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Photo by Brent R. Nordgren.

Publishing Mormon History: A Conversation with Alexander L. Baugh

INTERVIEW BY DEVAN JENSEN

Alexander L. Baugh (*alex_baugh@byu.edu*) is a professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

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Jensen: Recently you stepped down as editor of the Mormon Historical Studies journal. Would you tell our readers about your involvement with this journal from its early years, including the days when it was published as the Nauvoo Journal?

Baugh: The founder of the journal was Maurine C. Ward. She lives in Hyrum, Utah. She is a genealogist and a family historian, and in 1989 she decided to start a journal. She called it the *Nauvoo Journal*, published semi-annually, and it was basically dedicated to genealogy, but it had a biography and history slant to it. I don't know where she got the money to cover her production costs, but she had enough subscribers that as she began to publish the journal twice a year. Interestingly, Richard N. Holzapfel, a professor in Religious Education, became connected with Maurine and became the assistant editor, and helped solicit manuscripts and put the journal together. Originally, the *Nauvoo Journal* was published in an 8½ by 11 format, so it was kind of roughshod, but it had some good content.

In 1995 I received a faculty appointment in Religious Education at BYU and the following year, Richard Holzapfel asked me to come on as an advisory

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board member and I accepted. (At that time I had submitted one article for publication in the *Nauvoo Journal*.) Up until this time a number of people had contributed their time and expertise toward the journal, not just Maurine and Richard and I. Another key player was Ted Stoddard, who came on in 1996 as the copyeditor. Ted was a faculty member in BYU's Marriott School and an excellent editor, having edited the publications associated with the Marriott School for a number of years. So the right people were in place for everything to come together.

In 1997, Richard stepped down. At that point, Maurine asked me if I would be the assistant editor, so beginning in 1997, I began to help her solicit manuscripts, edit them, and send them out for peer review, those kinds of things. I probably would have never become involved with the journal had it not been for the invitation by Richard Holzapfel.

When I came on as assistant editor I told Maurine, "We need to make some changes. The number one thing we need to do is give the journal a different name. *Nauvoo Journal* leaves the impression that the journal is specifically devoted to Nauvoo history. That's not what it reflects; it's a journal of a larger historical genre. We need to change the name." I originally suggested we try to produce an issue in winter, spring, summer, and fall, and call it *Mormon Historical Quarterly*. She said, "Well, it's really hard to produce a journal *every six months, not to mention every three months*." We made the right decision to keep in a biannual publication.

Another individual who became involved with the journal about this time was William G. Hartley (Bill), a research historian in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint Studies at BYU. In discussing some of the changes we envisioned, I think it was Bill who proposed we change the name to *Mormon Historical Studies*. At the time, the *Journal of Mormon History* had been published for a number of years, but we obviously needed to be distinguished from them, and *Mormon Historical Studies* was a distinctive enough name, plus we didn't have to publish quarterly; we could just do it semiannually. So the name change from *Nauvoo Journal* to *Mormon Historical Studies* came in 1998.

At the same time, I suggested that we also needed to revise the format so that it has the look and feel of a genuine scholarly periodical, which included changing the size from 8½ by 11 format to the more standard journal size of 6 by 9. Then I said, "We need to have book reviews." I talked to Andrew H. Hedges. Andy had been hired as a faculty member in Religious Education at

the same time I was, and he agreed to be book review editor. He was the book review editor from 1997 to 2005. Next I said, "We need to have different kinds of departments. For example, we need to have a section in the journal for historical documents—a document section." Then Bill Hartley said, "It would be nice if we could interview Latter-day Saint historians who have published and made significant contributions to the field of Mormon historiography, particularly those who have been part of the new Mormon history." So we put our heads together and said, "Let's have a section in the journal and call it 'Conversations with Mormon Historians.'" Things started shaping up and making this more of a professional journal, complete with feature articles, documents, conversations with Mormon historians, and book reviews. We also created an advisory board and sent out papers for peer review assessment. So that's how it started. Maurine got it going, but, realizing there was a need for more professionalism, we made a number of changes and brought the right kind of people into place.

In 1998, the journal had a pretty good subscription base, and things were going pretty well, but with the new format, the expenses of producing the journal went up and we were having a harder time trying to get enough subscriptions to underwrite the entire production process—printing the journal, mailing, and all of that. Maurine was underwriting some of it by herself, but it became evident that if we were going to make this go, we needed a little better cash flow and a more money from somewhere.

On October 30, 1998, a special memorial service was scheduled to be held at Hawn's Mill to commemorate the 160th anniversary of the tragedy. I helped plan this even along with Mark A. Scherer, the world historian for the RLDS Church (now called Community of Christ), which church owned the Hawn's Mill site. A few weeks prior to the commemoration, I received a call from Kim R. Wilson, chairman of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation (MHSF), a nonprofit organization. Kim was also a descendant of Thomas McBride, one of the Mormon victims who died at Hawn's Mill. Kim had heard about the commemoration and called to ask me about it. He also expressed interest about the possibility of the Foundation cosponsoring the event along with the RLDS Church. Kim contacted Mark and within a short time the two groups came together and cosponsored the commemoration, which was very successful. I mention this simply because within a year, Kim invited me to be on the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation Board. None of

us realized it at the time, but just a year later, the foundation ended up taking charge of the publication of the journal.

Up until this time the most significant project the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation had done was to raise funds for the creation of Ensign Peak Park located on the foothills north of Salt Lake City. The Mormon Historic Sites Foundation was originally called the Ensign Peak Foundation, but after the completion of Ensign Peak Park, they decided to adopt a different, broader name, hence the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation.

After I was put on the board I told the board members about the *Mormon Historical Studies* journal. I indicated to them that the editor, Maurine Ward, could use some help in terms of funding to help keep this journal going. Fortunately, they agreed, and a deal was struck with Maurine. The timing was perfect. The Mormon Historic Sites Foundation took over as publisher of the journal in 1999, and the following year the name of the periodical was changed to *Mormon Historical Studies*.

For the next six years, I continued to work as the assistant editor, and I helped Maurine produce the journal. However, during this time she experienced some health problems, making it harder and harder for her to do the work associated with the journal. In 2005 she decided to resign. Since I had been the assistant editor and knew the ropes by that time, arrangements were made for me to be the new editor.

When Maurine resigned in 2005, Ted Stoddard stepped down as well, so I asked Don E. Norton, an emeritus professor of linguistics and English language if he would help with the copyediting. He was willing and proved to be invaluable. Don had also taught the editing class at BYU and was a perfect fit.

Other changes occurred. Andy Hedges, who had served as book review editor since 1998, also requested that he be replaced. In the early 2000s, I became acquainted with Jacob (Jake) Olmstead, a young BYU history student. After graduating and getting his master's degree at BYU, Jake went to TCU to get his doctorate. At the time Andy stepped down, I thought about asking Jake, who was finishing up his degree at TCU, but I was worried it might interfere with him completing his studies. But I tossed the idea of him being the book review editor, and to my surprise, he said he'd be happy to do it.

I also needed someone who could do the layout for the journal, one who knew InDesign, the typesetting program used by publishers. My wife, Susan, became the obvious choice. She had graduated from Utah State University in business education and had come computer savvy. She had actually wanted to

learn the InDesign program, so this gave her an excuse to do so. She enrolled in an InDesign course at BYU and learned the program.

The first issue of *Mormon Historical Studies* by our new editorial staff rolled off the press in 2006, but because it took us additional time to “transition,” we were only able to publish one number of the journal that year, which we combined to form a Spring/Fall issue. But we've been going strong ever since and we've had good success. Over the years a lot of people told me how much they like the articles and enjoyed reading the journal. And a significant number of Mormon historians began to take note of the journal and submitted manuscripts. *Mormon Historical Studies* has since been recognized as a legitimate Mormon periodical and filled a nice niche. For a number of years Mormon historians and scholars have published their research in *BYU Studies* (now *BYU Studies Quarterly*), the *Journal of Mormon History* (published by the Mormon History Association), and the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, and more recently the *Religious Educator* (published by the BYU Religious Studies Center), and there are others, but for many years I believed that there was a need for additional publication venues for those in the field of Mormon history.

During my time as editor I was also able to get the journal indexed and abstracted in *Historical Abstracts and America: History and Life*. So I think it's significant that the journal has become recognized as part of the larger landscape of professional journals and periodicals associated with Mormon history and to some degree American religious history.

One of the reasons I took the job as editor was that I felt I could help some of my own colleagues in Religious Education at BYU to get their work published. I can't tell you how many articles were published from our faculty, but there have been a lot. I would say that probably half of our faculty in the Department of Church History and Doctrine and even several in the Department of Ancient Scripture have contributed articles.

Jensen: *You and Reid Neilson recently compiled a number of the “Conversations of Mormon Historians” into a book. Why don't we talk about that?*

Baugh: I mentioned earlier that one of the departments in the journal is the section titled “Conversations with Mormon Historians.” These conversations were actually typescripts taken from oral history interviews with a number of faithful LDS historians who had made important contributions to the understanding of Mormon history. We published some wonderful interviews with what I would call big-time Mormon historians

who almost everyone in the Mormon historical community would be familiar with—historians who made a real impact in the area of Mormon history and historiography—Richard and Claudia Bushman, Thomas G. Alexander, Carol Cornwall Madsen, James B. Allen, Stanley B. Kimball and Dean C. Jessee—including historians from among the Religious Education faculty at BYU—Richard Lloyd Anderson, Milton V. Backman Jr., LaMar Berrett, and Larry C. Porter—to name a few. We also had interviews with historians who made their mark in Western American history, such as Charles S. Peterson, a professor of Western American History at USU, and Kenneth W. Godfrey, who had a distinguished career in the LDS seminary and institute program. It was such a terrific mix of seasoned scholars who were respected in the Mormon historical circles and also in the larger historical community.

For a number of years I contemplated compiling the interviews into a book. Finally, I approached Reid Neilson about it. At the time, Reid was a member of the Church History and Doctrine faculty (he's now the managing director of the Church Historical Department). Reid had put together several book compilations, so I thought I'd pass the idea by him and he liked the idea. Together we edited the interviews down a bit so the core content was there but it could still be a part of a larger book compilation. Then we submitted the manuscript to the Religious Studies Center, and it was accepted. I think the book will make a significant contribution to Mormon history. I'm really pleased with it.

Jensen: *What can your colleagues in history learn from these seasoned historians?*

Baugh: Anyone who is interested in the historical profession would benefit from reading about the journeys of those who have already been there, the sacrifices they made, and their perspectives on history. In each of the interviews we asked them, "Tell us a little bit about your historical journey. How did you get into it, and what do you see as your contribution to the field of Mormon history?" Anyone who is interested in making their own contribution to the study of Mormon history will be inspired by their journey and experiences and their ups and downs. I'm inspired by what they did, how they accomplished what they did, and their take on things.

A number of these professionally academically trained Mormon historians have been part of the generation that has been called pioneers of the new Mormon history. If I were a younger historian and asked the question "How would I chart my path in the historical profession?" I could get a lot of

inspiration from reading about these historians, what they did, how they pursued their careers, what they felt they should publish, and the contributions they made. It's just fascinating. I can't say enough about the history that we've been able to capture from these premier historians which may have otherwise been lost. I feel sad about two historians we were not able to interview. One was Dean May and the other was Davis Bitton, both of whom were history professors at the University of Utah. Both of these men were heavy hitters in the Mormon historical community, and unfortunately, both of these men died before we could get their stories. I don't know if their families did either, but fortunately we have these others—sixteen total—whose life stories will be a valuable treasure, not only to their families, but to the Mormon historical community.

Jensen: *Back to the journal, what articles are in the pipeline?*

Baugh: Like I said, for a number of years I've tried to develop different departments—such as the conversations with Mormon historians, general articles, book reviews, and documents. We've also tried to highlight important Mormon historical sites as often as possible. Since the journal is published by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, I felt like we needed to include articles that would highlight these site locations. For example, the next issue will have an important article by Mark L. Staker on the location of the Harmony home of Joseph and Emma Smith. Mark's done some incredible research on that site and property. He is also preparing an article highlighting the Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith home frame home in Manchester, New York. So these site articles will have some very new and important historical information.

Jensen: *You and your wife worked on this journal for many years. What can you tell us about the transition to Ron and Marilyn Barney, who are the new editors?*

Baugh: Let me just mention, I can't say enough about the value it was to have my wife as the layout editor. I could not have done it without her help and assistance. Once the manuscripts were ready to be inputted into InDesign, Susan and I would sit down together and formulate the layout and how we were going to put the issue together. I might say, "This is where we need to put this article," or "I need you to shift that photograph to this page," or "Let's insert the table before the endnotes." You know, the stylistic kinds of things. I could sit down with her and say, "This is what I'd like," and she'd lay it out. And I received a lot of compliments how the journal looked. I think it

had a pleasing aesthetic journal quality about it. Susan and I worked together on everything that had to do with the layout of the journal, and I think we made a pretty good team. In total, we did fourteen issues together.

I served as the assistant editor of the journal from 1997 to 2005, then editor from 2006 to 2014—seventeen years total. That’s a long time to do this sort of thing—too long in some respects. So it was time for both Susan and me to move on. Susan works full-time as the accompanist for the choral groups at American Fork Junior High School. She also teaches twenty piano students, and recently she was asked to be the accompanist for the Salt Lake Choral Artists Women’s Chorus. She’s already too busy and needed to cut back somewhere. I needed a change as well. I have a lengthy list of research and writing projects that need to get done, which I’ve left on the back burner for years. I remember my former colleague Paul Peterson would often say, “I’m closer to death than birth,” and now that’s the case for me. Mortality is slipping by and both Susan and I felt like this was the time to pass the baton to someone else. Hopefully, now I’ll be able to devote more time to work on several articles and a couple of books that I’ve got in my head—books I just need to get down on paper.

The members of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation board were the ones who approached Ron and Marilyn Barney about taking over as editors of the journal. Ron worked in the Church Historical Department for many years and was on the Joseph Smith Papers Project team. He and Marilyn recently served as the executive directors of the Mormon History Association so they are well connected to the historical community. I’ve been trying to be helpful in terms of transitioning from the Baughs to the Barneys. One thing I’ve stressed and emphasized to Ron and Marilyn is my hope that the journal will continue reflect the scholarship of our people in Religious Education at BYU.

Jensen: *We have some landmark anniversaries coming up in the Church. Where are we going with the field of Mormon studies generally?*

Baugh: One thing I think that is really exciting is that we’re approaching the two hundredth anniversary of a lot of events that took place in early LDS Church history—the First Vision in 2020; the coming of Moroni in 2023, Joseph Smith receiving the plates in 2027; the publication of the Book of Mormon and the organization of the Church in 2030; and the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in 2036, to name just a few. We’re going to have milestone after milestone after milestone. In fact, I’ve kidded with my family that I

want to live until 2044. And they asked, “Why 2044?” And I said, “Well, June 27, 2044, is the two hundredth anniversary of the martyrdom. At that time I’ll be eighty-seven years old, and if I can live that long I will have been part of all the two hundred anniversaries associated with the life and mission of Joseph Smith, and that’s pretty good.” I’m fifty-seven right now, so that gives me thirty years. But just think what’s going to happen during the next thirty years—a lot of key anniversaries will be taking place in the Church.

We’ve got to have more history written about the international Church. I am so convinced about that. We’ve got to study it, write about it, and publish it. One of the things I’ve tried to do include in *Mormon Historical Studies* are more articles focusing on the international aspects associated with Mormon history. In some of these international areas the first generation of Latter-day Saints are still alive and we need to get their history. There’s a heavy emphasis in the Church Historical Department to gather and collect and get these histories in the countries where the Church has been emerging in the last generation or so. That information needs to be collected, researched, written, and published.

I think we’re doing much, much better in the area of Mormon women’s history, but we still need to do more. Women have always been key players in every aspect of our history, and their stories and experiences need to be told. I’m very pleased with Richard E. Turley Jr.’s and Brittany A. Chapman’s efforts to produce the multivolume *Women of Faith in the Latter Days* series, highlighting the biographies of Mormon women. We need more of that type of history.

Finally, there is so much negatively slanted and disingenuous history on the Internet, about the Latter-day Saints, and Joseph Smith and Brigham Young in particular. So we need to do a better job explaining our history more accurately to both Mormon and non-Mormon audiences. We also need to be more proactive in countering those who write critically against the Church, but of course do so civilly. Transparency is also important. The recent release of several historical and doctrinal statements by the Church illustrates a genuine effort to be more open about our history and issues related to the Church.

There are Church members who, in their search for truth and understanding, may experience a crisis of faith regarding some of the doctrines, practices, teachings, or the history associated with the Church. I totally understand that. But I can honestly say that I’ve never had any spiritual or intellectual hiccups with Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or

any of the prophets or leaders. Did they have shortcomings? Sure, they did. Were mistakes made by our people and our leaders? Why of course. And we certainly don't have all the answers, but to me, our history has the power to produce and strengthen faith and testimony. I often say to my students, "If you don't know Mormonism is true, you haven't done your homework. And you won't find historical or doctrinal truth by studying the wrong stuff written or presented by people whose purpose is to destroy faith, misrepresent the facts, or who have an ax to grind against the Church." Our history is so faith-promoting and so fantastic! And it is so obvious to me that the guiding hand of God has directed the course of the Latter-day Saints.

Jensen: What other comments do you want to make about anything—the journal, anything else you want to add?

Baugh: I feel like *Mormon Historical Studies* was meant to be, and I hope the journal will have longevity. Maurine Ward, the first editor, did something that no one else did, she pulled things together to produce the journal and made it happen. Then she got a few people together to keep it going; then others came on board to take it to the next level. I was fortunate to become involved and when my turn as editor came, I had my own vision of what I thought would improve the quality of the journal, and I feel like we brought the journal to a point where the Barneys can raise the bar and improve it even further. I also hope the journal will continue to have a high standard of academic and scholarly professionalism but also reflect faith—I hope that the contributors and their writings will always emphasize the faith aspect. I'm a firm believer that Mormon historians can produce objective scholarly history and at the same time include the element of faith.

In my own pursuit scholarly endeavors, I have attempted to interpret Mormon history "by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118) through what could simply be called Restoration eyes. And while I believe that nonbelieving historians have made wonderful contributions in the field of Mormon history, I am of the opinion that the best scholarship in Mormon history has been and will continue to be produced by believing Latter-day Saint historians and writers—those on the inside who understand the spiritual dimensions and workings of the Church and its leaders and members and who possess the gift of the Holy Ghost, which enables them to tap into the higher source of knowledge and truth, the truth that God possesses.

Some time ago, I was discussing with one of my colleagues in Religious Education about the incredible amount of historical scholarship and

literature that has been produced about the Latter-day Saints. To this, he said something quite profound. "Yes, much has been done," he remarked. "And yet, with all that has been done, what has been written is only a prelude. There is so much more to do." Truly there is "much more to do," much more to research, much more to write about. And the best in Mormon history is yet to be written. And I believe it will be written by believing Latter-day Saint scholars who will write through the lens of faith the ever-unfolding history of the Latter-day Saints. **RE**