ON WRITING LATTER-DAY SAINT HISTORY

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I suppose we should start out by recognizing why the study of LDS
history is important. Let me suggest four reasons.

First, the study and writing of our history will help us better
understand the Lord. It will tell us more about the settings and circumstances of the revelations; it will provide examples of how the Lord works through men and women, and of what He expects of us; it will tell us more about the progress and problems of the Church and its membership and how and why these have taken place.

Second, the study and writing of history will help to strengthen Church unity by building in all of us a sense of commonality and pride in our past. It will give us a sense of who we are, our cultural and spiritual roots, as well as our biological and social roots. It will give us a sense of appreciation for our LDS ancestors. Studying Church history is like studying the scriptures; it gives us a society against which to compare or contrast our own. We can compare ourselves with other cultures, but it is not the same as looking at people who have lived with the Restored Gospel. The Jews were a covenant people and they made mistakes. The Nephites and Lamanites were a covenant people and they made mistakes. Our LDS ancestors were a covenant people; and they made mistakes. We have the advantage of being a covenant people who follow all of these. We can learn from their successes and failures. This will help us see our problems in perspective and remind us to be humble about our own achievements.

Third, it will help give us a knowledge of things as they were so that we can be informed when discussing our religion with others. It will give us accurate information to counter distorted histories and misunderstandings about the Church; it will provide accurate information to counter the arguments of apostates and others on the border of apostasy. In short, it will help us be informed as we discuss the Restoration with nonmembers and business associates.

And fourth, we do history because the Lord commands it. On April 6, 1830, the very day the Church was organized in this dispensation, the Lord commanded the Prophet Joseph Smith to arrange for the keeping of a record of the Church's history. (D & C 21:1) Oliver Cowdery was appointed to do this, and thus served as the first Church Historian and Recorder. Eleven months later, on March 8, 1831, John Whitmer was commanded, by revelation, to "write and keep a regular history" of the Church. (D & C 47:1) In a later revelation, Elder Whitmer was instructed to "continue in writing and making a history of all the important things which he shall observe and know concerning my church." (D & C 69:1) Other revelations attest to the Lord's insistence that the documents of the Church be preserved and that histories be written. With the encouragement of the prophets, the Church has fully complied with these commandments. From Oliver Cowdery's first history, later published in the Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate, to the most recent works of the General Authorities, the History Division of the Church, and others, Latter-day Saint historians have prepared and published histories of events and personalities important to the Church in each stage of its development.
To this record of following the Lord’s admonitions we have now the word of our Prophet that we should also keep our personal and family histories. These instructions apply to all members, in whatever part of the world they reside and under whatever government they make their living. Church history is a record of our brotherhood and sisterhood in Jesus Christ—a history which brings us home to an understanding of the Lord’s Kingdom and how we fit into it.

When the Historical Department of the Church was organized in 1972, we looked over our written history and determined areas that had been neglected and needed further attention, and we realized very quickly that we should give encouragement to studies of ethnic groups and their experiences; studies of local leaders; studies of ordinary men, women, and family groups; studies of Latter-day Saints in their local settings; and studies of the workings of Church programs at the local level.

Now I am going to suggest something that may seem to be heretical—something that seems on the face of it to be ridiculous. I’m going to suggest that it is more important to study and write local history than it is to study and write general history. What I am suggesting is that it is more important, for you, at any rate, to do Hawaiian history than general American history; New Zealand history rather than history of the British Commonwealth; and so on.

It is more important to do stake and ward history than general Church history.

It is more important to do the history of your family than of the history of the family in general.

As I say, this seems ridiculous, but I firmly believe that one who concentrates on Hawaii’s history can make more progress toward understanding the aspirations, experiences, and achievements of mankind than if he has elected to study the history of the United States.

Only at the local level can the historian come to grips with reality its most elemental forms, and more intimately than at any other level of space organization. Too much history has been written from above, from the important documents, from the ivory towers as it were. It needs to come up from the grass roots, up from where the people live. Many of the significant administrative steps the Church has taken had their beginnings at the grass-roots level. Local innovations and suggestions were brought to the attention of Church leaders, who then felt inspired to use them as the basis for Churchwide programs. While many Church members have felt that there was little room for individual initiative in a Church directed by God and prophets at its head, the most positive achievement has taken place when Church members did not wait to be "commanded in all things," but did "many things of their own free will (D & C 58:26-29)."

Much of what we now have in many Churchwide programs began at the initiative of individual Church members: Priesthood Welfare Program; Primary; Young Women’s program; Relief Society; hosting of Fast Day on Sunday; and so on.

As our civilization matures, as the Church grows, the saga of the locality, of the ward and stake and region, and of the individual Saint as on greater significance. Moreover, our general Church history is
often too abstract and impersonal. When history comes up from the grass roots, up from where the people live and worship, the individual can identify personally with the general Church experience.

As to sources of Pacific LDS history, we have already had papers by Agnes Conrad and Ken Baldridge, and had suggestions from several others who have been working in this area. Ward and stake records are in the LDS Archives in Salt Lake City. We have the diaries of many missionaries and others. Microfilm copies of many of these can be obtained for your archive. Don Johnson gave fine suggestions this morning as to work that needs to be done, and Joe Spurrier gave a splendid example this afternoon of how it can be done.

Let me offer a number of suggestions that might be helpful in compiling and writing the history of the Church in the Pacific.

First, give due importance to the work of the sisters. Let's not have histories that give lists of the bishops, but not lists of Relief Society presidents as well. Let's include descriptions of the activities of the women's organizations as well as those of the Priesthood. It is incorrect to start out with the notion that since men hold all the important policy-making positions, they are the ones who determine the course of events. Although the Priesthood may hold certain key leadership offices, the brethren are not exclusively responsible for everything that happens. We must avoid a male interpretation of Mormon history. Anyone who spends a substantial amount of time going through the materials in the Church Archives must gain a new appreciation of the important and indispensable role of women in the history of the Church—not to mention new insights into Church history resulting from viewing it through the eyes of women.

The historical studies of LDS women done thus far reveal them to be strong individuals with a tremendous variety of temperaments, talents, and sensitivities. Further biographical studies of these women will help our sisters in charting their own life without feeling constrained to mold themselves into existing stereotypes. Real models should be more useful than simply "ideals."

Second, in our writing we should give due emphasis to intellectual, social, and cultural accomplishments, as Ishmael Stagner did this afternoon in his film "Art, Culture, and the Gospel." There is a tendency for us to remember the tangible, the material, the visible, simply because we can see them and because they have had greater survival value. We have tended to measure the accomplishments of earlier members by such durable achievements as the construction of canals and dams, temples and meetinghouses, houses and cooperative stores. But our forebears also made contributions in thought, in poetry, in music, in games and dancing and recreation, in human relations, in education. These contributions are more difficult to discover and to trace, but they are nevertheless there, and we should be aware of them.

Third, in our writing we must acknowledge that not every program, not every organization, proceeded smoothly. This was illustrated by Lance Chase's talk this morning on the crisis of 1874. Our histories should make us aware of some of the problems, obstacles, objections, and difficulties. It would be especially instructive to know the particular problems of applying Church procedures and programs in the South Seas because of the differing cultural and social backgrounds of the people.

Fourth, we should give due attention to the so-called ordinary members of the Church. An ideal example of this was Carl Ponomoana's paper on his grandfather Opapo. We should be concerned with both the obscure and the famous, the deacons as well as the General Authorities. Actually, one
may get a more accurate reflection of the impact of the Gospel on the lives of members by studying the humble, the unambitious, the devoted ward worker. Well-known people, leaders, must necessarily preserve the image of their office by showing the world a mask. In doing so, they may conceal their real selves. They play the part that is expected for them, and with practice they learn to play it very well. This public performance may not always correspond with the man or woman within. They hold in their anger; they will not acknowledge their doubts and disappointments. The local scoutmaster, the ward primary president, the second counselor in the Elders Quorum, on the other hand, have far less need to create a personality to protect themselves from the world or to impress it. They are more often themselves. The “ordinary member” provides a richer field for understanding the functioning of the Church in the lives of people. The unexpected variety of people, the complexity and uncoached elements of their character, demonstrate the richness of the Gospel plan and the manner in which it can serve all men and women.

Fifth, we need, especially in biographical and family histories, to recognize the complexity of people. Some of this was alluded to in Eric Shumway’s luncheon address on the people of Tonga. We get a mistaken view of humanity by watching television shows. A half-hour show, an hour show, cannot develop full-rounded personality; the writer can exploit only one facet of a person’s character. And so he presents one person as compassionate, another as cruel, still another with the single motive of wanting more money, and a fourth who wants to bed every pretty girl he meets. But people are not that simple. The man who finds it hard to resist an opportunity to take advantage of a girl may be hard-working, honest, and kind to the unfortunate. The man who cannot resist an opportunity to make money may love his family, may be generous, and may have courage. A whole series of qualities, good and bad, may exist in the same person. And sometimes contradictory qualities. The historian is obligated to give some indication of this diversity, this complexity, this contradictory nature of historical persons. I am not suggesting anything that might serve to malign beloved ancestors or leaders. It is, of course, distressing to think that the composer of a beautiful song was a less than completely beautiful person, or that the author of a lovely poem may have been stingy and small. I’m just suggesting that we must acknowledge that everybody has weaknesses. If we are made conscious that people we respect had faults as well as achievements, we may come to believe that achievements may be possible for us even with our own defects.

My sixth point is that we should tell a straightforward story, not bog down the narrative with attempts to moralize. Mormon writers have a tendency to moralize. Maybe we got into that habit by having to give 2-1/ minute talks in Sunday School, or perhaps by hearing the constant moralizi of parents and seminary teachers and missionaries. The secret of good historical writing is to stick to the point and to cut whenever you can. There is a tendency for all of us, those who are new at it, to look upon our writing as something of a miracle that we should be able to put words on paper at all. When they are there, out of our own brain if not straight from heaven, we look upon them as sacred. We cannot bear to sacrifice one of them. The best historians, having cultivated the ability to write, have learned to cut with fortitude. Each of you, as you write, will hit upon a quotation, a thought, that seems so happy that to cut it is worse than having a tooth out. It is then that you must grit your teeth and accept the advice of another reader that you respect. If editorializing takes us away from the story we are trying to tell, it should be cut.
Finally, I hope you will, through your interviews and writing, convey the lovable spirit of Hawaiians and Pacific peoples: their faith, their sense of humor, their playfulness, their athletic prowess, their love of nature, their generosity, their practical intelligence and happy nature. Caucasian missionaries who return tell of this special spirit—and speak of it longingly, as if one cannot find this special spirit duplicated in the continental states. But we need, not just the reports of the so-called white missionaries, but the stories, the tales, the characterizations of the Pacific peoples themselves—illustrations from their own lives of this spirit. For this purpose we need interviews with bishops, Relief Society presidents, Sunday School teachers, and others. We do not have much in the Church Archives reflective of it, either historically or current.

I think of Solomona Piipiiliani. We don't know exactly when he was born—sometimes around 1800. This brother first received the gospel under George Q. Cannon in 1851 and was soon afterward ordained an Elder. He was a fluent speaker in his native tongue, a close and careful reasoner, a thorough scribe, and a conscientious man. He was among those who gathered to Palawai, on the island of Lanai, in 1854. When Lai was purchased in 1865 and established as a gathering place, he was among the first to gather and labored on that plantation. In 1879, his wife having died, he decided to emigrate to Utah, taking along his granddaughter. He acquired a home in the Salt Lake Nineteenth Ward and made a modest living. He went to the Endowment House to make his temple covenants and was the first Hawaiian to receive his endowments. When Iosepa in western Utah was established as a gathering place in 1889, he gathered there, obtained a city lot, built a home, and supplied it with the needed comforts. He managed to save enough to send for a grandson who stayed with him at Iosepa, his granddaughter having died. Over a forty-year period, he was a stalwart. He had a thorough knowledge of the Bible and the Book of Mormon, and made regular trips to the temple in Logan, Utah, to do temple work on behalf of his kindred dead. Finally, at about the ripe old age of 91, he died, still at Iosepa. He was described by President Joseph F. Smith, who spoke at his funeral, as one of the most worthy, faithful, and true-hearted Latter-day Saints he had ever known.

There must be dozens of others that we could say similarly important things about. One of the signs of vitality of the restored Gospel is its capacity to produce strong people—people of faith and commitment and talent. I think of Mele Vea, a native Tongan, who later lived in Fiji. (She goes by Mary Ashley.) She was baptized a member at 14 and became a woman of tenacious faith, a pioneer of the Church both in Tonga and Fiji. I think of Helen Sekaquaptewa, the great Hopi woman whose life is eloquently told in We and Mine; Faith Okawa Watabe, an American-born Japanese woman whose marriage linked her to the "pioneer" Watabe family of the Church's first real expansion into Japan; Lucile Bankhead, the faithful black member whose long wait for temple blessings was finally rewarded by the glorious announcement of June 9, 1978. Finally, there was Jonatana H. Napela, a Hawaiian judge in Lahaina, who met George Q. Cannon in 1851 and was written up by President Cannon. He was baptized and ordained an Elder, was a fine speaker and reasoner, a person of standing and influence in the community, a charming and intelligent man who helped the ministry in many ways, assisted with translating the Book of Mormon, healed the sick, and in other ways showed the spirit of Jesus.

Let me close by saying that we wish you well in all your endeavors. Offer also our facilities to help you to the extent we can. What you are proposing to do is important to you, to your wards and stakes and regions, and to the Church. May the Lord bless you in your efforts, and all of us who are engaged in similar endeavors.