read—all graphically portray the reality of the man. His often tender, yet sometimes almost tragic, journey across the plains with a teen-age sister arouses compassion in the souls of those who can identify with him. His learning to read and write, the fact

that he published over twenty books before his death, and his rise from meager beginnings to the leading councils of his Church—all make a thrilling success story that has few if any equals in American lore.

Malan's book began as a master's thesis in history at Utah State University. It is unfortunate that the author did not have access to the three-volume memoirs of Roberts, dictated just before his death, which are as yet unpublished.¹ These volumes cast a bright light on Roberts' feelings, thoughts, and personality. In the preface Malan states, "Roberts was a soldier, statesman, striking individual personality, whose iron will enabled him to advance and succeed." Largely because of Malan's deficiencies in style and scholarship, that kind of Roberts fails to appear. The author has attempted too much and devoted too few pages to what needed to be written. It is almost impossible to record the life of as colorful a man and as prolific an author as B. H. Roberts in just a few more than one hundred and twenty pages.

Malan's treatment of plural marriage reveals little depth of scholarship. He mentions several of Roberts' public discourses and published writings but frequently spends too little time with their content. The reader often wonders what Roberts really said or wrote. It is also unfortunate that Roberts' stands on prohibition, women suffrage, Mormon theology, and the authority of the Seventies were not discussed in greater detail. Other facets of Roberts' life such as his family problems, his ability and reliability as a historian, and his political difficulties could have been probed in greater depth. If more attention had been given to developing the historical situation in which Roberts lived, the book would have been much better.

Perhaps the greatest redeeming quality of this work is the fact that no other biography of Roberts has appeared. It does fill a need, and one can glean much valuable material from this short volume. In all fairness to the author it should be said that the master's thesis from which it is adapted is far superior to the published biography.

There still needs to be a major study made of Brigham Henry Roberts, a work that will somehow make him a living,

¹Dr. Truman Madsen, professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University, is in the process of writing a complete biography of Roberts based on these memoirs.

vibrant being; one that will portray his good qualities and his bad, his victories and his defeats, his loves and his hates. Such a biography must relate his life to Mormon history and the world in which it took place, for this is one of the most fascinating stories of any age or people. Perhaps Roberts has not been dead long enough for the task to be done; yet it seems sad that so great a man, who lived such a life of struggle, cannot be captured on the printed page so that all Latter-day Saints can thrill, cry, laugh, and love with him—not a perfect man by any means—but a great man just the same. Malan fails, and the need remains.

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