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# The Challenge and Craft of Mormon Biography

Ronald W. Walker

And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, Thou knowest.

[Ezekiel 37:3]

Ezekiel saw a valley full of dry and lifeless forms, but with the promise of becoming. No doubt filled with mausoleums and alabaster statuary, its name is not given, though the prophet probably glimpsed the valley of Mormon biography. Lytton Strachey, whose verve and mood did so much to father modern biography, assaulted Victorian life-writing with similar metaphors, and his lamentation is not ill-fitting here. He wrote of “those two fat volumes with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, or design? They are as familiar as the cortege of the undertaker and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism.”<sup>1</sup>

During the past several months, with increasing exasperation and distemper, I have asked what possibly could have possessed me to assume this role. Like Henry Higgins, I am a “very gentle man, . . . the sort who never could, ever would let an insulting remark escape his lips.” Yet here I stand gracelessly impugning my mentors and betters. At the outset I acknowledge their talent and integrity, but that is not the larger problem. Biography is a demanding art form which rarely surrenders itself to excellence, and religious biography only escalates these odds.

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Ronald W. Walker is a senior research historian for the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History and an associate professor of history, Brigham Young University.

Parts of this paper were read at the April 1981 Mormon History Association Convention in Rexburg, Idaho, and the August 1981 Sunstone Theological Symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah.

<sup>1</sup>Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (New York: The Modern Library, 1918), p. *xiii*. While Mormon biography is largely ignored as a critical study, there are signs of growing interest. See James B. Allen, “Writing Mormon Biographies,” *World Conference on Records: Preserving Our Heritage*, Series 116 (August 1980): 1–16; and Davis Bitton, “Mormon Biography,” *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 4 (Winter 1981): 1–16.

My bleakness flows partially from my definition of biography. Carlyle used a similar debater's trick when, after demanding impossible standards, he held a well-written life was almost as rare as a well-spent one (prompting Andre Maurois to declare that the Scotsman thereby revealed himself to be "as much an optimist in his criticism as he was a pessimist in his ethics"<sup>2</sup>). To be sure, biography requires Merlin's alchemy. With deceptive simplicity the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as "the history of the lives of individual men [and presumably women], as a branch of literature." But these elements seldom mix. Few biographies have produced both the science of history and the creative illusions of literature to simulate accurately a human life. Fewer Mormon works have even tried.

On one hand the canons of history are overwhelming. Hot on the trail for additional Samuel Johnson source material, James Clifford tells of his delicate maneuvers which won his admittance to the cavernous vaults of London's Barclay Bank where he toiled with huge and dusty ledgers—all for what became a single sentence in his book.<sup>3</sup> Modern biography requires back-breaking research with the impossible aim of comprehensiveness, and then it is expected to speak without mealy-mouthing or dissimulation. At least during an initial stage, the life-writer will assume an adversary relationship with his materials. "The biographer does not trust his witnesses, living or dead," one critic has written. "He may drip with the milk of human kindness, believe everything that his wife and his friends and his children tell him, enjoy his neighbors and embrace the universe—but in the workshop he must be as ruthless as a board meeting smelling out embezzlement [and] as suspicious as a secret agent riding the Simplon-Orient express."<sup>4</sup>

To history's touchstones of thoroughness, candor, and tough-minded accuracy, the biographer adds the grace of art. A narrative flow cannot be created by simple-minded, beaverlike piling of facts. The life-writer should allow his research to suggest a controlling point of view, passion, or insight, which must be arrived at independently of any preconception. Then as the narrative is written, it can be shaped, paced, and perhaps rearranged through flashback. A subject's inner thoughts might be probed by reverie, by use of the subjunctive mood, or by psychological montage. Scene, description,

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<sup>2</sup>Andre Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, trans. Sidney Castle Roberts (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939), p. 204.

<sup>3</sup>James L. Clifford, *From Puzzles to Portraits: Problems of a Literary Biographer*, John W. Harrelson Lectures (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), pp. 62-64.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965), pp. 22-23.

density of detail, idiom, and even authentically obtained dialogue may create the illusion of life. But if the modern biographer apes the novelist and dramatist, his purposes are dissimilar. Paul Murray Kendall has pointed out that these older literary arts “seek to evoke reality from illusion,” but “biography hopes to fasten illusion upon reality, to elicit, from the coldness of paper, the warmth of a life being lived.”<sup>5</sup>

This twentieth century amalgam of history and literature has produced unprecedented biography both in terms of quality and numbers and has led some critics to declare that the art form now deserves literary attention as a distinct *genre*. But there have been unhappy results also. The novelist-working-as-biographer, used to the freedom of unrestricted imagination, has found historical facts to be vexing and at times irrelevant. “When Livy said he would have made Pompey win the battle of Pharsalia if the turn of the sentence required it,” Strachey held, “he was not talking utter nonsense, but simply expressing an important truth in a highly paradoxical way—that the first duty of a historian is to be an artist.”<sup>6</sup> Strachey was speaking autobiographically, for he frequently allowed the artist within him to overwhelm the historian. However brilliant his prose and, subsequently, the writing of those who have followed him (some even fictionalizing to the point of inventing scene and dialogue), the inevitable result is ersatz biography. For when a life-writer reaches beyond his materials, he destroys the dramatic veracity unique to his mode. “The value of every story,” Dr. Johnson lectured on the need for verisimilitude, “depends on its being true . . . ; if it be false, it is a picture of nothing.”<sup>7</sup> In biography, truthfulness, or sticking with “the facts and nothing but the facts,” is a basic and preeminent law.

There is yet another quality of life-writing potentially more trying, even exasperating, to Mormons and the religious-minded. Einhard suggested it in his *Charlemagne*. “Here you have a book containing the life of that great and glorious man,” the monk prefaced his volume over eleven centuries ago. “There is nothing for you to wonder at or admire except his deeds.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of heavy-handed didacticism, institutional glorification, or religious myth-making, Einhard and his modern successors write about human life as it actually was lived. Their subjects are fallible individuals—

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Cited in John A. Garraty, *The Nature of Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 122.

<sup>7</sup>James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hall, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 2:433.

<sup>8</sup>A. J. Grant, ed. and trans., *Early Lives of Charlemagne by Eginhard and the Monk of St. Gall* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966), p. 6.

unfathomable in complexity and contradiction, at times torn with tension, pulled periodically heavenward or downward by what Faust described as the two souls working within his breast. Biography understands that men grow and atrophy, that virtue to have any meaning must be tested.

Such human realism requires the life-writer to paint, as Oliver Cromwell demanded of his own portraitist, "warts and all." This is not a prescription for voyeurism or debunking—as poet Stephen Spender reminds, "Warts are not the same as intestines."<sup>9</sup> Still, a modern audience cannot be satisfied by cardboard, one-dimensional personality. Unless the character is portrayed with some depth, the audience can have no empathy for him. "If nothing but the bright side of characters should be shewn," to quote again Dr. Johnson, who remains one of biography's most astute critics, "we should sit down in despondency, and think it utterly impossible to imitate them in *any thing*."<sup>10</sup>

The accurate portrayal of human personality is not easily achieved. Pressures constantly weigh upon biography to depart from this primary role and instead serve as commemoration or homily. In each case the temptation to tamper with evidence or retouch a portrait is almost beyond the power to withstand if an author is working for hire. Today, outright prevarication is infrequent; but by selectivity, arrangement, and the use of emphasis, a more satisfactory or useful character can be created. The resulting biography usually will correspond to a preconceived view, with occasional foibles squeezed into the text to render apparent balance and truthfulness. "I would rather be a dog and bay at the moon," American biographer Henry S. Randall disparagingly said over a century ago, "than write in that sickly, silly, adulatory, mutual-admiration-society, mutual scratch-back, tickle-me-Billy-&-I'll-tickle-you-Billy spirit in which most of our American biographies have been written."<sup>11</sup> Similar results occur when biography attempts to evangelize. Fervid passions not only distort personality but often refocus a book into something which is no longer biography. The religious movement or philosophy replaces the subject-person at center stage, and whatever is deleterious to the higher cause is screened from view.

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<sup>9</sup>Stephen Spender, "How Much Should a Biographer Tell?" *Saturday Review*, 25 January 1964, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup>Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 4:53.

<sup>11</sup>Cited in Garraty, *Nature of Biography*, p. 173. Randall's experiences with the Jefferson family, which prompted the quotation, are described in F. J. and F. W. Klingberg, eds., *The Correspondence of Henry Stephens Randall and Hugh Blair Grigsby* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), pp. 15, 65, 110–11.

This warping of human emotion led English biographer Harold Nicholson to lay down this primary rule: "So long as the intellect is undisturbed by emotion you have good biography. The moment, however, that any emotion (such as reverence, affection, ethical desires, religious belief) intrudes . . . , that biography is doomed."<sup>12</sup> No doubt the antireligion of Sir Harold's time prompted him to overstate things—it is difficult to imagine any intellect sanitized completely from emotion, whether religious or skeptical in its variety. Our present generation understands the need for voice and perspective; and a reverential, affectionate, and even religious view, if tempered with openness, scholarly detachment, and a gentle narrative hand, can produce fine biography. Yet, Nicholson's verdict largely stands. Religionists and religious times do not do well at life-writing. The religiously inclined Medieval and Victorian periods produced hagiography and commemoration which by vigorously sandpapering personality created an endless shelf of stylized and faceless figurines. Their blandness, impeccability, and consequent lack of humanity stand in contrast with the flesh and blood of good biography.

## II

Biography has limitless variety—like the men and women it describes. We have sketched but one strain, an ideal hybrid that might be called "narrative-biography," which has history (science), literature (art), and human realism as its three primary qualities. Strachey and the twenties had a hand in creating it by introducing into biography wit and fancy. (In 1918 a British warden was disturbed by the uproarious glee of a prisoner—it was the pacifist, Bertrand Russell, relishing his first introduction to *Eminent Victorians*.) Serious-minded historians made the next advance, aware of the supercilious, contrived and at times unfair techniques of the debunkers yet also cognizant of their literary flourishes. This twentieth-century mixing of literati and historians has produced a wide spectrum of biography—from the historical novel at one extreme to the dry-boned catalogue of biographical facts on the other. Somewhere in the middle lies narrative-biography.

Over a half dozen Mormon biographers have produced works at various points on the history–literature continuum—but few if any at the solid center. Samuel Taylor's portraits of his father and

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<sup>12</sup>Harold Nicholson, *The Development of English Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928), p. 110.

grandfather, the fictionalized *Family Kingdom* [John W. Taylor] (1951) and the more history-minded *The Kingdom or Nothing: The Life of John Taylor, Militant Mormon* (1976), exhibit the cares and techniques of the novelist. In contrast, academic-scholarly books are more numerous. Leonard Arrington's *Charles C. Rich: Mormon General and Western Frontiersman* (1974) and *From Quaker to Latter-day Saint: Bishop Edwin D. Woolley* (1976); Juanita Brooks's *John Doyle Lee: Zealot—Pioneer Builder—Scapegoat* (1962); Donna Hill's *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (1977); Stanley B. Kimball's *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (1981); and Karl Larson's *Erastus Snow: The Life of a Missionary and Pioneer for the Early Mormon Church* (1971) are examples of solidly (sometimes stolidly) undertaken research. (Larson's verbosity is fitting given the legendary discursiveness of Snow's sermonizing.) Nearer the middle, combining narrative talent with able but controversial research, are Harold Schindler's *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* (1966) and Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (1945). Although its focus is on the Mormon periphery, Frank Fox's recent *J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years* (1980) also agreeably combines history and fine writing.

Using the criteria of science and literature, these books represent some of the best of Mormon biography. Obviously, LDS life-writing is a product of the present generation, reflects a strong nineteenth-century, male, Church-leader bias, and is very much tilted toward the writing by historians. It is possible, however, that Samuel Taylor may yet play a Strachean role, both in forcing an increased literary consciousness and in setting a precedent for mixing "facts" and "poetry" into a blend which seems neither.<sup>13</sup>

Taylor is not alone. Much of the best-written and researched Mormon biography receives lower marks when judged by the third touchstone in life-writing, the question of truth. Pilate ironically asked of its nature and then turned aside without a response. "Perhaps he did well to make a joke of it," Rupert Hughes, a seasoned biographical campaigner of the twenties and thirties acknowledged, "since, if he had stayed for an answer, he would be staying yet."<sup>14</sup> Certainly the first generation of Mormon biographers would not have helped much. Typified by Edward Tullidge, George Q. Cannon, Matthias Cowley, and Bryant S. Hinckley, they chiseled their heroes

<sup>13</sup>The phrasing and astute critique are those of Robert B. Flanders, "Review of *Nightfall at Nauvoo*," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action* 2 (Winter 1972): 393-96. While a review of one of Taylor's historical novels, Flanders's comment seems equally apropos to Taylor's biographies. For Taylor's reply, see *ibid.*, 3 (Fall 1972): 62-63.

<sup>14</sup>Rupert Hughes, "Pitfalls of the Biographer," *Pacific Historical Review* 2 (March 1933): 2.

to be demigods—truth lay in the unfolding of social and religious causes in which the actors played a larger than human role. The very things which biographically matter most, like the Victorians' exposed ankle, were thought better unseen: personality, psychology, physiology and health, sexuality, religious striving, and human relationships, especially among Church leaders and family members. These taboos were not evenly applied, but clearly the closer an LDS subject-character was to the locus of power the less the likelihood of careful probing. Early Mormon biography provided a helpful point of departure for further research, but its characters were as heavily shrouded by the mists of darkness as those of Lehi's dream.<sup>15</sup>

Well-intentioned obscurantism continues in Mormon biography, though today with a softer hand and subtler technique. Some authors meet the issue head-on. "After some reflection, personalities, hundreds of which have entered my life, have been almost entirely omitted," Apostle John A. Widtsoe prefaced his autobiography. "If mentioned, comments would probably follow. That might hurt the feelings of some."<sup>16</sup> Equally forthright is Richard Poll, whose recent volume on Howard J. Stoddard is one of the best of the commemorative books. This biography "accents the positive," Poll unblushingly admits, "but the reader will have no difficulty discovering why Howard Stoddard was a controversial figure."<sup>17</sup> More ominously, however, reticence is implicitly conveyed by the selectivity of facts or by the lack of balance. Truman Madsen's *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (1980) is in many ways artful and courageous. Recorded are Roberts's early struggles with alcohol (it "would not only beat him to his knees but to his elbows and chin"), his well-intentioned but maladroit attempts at husbandhood and fatherhood, and his unremitting cycles of pugnacity and reconciliation. Madsen rightly subordinates these tendencies to Roberts's strengths. Yet the feeling is inescapable that the information of several "evil-bearing" footnotes belong in the text,

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<sup>15</sup>George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor, 1888); Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff . . . History of His Life and Labors . . .* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1909); Bryant S. Hinckley, *Heber J. Grant: Highlights in the Life of a Great Leader* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1951); Bryant S. Hinckley, *Brian Stringham and His People* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1949); Bryant S. Hinckley, *Daniel Hanmer Wells and Events of His Time* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1942); Edward W. Tullidge, *Life of Brigham Young; or, Utah and Her Founders* (New York: n.p., 1876); Edward W. Tullidge, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (New York: n.p., 1878); Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: n.p., 1877).

<sup>16</sup>John A. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1952), p. viii.

<sup>17</sup>Richard D. Poll, *Howard J. Stoddard: Founder, Michigan National Bank* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1980), p. vii.



that some nonchalant and understated sentences should actually be paragraphs, and that likewise a few paragraphs could be transformed with advantage into chapters. The unfortunate result is an undercurrent of defensiveness which prevents a good book from becoming something of a classic.<sup>18</sup>

Madsen is representative of a general tendency. Many conscientious LDS biographers are solicitous of the “art of telling,” that is, how they can place important and disturbing facts into the record without giving offense. Their byword: “Anything may be said if said rightly.” And while a few stylists such as John Henry Evans and Leonard Arrington have managed to balance truth with fine phrasing, the less skillful and less knowledgeable have generally fumbled the act. Their caution and sleight of hand produce a simple and harmonious portrait where simplicity and harmony often are out of place. The real Brigham Young, for example, will not be found by neatly counterposing his strengths and weaknesses and seeking within him some kind of common denominator of behavior. Like that of many men, the edges of Young’s personality cannot be smoothed. His complexity and incongruity should be frankly acknowledged.

Mormon biography lacks the telling anecdote, the offhand comment, the characteristic trivia that great biographers have seized upon to reveal their subjects. It might be the excited platform style of an introverted Daniel Wells—struggling to control his flinging arms as they move perilously close to the scriptures stacked beside him on the podium. Or it could be the self-confident Charles Nibley cracking a salty joke as he lay dying. What could be more descriptive of Brother Brigham than his motto: “I’ve got the grit in me to do it”? And what better way to summarize the saintly and other-worldly life of Wilford Woodruff than by speaking of his favorite hymn: “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”? This sense of detail and anecdote is not a part of our tradition, partly because of the failure of art but more largely because of a hesitancy to penetrate the inner man.<sup>19</sup>

The bland quality of Mormon biography—its spirit of understatement, harmony, and circumspection—is explained only partly by the didactic and commemorative tendency of religious literature. Biography conforms as closely to its *Zeitgeist* as any other art form,

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<sup>18</sup>Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), pp. 70, 254, 273, and 275.

<sup>19</sup>Wells: Heber J. Grant to Hannah C. Wells, 25 February 1902, Letterpress Copybook, 35:55, Heber J. Grant Papers, Library-Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter cited as Church Archives). Young: John Taylor, sermon, 1 November 1857, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1855–1886), 6:18. Woodruff: Heber J. Grant to Ed [?] H. Snow, 22 January 1915, Letterpress Copybook, 50:606–607, Church Archives. Nibley: Heber J. Grant to W. W. Wilson, 14 December 1931, Letterpress Copybook, 69:274, Church Archives.

and the spirit of the LDS times has understandably been defensive. The Saints have been a persecuted and persecuted-minded people, and while possessed with a towering and unsettling sense of destiny, they are only now emerging from their insecure and intellectually adolescent world. Consequently, they have enjoyed the assurance of a heroic biography, with clean lines, strong contrasts, and flattering hues.

The Mormon concern with genealogy and family history has increased this impulse. Mr. Everyman, in this case, Mr. Every Family, has picked up a pen or sat at the typewriter. "This is amateur history, basically chronicle and vignette, not interpretation," historian Mark Leone observed. "Its skeleton is kinship, not politics or economics, and it is unreservedly uncritical."<sup>20</sup> Besides fostering inexacting standards, family history by building upon the Mormons' already strong sense of family and tradition has promoted a feeling of proprietary guardianship about the past. The result is the cramping of the already confined atmosphere.

Despite these inhibiting conditions, there are signs of growing candor. Perhaps Pilate should have paused after all. John Henry Evans's *Joseph Smith, an American Prophet* (1933) spoke with remarkable detachment for its time, but its promise only lately has been realized. Edward and Andrew Kimball's *Spencer W. Kimball* (1977) and Caroline Eyring Miner and Edward Kimball's *Camilla: A Biography of Camilla Eyring Kimball* (1980) cast Mormondom's "first brother and sister" into the texture of real life. Here are struggling personality, the depiction of genuine emotion, and homely details which are at times stark (during President Kimball's subdural hematoma operation "the pressure [on his skull] was so great that fluid spurted out two feet").<sup>21</sup> More scholarly but equally revealing is Fox's treatment of J. Reuben Clark, which probably owes a large debt to its sponsor. "Any biographer of President Clark must write the truth about him," penned an insistent Marion G. Romney, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, in the foreword.

To tell more or less than the truth would violate a governing principle in his life. When I first met with those who are writing his biography, I explained that I did not want them to produce a mere collection of uplifting experiences about President Clark. . . . I wanted a biography of the man himself, as he was, written with the same kind of courage, honesty, and frankness that J. Reuben Clark himself would have shown.

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<sup>20</sup>Mark P. Leone, *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 194.

<sup>21</sup>Caroline Eyring Miner and Edward L. Kimball, *Camilla: A Biography of Camilla Eyring Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980), p. 203.

An account of his life should tell of the decisions and indecisions, sorrows and joys, regrets and aspirations, reverses and accomplishments, and, above all, his constant striving.<sup>22</sup>

These words may be inscribed and immortalized as the Mormon biographer's credo.

### III

As LDS biography matures in research, technique, and realism, it will confront additional challenges. The massive bulk of today's manuscript collections, once a life-writer's fondest reverie, has become an illusory nightmare—an embarrassment of riches. The Joseph Smith material is stored in the LDS Library–Archives in six boxes occupying several feet of shelving. In contrast, Heber J. Grant's papers require almost two hundred boxes and one hundred linear feet—while the three-times-larger David O. McKay collection would run the length of a football field.<sup>23</sup> In 1924 Morris Werner was granted access to the Brigham Young papers, an intermediate-sized collection, and, like at least one other subsequent Brigham Young biographer, decided he could do very well without it.<sup>24</sup> The question increasingly looms whether a single biographer can begin to master the sources before him.

But try he must. LDS biography is filled with a second or third tier of books, perhaps best uncited, that have little to recommend them except their saleability. Often chapbook in size, slapdash in preparation, and abetted by tolerant publishing standards, these books have hardly a speaking acquaintance with their subjects. Within a few pages a recent publication imaginatively placed the hero's mother at his father's funeral (she was home critically ill), miscounted his siblings, created his father's estate largely out of fancy, and failed to report his hero's subsequent mental and physical collapse. Classic biography has often been achieved by writers who knew their subject personally and intimately. But for most, only interminable digging in the historical trenches will do, a labor one biographer, Eleanor

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<sup>22</sup>Marion G. Romney in Frank W. Fox, *J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Company and Brigham Young University Press, 1980), p. xi.

<sup>23</sup>I am indebted to Jeffrey O. Johnson of the Church Archives, who undertook an informal survey of some of the principal Mormon and Mormon-related manuscript collections. His computations are in linear feet. Church Archives: Joseph F. Smith, 50 feet; Hugh B. Brown, 50 feet; Henry D. Moyle, 50 feet; Brigham Young, 80 feet; Heber J. Grant, 100 feet; Joseph Fielding Smith, 50 feet; John A. Widtsoe, 140 feet; and David O. McKay, 320 feet. University of Utah: Sherman Lloyd, 65 feet; George Albert Smith, 85 feet; and Frank Moss, 380 feet. Brigham Young University: Reed Smoot, 80 feet; J. Reuben Clark, Jr., 250 feet; and Wallace F. Bennett, 500 feet.

<sup>24</sup>Heber J. Grant Diary, 19 May 1924, p. 129, typescript, Church Archives.

Ruggles, estimated to be at least two years before the subject-character “becomes alive.”<sup>25</sup> Then actual writing might commence.

Even as he searches into the behemoth manuscript collections now at hand, the biographer has never been so unsure of himself. Non-Mormon writers no longer ask “How much can be told?” but the still more perplexing question, “How much in fact can be known?”<sup>26</sup> The problem lies not in establishing a chronicle but in grasping the intimacy of a life in its totality, sensing the interior and sometimes the hidded aspects of a career. Dostoevsky’s observation in *Notes from Underground* still pertains: “In the reminiscences of every man there are some things that he does not reveal to anyone except possibly to friends. Then there are some that he will not even reveal to friends, but only to himself, and even so in secret. But finally there are some that a man is afraid to reveal even to himself.”<sup>27</sup>

Fortunately, the life-writer is not left empty-handed in his quest. “All sorts of keys to human behavior have been handed to the biographer,” Paul Murray Kendall observed, “which, it is true, he has sometimes used to open the wrong door, or has thrown away, or has played with like a small boy, uttering squeals of delight.”<sup>28</sup> With Marxists vying with Freudians, and preachers with philosophers, the biographer asks which key he should grasp—with Mormons usually grasping none at all. Brodie’s study of Joseph Smith, the primary exception, was explicitly psychoanalytical, but her era which vaunted technical analysis within biography has largely given way. It is difficult enough to pronounce a diagnosis with the patient emitting a stream of consciousness on the couch without being a biographer separated from a subject by time and distance. Nevertheless, the twentieth century speaks of defense mechanisms, inferiority complexes, repressions, rationalizations, and sublimations, and these insights have an important and unfulfilled role in Mormon biography. James Clifford’s advice is probably best: “Be sensitive to possible psychological quirks of character, and give all of the relevant evidence, but make no attempts at technical analysis.”<sup>29</sup> And a further matter of advice: Since a biographer often interprets his subject in his own image or at least as a reflection of his own concerns, “the first method

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<sup>25</sup>Garraty, *Nature of Biography*, pp. 24–25, 215. Examples of classic biography by intimates are Einhard’s *Charlemagne*, Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters*, Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, and Ernest Jones’s *Life of Sigmund Freud*.

<sup>26</sup>Alan Shelston, *Biography* (London: Methuen & Company, 1977), pp. 8–9.

<sup>27</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, ed. Robert G. Durgy and trans. Serge Shishkoff (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), pp. 37–38.

<sup>28</sup>Kendall, *Art of Biography*, p. 116.

<sup>29</sup>Clifford, *From Portraits to Puzzles*, p. 131.

of modern biography . . . is self-analysis.”<sup>30</sup> By seeking to understand his personal motivation in subject, thesis, and fact selection, in short, by psychoanalyzing self, the author may avoid distortions in interpretation. Had she so analyzed herself, Brodie might have softened her portrait of Joseph Smith and perhaps those of her other biographical subjects as well.

Other weapons in the modern biographer’s armory could be used to advantage. Remembering Tolstoy’s warning that Napoleon did not lose the battle of Borodino simply because of a head cold, Mormon biography could make use of an infirmary. The medical history of LDS Presidents, in fact, is largely unexplored—a startling omission since biographers must judge the contributions of these men during their declining and disease-prone years. Could the elderly John Taylor’s irascibility and inconsistency be attributed in part to his final (and largely unknown) disease? Too, the life-writer might seek personality clues from less apparent sources. Handwriting analysis no doubt would reveal much about President Grant’s moods, as his penmanship widely varied from a careful Spencerian script to a wild scrawling as during the crisis-ridden Panic of 1893. And if a biography is ever undertaken of that brilliant scoundrel Frank Cannon, content analysis of *Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (officially authored by his father, George Q. Cannon, but in part ghosted by Frank) might provide interesting glimpses of the father-son relationship as well as the latter’s early religious convictions.

But of all the challenges and opportunities facing the LDS biographer, none is as tormenting as how he should treat his own religious faith—if at all. While richly variegated, the fabric of most modern biography is decidedly secular, nonjudgmental, and more than faintly skeptical. Can a religiously committed biographer write against this current, exploring what one LDS scholar described as “the complexities of the God-man partnership”?<sup>31</sup> Or must he stay his hand, concealing as best he can his culture’s values and expectations?

At stake is the question of “faithful biography.” The phrase is a contradiction in terms if “faithful” is taken to mean gilding the lily, miracle mongering, tracing grand theological designs, ignoring historical context, or supplanting characterization with religious ends and emotions. These practices may have their place but not within the modest habitation of biography. Here characters must have their

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<sup>30</sup>Robert Gittings, *The Nature of Biography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), pp. 42–43.

<sup>31</sup>Douglas F. Tobler, “Sacred and Profane: Writing Mormon History in a Secular Age,” unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, 1978, Logan, Utah.

feet firmly planted upon the earth, even if their faces are turned heavenward.

Still, religious values have a place. There is no reason why an author should be less a Christian because of his vocation. After all, patience, diligence, humility, charity, indeed godliness are virtues which admirably serve the biographer's craft. They can also provide the life-writer with empathy for a religiously inclined subject. Too often the reverse is true. The secular writer caricatures, disclaims, or simply ignores religious striving and mystic experience. Marvin Hill has shown this flaw to be present in the seminal work of Brodie; and lesser biographers, some with an ostensible Mormon perspective, are as culpable.<sup>32</sup> The resulting biographical sin is as deadly as the bowdlerism of the misguided religionist.

Richard Bushman has noted that "virtually everyone who has shown the 'human side' of the Church and its leaders has believed the enterprise was strictly human." Of course this need not be so. Bushman suggests that historians are needed "who will mourn the failings of the Saints out of honor for God instead of relishing the warts because they show the Church was earthbound after all."<sup>33</sup> Perhaps a clever biographer will manage this highly sophisticated task, though arguing God's cause, or even mourning in his behalf, is filled with hagiographic dangers. Other biographers may take a safer course. They will wish to give the transcendent its proper due, and while providing historical context for such phenomena, they will allow the biographical subject and his peers largely to speak for themselves. Judgment of such an event will be left to those with spiritual eyes to see, with readers, not authors, mourning God's cause. Such an unobtrusive and unassuming manner may offend many. Gone will be the thunderous undulations of the nineteenth-century stylist who with Olympian sureness described the pattern of God's hand. Left to the biographer is a more discrete task, freer from conceit and hubris, of describing earthly events as a caring mortal fully aware of his own fallibility.

Even on this limited stage, the biographer has scope for his virtuosity. For life-writing is the stage of everyday life, where the abstract forces of the social scientist, philosopher, and theologian come to center in the existence of a human being. If a microcosm, biography also celebrates human life. It declares with Shakespeare

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<sup>32</sup>Marvin S. Hill, "Brodie Revisited: A Reappraisal," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7 (Winter 1972): 72-85 and "Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of *No Man Knows My History*," *Church History* 43 (March 1974): 78-96.

<sup>33</sup>Richard L. Bushman, "Faithful History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Winter 1969): 18.

“What a piece of work is a man” and upholds the life of any individual to be of worth—and worthy of preservation. To the religious-minded, it may even suggest the pattern of mankind’s eternal struggle. For these reasons it retains tremendous appeal. That is why every public library has long rows of shelves of biography and why, at least in part, the Kimball biographies have become an LDS marketing phenomena and Schindler’s *Rockwell* remains the all-time best seller at the University of Utah Press.

Biography is a limited and cumbersome craft. Its heroes are recreated imperfectly. Its truths speak in a more precise yet modest voice than those of literature. But even within this limited realm, Mormon biography has fallen short. Only recently has it begun to fuse investigation, technique, and openness—the three essentials of biography—and make use of the tools of the social sciences. Yet because of the maturing confidence of LDS culture and because of biography’s continuing appeal, the visionary hope remains of a more substantial and artistic achievement.