



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 14 | Number 1

Article 15

2002

George Q. Cannon and the Faithful Narrative of Mormon History

Davis Bitton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bitton, Davis (2002) "George Q. Cannon and the Faithful Narrative of Mormon History," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol14/iss1/15>

This Mormon Studies is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title George Q. Cannon and the Faithful Narrative of Mormon History

Author(s) Davis Bitton

Reference *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1-2 (2002): 275-93.

ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Abstract Review of *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (1888; 1986), by George Q. Cannon.

GEORGE Q. CANNON AND THE FAITHFUL NARRATIVE OF MORMON HISTORY

Davis Bitton

I have no desire to argue that George Q. Cannon (1827–1901) was a great historian. It is stretching it even to say he was a historian at all. And I do not pretend that his view of history was any different from that of John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, or even B. H. Roberts (1857–1933), although I do think that Roberts moved the writing of “inside” Mormon history to a new level.¹ What I will attempt to demonstrate is that Cannon exerted an extraordinary influence on the self-conception of the Mormon past that became standard among faithful Latter-day Saints. Let us briefly notice the areas in which George Q. Cannon promoted a way of thinking about the past.

1. He talked about history in his sermons. I have read every surviving Cannon sermon. It would be going too far to say that when he stood at the pulpit he always talked about history. Instead, like his brethren among the General Authorities, he typically talked about

I read a version of this essay at “Telling the Story of Mormon History,” a symposium held at Brigham Young University, 16 March 2002, under the sponsorship of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History.

1. Davis Bitton, “B. H. Roberts as Historian,” *Dialogue* 3/4 (1968): 25–44; revised as a chapter in Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 69–86.

Review of George Q. Cannon. *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*. Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888; reprint, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986. ix + 562 pp., with index. \$23.95.

the current situation and offered counsel. I can say that one of his frequent tropes was a quick review of the history of the restoration, showing how, in the face of seemingly insuperable odds, the work had continued to progress.²

2. He participated in the dedication of monuments and in celebrations commemorating the achievements of the past. I have attempted to put this kind of memorialization into a larger framework in an article entitled “The Ritualization of Mormon History.”³

3. He showed an interest in the preservation of primary sources and, at the end of his life, began the large multivolume work we know as *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* by Joseph Smith. The project was taken over and carried to a successful completion by B. H. Roberts.⁴

When we remember that George Q. Cannon was a General Authority from 1860 to his death in 1901—first as an apostle, then as a counselor to President Brigham Young, and from 1880 the first counselor to Presidents John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow—and that his publishing house, George Q. Cannon and Sons, published the great majority of titles intended for the Latter-day Saint audience, it should not be surprising that his way of thinking, talking, and writing about history had a powerful shaping influence on the collective memory of the early Saints.

From 1866, the beginning of the *Juvenile Instructor*, he was its editor and publisher; in its pages appeared many short, first-person narratives. In 1879, the first volume of the Faith-Promoting Series, published by Cannon and Sons, appeared. Thirteen more volumes, for

2. See, for example, the sermons found in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:340–48 (28 October 1864); and *Journal of Discourses*, 23:114–23 (3 April 1881).

3. Davis Bitton, “The Ritualization of Mormon History,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43/1 (1975): 67–85; revised as a chapter in Bitton, *The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 171–87.

4. Davis Bitton, *George Q. Cannon: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 446. For Roberts’s evaluation of this whole project, quite critical of Cannon, see *The Autobiography of B. H. Roberts*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 222–23.

the most part first-person narratives, followed over the next nine years.⁵ Cannon's *My First Mission*, a distillation of his experience, led the way as volume 1. Volume 3 was the remarkable *Leaves from My Journal by Wilford Woodruff* and volume 7 the *Journal of Heber C. Kimball*. Other firsthand accounts included C. V. Spencer's mission to Great Britain in the 1850s, William Budge's mission to England and Switzerland in 1878–80, Thomas Shreeve's mission to Australia and New Zealand in 1878–80, Llewelyn Harris's 1878 experience with the Zunis, Amasa Potter's mission to Australia in 1856–58, David P. Kimball's experience on the Salt River in 1881, and life sketches of Robert Aveson, William Anderson, John Tanner, Briant Stevens, and Daniel Tyler.

No documentation supports these narratives. Historians using this material must assess its authenticity by comparing it to diaries, letters, or other documents close to the events. Judging by George Q. Cannon's account of his sojourn in Hawaii, the changes could be as innocent as casting an experience into a retrospective mode rather than recounting it day by day. Some omission and highlighting were of course inevitable. Surviving handwritten documents by some of these authors force us to conclude that the manuscripts received some revision—correction of spelling, recasting of sentences, insertion of paragraph divisions—as they were prepared for publication.

Describing travel, persecution, healings, dreams, and visions, the Faith-Promoting Series cumulatively equates to a Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* for the Saints. Suffering and frustration were not omitted, as witness Wilford Woodruff's series of accidents and the misfortunes of many others. Daniel Tyler even admitted to a lack of proselytizing success, but he did it in such a way as to encourage rather than dissuade other young Saints. "I baptized none personally while on that mission of about three and a half years," he wrote, "and yet, although I suffered much affliction and persecution, I look back upon it as one

5. Cannon's *Life of Nephi* (vol. 9) and George Reynolds's refutation of the Spaulding theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon (vol. 11) were not first-person narratives and in this respect were different from the others.

of the happiest times of my life.”⁶ A Latter-day Saint convention was being established.

The inclusion of many specifics, including the names of witnesses who could confirm or deny the events, lends credibility to these accounts. But they are selective. Tales of disillusionment or apostasy were disqualified. And these accounts had to contain a moral.

Most of the volumes of the Faith-Promoting Series were published during the 1880s, a time of intense pressure for Cannon. In 1887, the year of the Edmunds-Tucker Act, the most punitive antipolygamy legislation to date, *Eventful Narratives*, the thirteenth volume in the series, appeared. The preface clearly states the purpose of the series: “The principal object in issuing them has been and is to increase faith in the hearts of those who peruse them, by showing how miraculously God has overruled everything for the benefit of those who try to serve Him.”⁷ This series was Cannon’s way of conveying this lesson to the broad reading audience of the church.

Cannon’s magnum opus was the *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*. This work was reprinted in 1986 as part of the Classics in Mormon Literature series. In a preface, historian Donald Q. Cannon notes that it has been “a very popular book for a long time”; that it is eulogistic, “designed to build faith”; that it “tells the story of the Prophet, but it does not attempt to analyze him or to probe deep beneath the surface events of his life in a critical way”; and that it “always presents Joseph Smith and the Church in the most favorable light” (p. 6).⁸ All this is true enough, but more needs to be said.

6. Daniel Tyler, “Incidents of Experience,” in *Scraps of Biography*, vol. 19 of Faith-Promoting Series, ed. George Q. Cannon (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 46.

7. *Eventful Narratives*, vol. 13 of Faith-Promoting Series, ed. George Q. Cannon (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1887), iii.

8. My references are to the pagination of the reprint edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), which inserts dates of death in the genealogical data of note 1 and references to the published Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (the multivolume “documentary” history) in parentheses after some quotations.

George Q. Cannon's original preface, penned in late 1888, brings the reader into the intense religious atmosphere of the prison cell—he was then serving a term in the territorial prison for unlawful cohabitation.⁹ Cannon does not hide his own fervent conviction about Joseph Smith. Rather than allowing it to emerge as a conclusion reached after telling Smith's life story, the author's testimony is trumpeted in the opening lines: "Joseph and Hyrum are now dead; but like the first martyr they yet speak. Their united voice is one of testimony, admonition and warning to the world." Cannon's motive in writing the book is stated forthrightly: "It is in the hope that the Saints may find joy in reading of their beloved Prophet and Patriarch, and that the world may judge more fairly of these benefactors of mankind, that this book is written" (p. 1).

Although working on the project "in the midst of a somewhat busy and laborious life"—an understatement—Cannon considered the labor a "loving duty" that had brought him comfort. "The closing chapters," he says, "were finished in prison for adherence to the principles which they [Joseph and Hyrum Smith] taught, and for this, the life is invested with a dearer regard." He even hated to send the completed manuscript off for publication: "To send the work away now is like being torn from a beloved companion, when most the solace of his friendly presence is needed" (p. 1).

Cannon had help on this project. "To many friends the author is indebted for information here embodied," he wrote, "and he takes this occasion to thank them, hoping to live yet to meet them and express his gratitude in the flesh" (p. 1). We wish he had been more specific about these "many friends." It would seem natural for a member of the First Presidency such as Cannon to enlist the help of the Church Historian's Office in preparing his work. Whether he spent time in that office or had material delivered to his own office is not known. His three oldest sons all worked on the project. As early

9. For the details, see Bitton, *Cannon: A Biography*, 292–96.

as the fall of 1882, Frank J. Cannon was “preparing the History of Joseph Smith.”¹⁰ Abraham H. Cannon also had a hand in it. “We revised what Frank had written of the Prophet’s History,” Abraham wrote on 20 August 1886.¹¹ A year later John Q. Cannon went over the whole thing and revised it.¹² So a draft manuscript by George Q. and his three oldest sons was in existence even before 1888.

George Q. Cannon was writing and revising through much of the summer of 1888 and in the fall spent many hours in proofreading and preparing the manuscript for the press.¹³ “Every spare moment of my time,” he wrote on 15 June, “I have worked on my History of Joseph.”¹⁴ He thoroughly revised and approved the finished product. He would not have allowed this book to appear under his name if it did not represent his views on the life of Joseph Smith.

After an introductory section about the primitive Christian church, the apostasy, the Reformation, the French Revolution, and the rise of modern sectarianism, Cannon offered what is no less than a hymn of praise to his subject. Joseph Smith’s “lofty soul,” he said, “comprehended the grandeur of his mission upon earth.” In his physical appearance “he seemed to combine all attractions and excellencies.” Joseph Smith, he said, had been “a retiring youth” but the Spirit made him bold; had been a humble farmer, but “divine authority sat so becomingly upon him that men looked at him with reverent awe”; had been unlearned, but “he walked with God until

10. Abraham H. Cannon Journal, 24 October 1882 (hereafter AHCJ). The holograph original of this journal, in 19 volumes, is housed in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Photocopies of the original are in the Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and in Manuscripts Division, University of Utah Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

11. AHCJ, 20 August 1886.

12. AHCJ, 7 November 1887.

13. George Q. Cannon Journal, 31 March; 26 and 31 May; 2, 5, 7-9, 15-16, 23 June; 6, 15, 25, and 30-31 August; and 4-8 September 1888. Hereafter abbreviated as GQCJ. I was given access to this journal during the preparation of my biography of Cannon, cited in note 4. The journal is located in the Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

14. GQCJ, 15 June 1888.

human knowledge was to his eye an open book, the celestial light beamed through his mind" (p. 19).

Just as Jesus was ridiculed during his life and only later could be seen "illuminated by the eternal sunshine of heaven," standing "outlined against the blue vastness of the past in sublime simplicity," so Joseph Smith should now be seen "as he towered in the full radiance of his labors . . . the reconciler of divergent sects and doctrines, the oracle of the Almighty to all nations, kindreds, tongues and peoples." Joseph Smith's "life was exalted and unselfish," his death "a sealing martyrdom, following after that which was completed upon Calvary for the redemption of a world" (pp. 19, 21).

Whether the casual, unbelieving reader would be drawn in or turned off by these opening pages, there was no false advertising. This book would not be history or biography in the dispassionate mode. After such an opening, it is no surprise to find in the following sixty-five chapters a Joseph Smith without fault, a persecuted people, knavish enemies, and the eventual martyrdom that concludes the book. Good and evil are as clearly contrasted as in any medieval morality play or modern Western novel.

However, Cannon's *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* was not merely a grandiloquent homily. Holding it together is a string of factual statements that no one would contest—although, as suggested, some might well take exception to the spin he put on them. The book is interlarded with many documents. Available to Cannon were early newspapers and published works by George A. Smith, Thomas Ford, and Josiah Quincy. Documents such as the Wentworth letter of 1842, including the Articles of Faith, are printed in their entirety.

A short chapter that deserves careful attention is chapter 56, "Eternal Marriage." Did George Q. Cannon give a clear account of the origins of plural marriage? Did he, in prison, defend it? The answer to the first question is no, but he comes close. "Eternity and plurality of marriage" are not distinguished but melded together and explained as the product of revelation. Joseph Smith "did not write it for a time," Cannon says, "although he obeyed its commands and taught it to

Hyrum and other faithful men, who, in prayer and humility before God, accepted and fulfilled its requirements" (pp. 438–39). It was on 12 July 1843, Cannon explains, that the revelation was dictated to William Clayton, on 13 July that a copy was made by Joseph C. Kingsbury, and on 12 August that it was presented to the stake presidency and high council of the Nauvoo Stake. He acknowledges Emma Smith's ambivalence. At first she did not accept it, "but later she became convinced of its truth and gave good women to her husband to wife as Sarah of old administered to Abraham" (p. 439).¹⁵

Then this editorial comment: "There is not one word in the revelation, nor was there one word in the Prophet's teaching other than purity and self sacrifice." It was a system that would make possible the satisfaction of every woman's right to "virtuous wifeness and maternity"; it was "a code of moral law by which the modern world, under the light of Christian truth, may achieve social redemption and be forever purified" (pp. 438, 440). An experienced soldier in the defense of polygamy for nearly forty years, Cannon could have said much more. But he said something about the subject, and it was not an apology or retraction.

In chapter 48, "Manliness of Joseph," we are treated to several complimentary quotations from contemporaries. Cannon does not choose to quote those who derided Joseph Smith, for his point is that even some who were not members of the Church of Jesus Christ were able to recognize something of the greatness of the man. He did not claim more than he should:

The foregoing opinions quoted from the Prophet's contemporaries and observers—his opponents, candid though they were—are as favorable as could be looked for in a skep-

15. Among scholarly analyses of the origins of plural marriage are Danel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith," (master's thesis, Purdue University, 1975); James B. Allen, *Trials of Discipleship: The Story of William Clayton, a Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); and Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996). Compton's book was reviewed by Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring and by Danel W. Bachman in *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998): 67–104, 105–37.

tical, materialistic age. They prove all that can be asserted of the Prophet by his believers, except the essential feature of his inspiration. This could not be testified to by any except a believer. His reviewers, whom we have quoted, judge entirely from external evidence. They saw the phenomenon presented by his life and work, and recorded it, excluding entirely from their consideration of his character and deeds all thought of the superhuman. . . . It cannot be expected that any non-believer will testify to the prophetic power of Joseph Smith. To admit it is to believe. (pp. 357–58)

It is a thoughtful analysis. “No words of a believer can of themselves convince an unbeliever,” he wrote. “There is but one power of demonstration, and that is to seek by humble prayer for the voice of the Holy Spirit. So surely as man prays in faith and meekness, so surely will the answer come” (p. 360).

The book concludes with a vivid, rapid-fire description of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. There is no epilogue or concluding chapter describing the trial of the assassins, the continued persecutions, the expulsion of the Saints from Nauvoo. With Joseph Smith dead and buried, author Cannon had finished his work—except for this final paragraph: “The enemies of truth were sure that they had now destroyed the work. And yet it lives, greater and stronger after the lapse of years! It is indestructible for it is the work of God. And knowing that it is the eternal work of God, we know that Joseph Smith, who established it, was a Prophet holy and pure” (p. 527). Such, even in prison, was the powerful conviction of George Q. Cannon.

Cannon was not trying to satisfy a doctoral committee or to please reviewers in secular journals. Readers would not have expected from him the flat exposition of an encyclopedia article. What they got—and arguably what was and is valuable—was not merely a life of Joseph Smith but what George Q. Cannon thought and felt about the life of Joseph Smith.

Cannon’s work served a purpose. For the Saints, it was a reassuring and satisfying reaffirmation. For the outsider, the book, even with its heavy moralizing, told the Prophet’s life in its essentials. The

discerning reader would have little difficulty in recognizing that it told as much about Latter-day Saint self-perception as about Joseph Smith.

*Although already simple, the work was not, in Cannon's estimation, simple enough for children. In 1898, George Q. enlisted the help of his 21-year-old son Joseph J. "My son Joseph submitted to me some manuscript of a 'Child's History of Joseph' which he is compiling under my directions," George Q. wrote.¹⁶ "Under my directions"—that is the key. Knowing how to use assistance, George Q. Cannon would again review the work, make whatever changes he thought necessary, and take responsibility for it. When published in 1900, *The Latter-day Prophet: History of Joseph Smith Written for Young People* must have filled a niche, for it came out again with a different subtitle—*Young People's History of Joseph Smith*—in 1912, 1914, and 1918. Always interested in children, Cannon was anxious to provide the new generation with a life of the Prophet that would stick in their minds.*

To call *The Latter-day Prophet* a Mormon version of Parson Weems's mythologized life of George Washington may be too strong. But Cannon was not afraid of indoctrination. Some kind of societal indoctrination would take place under any circumstances, as he well knew, and he wanted the rising generation of Latter-day Saints to understand and feel something of what he understood and felt about Joseph Smith.

The closest thing to a general history that Cannon produced, *The History of the Mormons: Their Persecutions and Travels*, appeared in 1890, just two years after his Joseph Smith biography.¹⁷ He of course knew this short, quick survey of article length was not a "full" history. When that full history was written, whether the author was friendly or hostile, every reader would recognize two "remarkable facts":

16. GQCJ, 23 August 1898.

17. George Q. Cannon, *History of the Mormons: Their Persecutions and Travels* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1890).

One is that in all the course of their interesting and troublesome [*sic*] career, though marked at every stage by honesty, thrift and good order, the people were constantly maligned by their neighbors and accused of views and practices inimical to the peace and welfare of the country. The other is that no sooner was one subterfuge of their opponents pierced by the light of truth and utterly disproved, than a second was brought forward and urged successively throughout the confines of township, county, state and nation.¹⁸

He added a third obvious fact: "After each onslaught, no matter how great the increase in virulence, the people have gained in strength, in numbers, in prosperity and in the ability to withstand every kind of attack."¹⁹

Cannon was writing in 1889 or early 1890. The federal onslaught was indeed increasing in virulence. It was about to force a momentous capitulation. Not knowing what was just around the corner, he considered the time ripe to review the sixty years of Mormon history.

Essentially, this little work is a lawyer's opening speech on behalf of a defendant. From the beginning, he writes, the Latter-day Saints had been persecuted. Starting with the Missouri persecutions and the driving of Mormon refugees from the state, the pattern had continued in Illinois, forcing the massive flight to the Rocky Mountains. What were the motives? What caused these other Americans to hate the Saints? For Cannon, the truth of the matter was made clear in Missouri.

It is true the mobocrats laid numerous offenses at their [the Latter-day Saints'] doors. Cunning villains have always been ready with stories calculated to inflame the ignorant mind and appeal to popular clamor. It was at first charged against the Mormons that their religion was an imposture—they believed in revelation from on high. Another offense was that

18. *Ibid.*, I.

19. *Ibid.*

in their domestic affairs they were “peculiar”—they were reserved in their deportment and dealing; they did not mix with the wild elements of mankind which surrounded them; in short, they minded their own business. These were atrocious crimes indeed! For these were they outraged, plundered and butchered! Many of them came from New England, where the anti-slavery movement was beginning. They were recognized as “Yankees,” were accused of secreting and “stealing” negroes, and were hated as abolitionists with all the bitterness that the men who lived on the border of the slave states at that time felt for adherents of that doctrine. This was held up as a most grievous offense, and they were driven out at the point of the bayonet.²⁰

This catalogue of charges is not quite complete, for it omits the apprehensions of the Missourians that the Mormons would somehow stir up the Indians. But here is Cannon’s fundamental point:

No charges of immorality then! No talk of *imperium in imperio*! No holy abhorrence of polygamy! No loyal anxiety to repress violations of law, for there were charges neither of misdemeanor nor of felony! No high-voiced hypocrisy about disloyalty or treason; for they [the Latter-day Saints] were law-abiding, obedient to judicial summons and patriotic.²¹

A prosecuting attorney might point out that in the late stages of the Missouri conflict some Mormons were indeed charged with crimes. But Cannon would stick to his allegation: the original case against the Mormons did not include charges of polygamy or grandiose aspirations of political independence.

In Illinois, Cannon said, the old charges of fanaticism were raised, but in this Northern state allegations of abolitionism carried less terror. A new objection must be found. It was found in the Mormons’ bloc voting.

20. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

21. *Ibid.*, 3.

The members believed that in union there is strength. They carried the theory into practice—not only in religion, but in commerce and politics. It was a great stumbling block to their neighbors. The independence which made them free to select the best candidates, and the good sense which caused them to cast a united vote for them, gave their enemies a weapon which has ever been readily used against them.²²

Only now, according to Cannon, did various other charges begin to be hurled against the Saints:

Having started out to give the Mormons a bad name, it was easy to charge them with the prevailing crimes of horse-stealing, counterfeiting, harboring vile characters, and of living, as a community, by a system of plunder. Lawless persons from up and down the river found it to their advantage to shield their own practices and divert suspicion from themselves by attaching it to the unpopular citizens.²³

Cannon recognized that the charges were made, dismissed them as essentially groundless, and tried to explain them. More recent research showing some basis for the charges of counterfeiting and theft might throw doubt on his claims of complete Mormon innocence, but his understanding of the general group psychology remains plausible. If some individual Saints were guilty of crimes, he insisted, they could have been tried and punished; after all, they lived as a minority in a country of law. Such charges were really a smoke screen. “The people were objectionable—that was all. That was the head and front of their offending.”²⁴

Cannon traces the forced departure from Illinois, the hardship on the plains, the service in the Mormon Battalion, and the raising of the American flag in the Salt Lake Valley when it was still Mexican

22. *Ibid.*, 4.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 8.

territory. For a brief period the Saints enjoyed peace in their valley home. Then came false and corrupt officials, who perjured themselves in making baseless charges. The result was the Utah expedition of 1857, a “senseless and unjustifiable expedition” that was not only “a farce, but a costly crime.”²⁵

Then came the anti-Mormon legislation. Now Cannon is speaking as if cornered. Many times he had been told that if the Saints would only stop polygamy, all would be well. “How hollow and mocking these phrases . . . sounded to a people who had passed through every form of tribulation before polygamy was known! We saw the old spirit of mobocracy which had driven us out from civilization in a new garb, to fit the changed circumstances of the case.”²⁶

The closing pages are Cannon’s address to the world, as it were. Standing his ground, with the shells of Edmunds-Tucker and confiscations and imprisonment and denial of the franchise exploding around him, he proclaimed: “We mourn for our unhappy country and those who will have to reap the whirlwind after such abundant sowing of the wind.”²⁷ For Cannon, it was the Latter-day Saints who were the defenders of liberty—meaning, of course, freedom of religion as they understood it: “When we shall have emerged from under the clouds and the sorrows, the love of freedom will have left an impress so indelible upon us that we will hold it as priceless to ourselves but too precious to be denied to others.”²⁸

Looking back over the tortuous path his people had followed, he saw clearly

the fate of those who have pitted themselves against the work and have sought to destroy the people. We have had presidents, governors, judges and other prominent and noted men, who have undertaken the task of “solving the Mormon problem” by violence and by the framing of various devices

25. *Ibid.*, 11, 10.

26. *Ibid.*, 11.

27. *Ibid.*, 14.

28. *Ibid.*

and schemes having in view the overthrow of the people. But who of them has prospered? Who has achieved fame or credit? It is true that some have attained some notoriety for the time being. This was not because of any superior merit which they possessed, but because their names have been connected with that of the Mormons. This notoriety has, of course, been only temporary. Everyone has sunk into dishonor and oblivion.²⁹

Governor Thomas Ford's published apprehension that his name would be remembered only for his role in the Mormon conflict had, as far as Cannon was concerned, been fulfilled, and the same was true of the other leading anti-Mormons.

Cannon concluded by lauding the Latter-day Saints for their "high conception of the rights of man," frugality, temperance, industry, perseverance, honesty, virtue, and "our hatred to vice in every form, and to litigation and violence."³⁰

We have been the pioneers in western civilization. About forty-five years ago we were compelled to leave the cities and pleasant places of our race and launch forth into an unknown wilderness. From that day until the present we have been the pioneers of the regions where we settled. We carried with us the printing press. Among the first buildings erected by us have been school-rooms. The first American paper published in California was issued from a Mormon press. The first farming operations performed by American labor there were carried on by the Mormons. The first gold discovered in California, which has created such a revolution, was dug by Mormons. We are the first Anglo-Saxons who have practiced irrigation. We came to Utah as religious exiles. We came here with a determination to make it our home,

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 15.

because we desired to be where we could worship God according to the dictates of our own consciences, undisturbed by mobs and religious bigotry.³¹

He contrasted these achievements with the desolation of places in Illinois and Missouri once occupied by Latter-day Saints and now showing signs of blight.

Cannon was proud of the high credit rating of his people: "In the commercial world our credit is of the highest. We can be trusted in financial circles because we always fulfill our obligations. Merchants, bankers, business men of all parts of the country, yield us freely this praise."³² He was speaking from experience, but this was before the extreme financial difficulties that would follow the Panic of 1893. The short "history" concluded with the manifesto of 12 December 1889. Just a year later, a new printing of Cannon's short history also included the Woodruff Manifesto of 1890.

The History of the Mormons was not so much history as it was an oration. The main value of such "history" is to serve as a reminder of the framework within which people like Cannon saw themselves and their past. They were not aloof bystanders but actors in the drama. To step back and see things neutrally was impossible for a committed participant. Concessions on details could be made, perhaps, but the essential pattern—a wronged people driven from place to place while sustained by their God—was not negotiable.

While encouraging a remembrance of things past, Cannon wished that remembrance to serve a present purpose. It should explain, create empathy with those who had gone before, and evoke admiration and appreciation. Above all, for Latter-day Saints, it should reinforce faith in the restored gospel. To subordinate the priceless jewel of religious faith to the paltry prattle of secular historians, incurably handicapped in their blindness and deafness to the spiritual dimension, would be a pitiful thing indeed. For Cannon, it was unthinkable.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 16.

Throughout Cannon's life, Latter-day Saints were the object of outrageous vilification. I am not referring to mild ridicule or the tendency to see them as curiosities from outer space—strange people to be ogled at and whispered about. Eskimos and Zulus and headhunters in New Guinea received similar bemused appreciation. I am referring rather to the hate-filled denunciations that effectively defined the Latter-day Saints as less than human, especially those calling for their extermination. With anti-Mormon journalism and travel books being published every year, Cannon could easily conclude that it was not his responsibility to represent the critics but to describe events as they appeared to the Saints. If this was “apologetic” in the sense of being a one-sided defense, he might have reasoned, so be it. The prosecution was already being heard and in many venues it was the only voice being heard.

It probably helps, also, to remember the importance given to *testifying* by George Q. Cannon and his colleagues among the General Authorities of the church. He had been a personal observer of much Latter-day Saint history and was an important participant in certain parts of it. Why should he write as if he were a disinterested observer? He would testify of what he was convinced of, of what he *knew*. We don't read the actual words “I testify to the truth of these things in the name of Jesus Christ,” but his tone is often one of proclaiming or bearing witness. This, needless to say, is not the history of a textbook or a learned treatise but the fervent witness of a believer.

If George Q. Cannon had models, historical works that were widely read and admired, they would include Thomas Babington Macaulay's popular *History of England*, perhaps J. L. Motley's *History of the United Netherlands*, and George Bancroft's *History of the United States*. While based on extensive research, these works all had a strong point of view and did not mind letting the reader know who wore the white hats and who wore the black hats. If we think Cannon was too severe in his condemnation of Governor Lilburn W. Boggs, we might find it illuminating to read Motley's description of Philip II of Spain: “If Philip possessed a single virtue it has eluded the conscientious

research of the writer of these pages. If there are vices—as possibly there are—from which he was exempt, it is because it is not permitted by human nature to attain perfection even in evil.”³³

With the introduction of the seminar system and training of graduate students in history, followed by the organization of historical associations and the publication of professional historical journals, Americans—as well as readers of history in most other countries—became familiar with norms that included careful documentation, reliance on primary sources, and avoidance of rank partisanship.³⁴ At least these were the stated goals. Whether they were realized is another question.³⁵

What academic historians have a hard time realizing is that most people who enjoy reading history are not interested in footnotes. They may not even care about “objectivity,” if that frequently misused term is in their vocabulary. They do like to think that what they are reading is true in the sense of being faithful to the reality of the past, but they seldom wish to go through the tedious exercise of looking at events from different points of view or weighing the evidence and assigning degrees of probability. What they want is a *story* compellingly told. They like strong, colorful characters and dramatic confrontations. Admittedly, there may be a certain audience for detailed, analytical works, but the biographies and histories most widely read for pleasure by the general public will continue to be those that, like novels, tell a story and let us know who are the good guys and the bad guys. For his generation—and apparently for many believing Latter-day Saints right down to the present—George Q. Cannon satisfied that desire.

33. J. L. Motley, *History of the United Netherlands* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1867), 3:534–43, as quoted and cited in Dom David Knowles, *The Historian and Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 3.

34. See summary of this development, with references, in Bitton and Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians*, 126–29.

35. The most stimulating analysis and critique is Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

The fact remains that for every chapter he wrote, if not for almost every page, significant scholarship has been produced during the past century. A perusal of the substantial bibliography in my *Images of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (1994) or the massive bibliography in *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997* demonstrates how far we have come since Cannon wrote. The student or casual reader may not think it necessary to delve into the intricacies of economic life at Nauvoo, for example, and may be quite satisfied with a simplified survey. I do think that any reader intelligent enough to pursue the subject at all should exercise sufficient critical faculty to recognize the point of view of the book in question as well as its limitations. And to pretend that scholarship during the twentieth century does not exist, or has contributed nothing worth mentioning, cannot be defended.

The historian cannot avoid thinking about audience. For whom does he or she write? The tone and terminology appropriate to the in-house audience might not be easily understood by others, and they might be turned off by a testimony-bearing tendency or a partisanship so extreme as to lack credibility. The chasm between faith-promoting history and critical history is impossible to ignore, at least in its extreme manifestations on both sides. To some extent I blame readers who, professing interest in the subject, refuse to read works from the other side—believers so easily offended that they are unwilling to learn from outside historians, and “outsiders” who turn up their noses at all in-house history. But writers of history bear responsibility as well. One longs for the kind of history that can be read with profit by everyone. It is a goal seldom achieved perhaps, but well worth pursuing.