

Richard Bushman's BYU Years

The Beginnings of an Influential Career

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The case can be made—and has been made¹—that Richard Lyman Bushman has been as influential as anyone in his generation in shaping the way that Latter-day Saints think about, write about, and talk about our shared history. His seminal books on Joseph Smith, his essays on historical philosophy, his two decades of mentoring graduate students every summer—all of these have had a real and discernible impact on Church publications and paradigms.

And his colleagues saw this coming. Brigham Young University history professor Marvin Hill wrote in a 1984 review of Bushman's *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* that “years from now Bushman’s work may be standard fare in Sunday school classes and seminars, for it is a voice of reason and of considerable persuasion on many difficult points.”²

1. See, for example, these assessments: “Editors’ Preface,” in *To Be Learned Is Good: Essays on Faith and Scholarship in Honor of Richard Lyman Bushman*, ed. J. Spencer Fluhman, Kathleen Flake, and Jed Woodworth (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2017), ix–xi; J. Spencer Fluhman, Steven C. Harper, and Jed Woodworth, “Mormonism in Cultural Context: Guest Editors’ Introduction,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 1–3; Grant Underwood’s introductory comments to Grant Underwood and others, “A Retrospective on the Scholarship of Richard Bushman,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 1–5; and Grant Wacker, “Reckoning with History: Richard Bushman, George Marsden, and the Art of Biography,” *Journal of Mormon History* 43, no. 2 (April 2017): 21–45.

2. Marvin S. Hill, “Richard L. Bushman—Scholar and Apologist,” *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 133.

Historians may indeed make poor prophets most of the time, but at least in this instance, Marvin Hill scored a memorable point for historians everywhere. He proved to be prophetic. The day he wrote about is here. Hill sensed that Bushman was doing something important, something potentially and uniquely impactful. “From the standpoint of the Church,” he wrote, “[*Joseph Smith and Beginnings of Mormonism*] may be the most important book of our time, for it boldly attempts to introduce new sources with their implicit challenges to faith in a way that can educate Latter-day Saints and not alienate.”³ What Hill wrote about *Joseph Smith and Beginnings of Mormonism* seems doubly true of Bushman’s 2005 full biography of Joseph Smith, *Rough Stone Rolling*, now almost twenty years on. Straight-line connections can be made from *Rough Stone Rolling* to the landmark publication of the Church’s new official history *Saints*—and to the Church’s *Come, Follow Me* curriculum.⁴ And this is just one example of his broad influence.

These are big claims—and there is a larger story to be told.⁵ But in the meantime, this article proposes something more modest. This article is interested in one piece—and a piece that may be underappreciated—of that larger story of the interplay between influence and credibility, and how credibility accrued in this case. It is interested in the first phase of Richard Bushman’s illustrious academic career, his decade on the faculty at Brigham Young University, his first university appointment. This article asks what we can see in Richard Bushman’s early career years at BYU that might point to what would follow later. What episodes and interactions from this time take on new significance knowing what we know now about what these episodes and interactions would portend?

3. Hill, “Richard L. Bushman—Scholar and Apologist,” 132–33.

4. See, for example, *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth: 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), chap. 1 n. 9; chap. 3 nn. 3, 26; chap. 4 n. 6; and so on. Among many others, see footnote 34 in chapter 20, “Do Not Cast Me Off,” *Saints*, 1:229; and compare Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 299–302, for the discussion of a fight between Joseph Smith and his younger brother William. Also compare, for example, the retelling of the Camp of Israel/Zion’s Camp episode in Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 249, and *Saints*, 1:201–3, and the hyperlinks embedded for this section of *Saints* in the *Come, Follow Me* curriculum for Doctrine and Covenants 102–5, scheduled for September 13–19, 2021, at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/come-follow-me-for-individuals-and-families-doctrine-and-covenants-2021/38>.

5. A volume on Richard Bushman is under contract to be published by the University of Illinois Press as part of the press’s *Introductions to Mormon Thought* series.

Key moments during Bushman's tenure at BYU reveal a young professor already fleshing out and expressing the ideas and approaches that would become characteristic of all of his work. BYU was an important first stop because of the school's unique mission and because of the way that mission resonated deeply with him.

Here is a sampling of those kinds of BYU moments that will appear in the narrative: University president Ernest Wilkinson asked Bushman to help in recruiting potential faculty members. Robert Thomas appointed Bushman as an associate director of BYU's still-new Honors Program. Bushman was also appointed to the university's speaker committee, charged with approving proposed speakers for campus assemblies. During his BYU years, Bushman participated in a Harvard seminar with the renowned Erik Erikson, which led to forays into psychohistory. And he taught a number of students who themselves would become important scholars in the field. (It is also worth noting that he published during those years several pieces in the pages of this very journal.⁶)

What emerges is a picture of a Richard Bushman who was thinking and writing about and advocating the kinds of positions that he would pursue at Boston, then Delaware, then Columbia, and beyond. And that is the central point. Bushman's consistency in the philosophical approach that he has advocated since his BYU days seems to be a factor in all of this that cannot be missed. BYU, and its mission to integrate heart and mind and faith and scholarship, offered the setting for Bushman to think through and practice a deeply held value that manifested itself as a primary intellectual—and religious—posture of his: *fearlessness*, a fearlessness born out of integrity—integrity as wholeness—and trust. The argument being made here is that this consistency has given his approach an authenticity, a testability, and an observability that have contributed to the persuasive power of this approach—and its permeating influence.

A Busy Decade

When Richard Bushman accepted a faculty job at Brigham Young University in 1960, it was a well-fitted match. Bushman had his sights set on BYU, and BYU—especially university president Ernest Wilkinson—had

6. See Richard L. Bushman, "Mormon Persecutions in Missouri, 1833," *BYU Studies* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1960): 11–20; and Bushman, "Inspired Constitution," *BYU Studies* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1962): 158–63.

sights set on Bushman.⁷ Wilkinson had been building BYU with dogged determination for a decade. Wilkinson would serve in his position for twenty years—he was just about halfway through his tenure when he recruited Bushman. By the end of those twenty years, Wilkinson had steered BYU through an increase in the student body by a factor of six—from some four thousand students to twenty-five thousand—and an increase in permanent buildings on campus by a factor of twenty.⁸ The growth that was taking place on the Provo campus was staggering. Wilkinson was also intent on bolstering the strength of the faculty. Hence, it was no surprise that a Latter-day Saint graduate student with Harvard credentials—Bushman earned his AB there in 1955 and ultimately finished his PhD in 1961—would stay squarely on Wilkinson’s radar.

It was a job prospect that fit Bushman’s hopes well too. He was keen on offering his services in the cause of educating Latter-day Saint young people. In fact, “only in working toward that end can I feel that I will make the maximum contribution toward the work of the Kingdom,” Bushman had written to Wilkinson in 1958, two years before finishing at Harvard. Bushman told Wilkinson that he counted himself among the “number of young Church scholars whose highest professional aspirations can only be fulfilled at the Y.”⁹ Wilkinson replied warmly, “I am happy to note that you are ultimately looking forward to being at this university. So are we.”¹⁰

But Bushman’s start at BYU came with an unexpected—and not entirely welcome—twist. He found out during the job-negotiation process that he was being hired to teach in the university’s College of Religious Instruction. As committed as he was to the BYU mission to blend religious and secular learning, Bushman was taken aback, to say the

7. See, for example, Ernest L. Wilkinson to Richard Bushman, June 27, 1955, MSS 2052, box 1, folder 13, Richard L. and Claudia L. Bushman Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah: “Dear Dick: I am delighted to know that you were the class orator for the graduating class this year.” Bushman’s response was telling: “The Latter-day Saint student group at Harvard watch with interest the growth of the BYU. I believe there are many of us who hope that eventually we can make a contribution to the Church University.” Bushman to Wilkinson, June 29, 1955, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

8. Figures are taken from Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 26; also Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 746.

9. Richard L. Bushman to Ernest L. Wilkinson, April 5, 1958, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

10. Ernest L. Wilkinson to Richard L. Bushman, April 10, 1958, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

least. He had expected to teach history, his field of training. What he later learned was that President Wilkinson was so intent on bringing Bushman to BYU that he had imposed something of his presidential prerogative to fast-track the hire. The College of Religious Instruction was more amenable than the History Department to this kind of administrative exceptionalism, and that meant Bushman would teach mostly religion classes with a couple of history classes to fill out his expected load.¹¹

This rocky start notwithstanding, Bushman tamped down his frustration and jumped in with enthusiasm. He may have felt underprepared to teach courses in religion on a college level without much advanced warning—he wrote to his friend and new department chair in Religious Instruction, Truman G. Madsen, that he felt more comfortable teaching American history than he did Latter-day Saint Church history¹²—but that did not mean Bushman was anything but keenly interested in religion. In fact, the intersections of religion and history in society had always been at the forefront of his interests at Harvard. Upon returning to school after two years of missionary service in the New England States Mission, Bushman chaired a Harvard-commissioned student committee that wrote a report on the state of religion at the university;¹³ he then wrote his senior honor's thesis on the Church's expulsion from Jackson County, Missouri; and only two years before joining the BYU faculty, he had written in his application for a Harvard graduate fellowship that “certain autobiographical facts partly explain my specialization within history. I am a Latter-day Saint who takes his religion seriously. Since our Church has grown up in the United States I am especially concerned to discover the meaning of our development in the American environment. This is a personal reason for specialization in American religious and social history. On a less parochial level”—and it is worth pausing here to note that this was a Richard Bushman who was already thinking bigger—“I am interested in the social and intellectual transformations that make personal faith in God seemingly more difficult today than, say, three hundred years ago. This last question has personal significance because I believe a deep reverence for life and the something beyond each individual which is also life is a beautiful and important attitude.

11. Richard L. Bushman, interview by the author, December 18, 2020. Bushman remembers feeling “absolutely furious” with Wilkinson at what he thought was “deceitful” in the way the job offer came.

12. See Richard L. Bushman to Truman G. Madsen, April 7, 1960, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

13. See *Religion at Harvard: A Harvard Student Council Report* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1956).

Formerly this reverence was comprehended by religious faith. My question is why this kind of reverence has declined and what has replaced it.”¹⁴ These were questions that motivated his life of scholarship and his life of faith, and he did not want to separate the two. As a Harvard freshman, he had already decided on the impossibility of living a life of mental compartmentalization. He wrote in his journal during that freshman year, as he reflected on his recent reading of Freud and his “intuitive perception . . . of the truthfulness of the gospel,” that “if I leave them in separate compartments they will pound at each other through the walls.”¹⁵

It almost goes without saying, then, that BYU’s stated aim of integrating the life of the mind and the life of the spirit spoke to Bushman and matched his own disposition and informed the classes he taught, whether in religious instruction or history. And there would be no compartmentalizing in his approach to his classes, either. In March 1960, as he contemplated the classes he would be teaching come fall term, he drafted a handwritten outline for one of his assigned courses, “Special Problems in L.D.S. Church History” (a graduate course). Bushman showed no signs of shying away from complex topics—“Polygamy,” “Mormonism and Masonry,” “Mountain Meadows and John D. Lee,” “Pearl of Great Price,” “Character of Joseph Smith,” and “Zion and the poor” were among the two dozen headings he listed.¹⁶

If the two history classes per semester that first year were meant to be something of an audition, Bushman won the part easily. Within two years, Bushman had moved full-time into the history department, no arm-twisting required.

Likewise, no matter the department, and no matter his assigned courses, Bushman cared about teaching as a craft. This was obvious from the get-go. He did not see students as a necessary but burdensome aspect of academic professional life. He was in this for the students. Early in his own college days, his career aspirations had shifted to education primarily because he remembered the impact of his high school principal on him; he knew what a good teacher could do for a student. After Bushman’s first year of teaching at BYU, he wrote an honest self-evaluation to the university’s academic vice president. He candidly admitted how

14. Richard L. Bushman, Application for the Samuel S. Fels Fellowship, February 6, 1958, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

15. Richard L. Bushman, Journal, May 28, 1950, box 16, folder 32, Bushman Papers.

16. See Bushman’s handwritten notes on the reverse of a letter from BYU academic vice president, Earl C. Crockett, to Richard L. Bushman, March 9, 1960, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

much he felt that he lacked as a teacher: “I was so discontented with my classroom techniques last year that I began discussing some problems with a few friends who were also relatively new.” He and several other young professors “met regularly, once a month or oftener, to share ideas in what became an informal seminar.” Bushman proposed participation for the group in a summer program focused on improving teaching.¹⁷

In all of this, assistant professor Richard Bushman manifested many of the qualities that colleagues and associates would see in him throughout his career: self-awareness, desire for improvement, planned course of action, thinking in collaborative terms, and naturally reaching out to colleagues. And he had experience with the benefits of fellowship opportunities—Richard and Claudia and their two young children had spent the 1958–59 school year in Europe on a Sheldon Fellowship from Harvard, during which he had extended time to read broadly in areas related to his dissertation.¹⁸ In line with these impulses, Bushman organized a BYU group application for summer 1962 to be in Bethel, Maine, with the National Training Laboratories for an intensive college-teaching seminar.¹⁹

Bushman may have been more self-conscious about his teaching than he should have been. A young Dean May—who would himself become a distinguished professor of Utah and Latter-day Saint history at the University of Utah—wrote a note to Bushman to say that Bushman’s 1961 class on intellectual history was “one of the two finest I have had in my undergraduate work.”²⁰ An anonymous student review questionnaire from those early years captured an expression of similar high praise: “If you don’t know History 170, nobody does. You have created an interest within me for history which I didn’t think was there.”²¹

17. From a draft of a letter from Richard L. Bushman to Earl Crockett, undated, box 1, folder 14, Bushman Papers. See also Richard L. Bushman to Douglas Bunker, February 3, 1962, and Bunker to Bushman, February 3, 1962, both in box 1, folder 14, Bushman Papers. Bunker was a training consultant at the National Training Laboratories, where Bushman hoped to secure a summer spot for his BYU team.

18. Any biographical project on Richard Bushman would be woefully incomplete without attention to his remarkable marriage to and partnership with Claudia Lauper Bushman. For a personal retelling of their courtship and early marriage, see Claudia L. Bushman, “Courtship,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2020): 204–11.

19. See “Bethel National Training Laboratories, 1962–1964,” box 1, folder 15, Bushman Papers.

20. Dean May to Richard L. Bushman, January 8, 1964, box 1, folder 18, Bushman Papers; see also May to Bushman, December 19, 1963, box 1, folder 16, Bushman Papers.

21. Evaluation sheet, box 1, folder 15, Bushman Papers.

It was more than just classroom teaching, too; Bushman was attuned to mentoring. That was obvious in the number of students over the years who asked him for letters of recommendation.²² (Dean May was the recipient of one of those Bushman endorsements—and to May's credit, he didn't mention his fond memories and high praise of Bushman's class until after Bushman had written the letter!) Bushman himself had benefited from mentors. One of his Harvard dissertation advisors, Oscar Handlin, alerted Bushman to a new fellowship opportunity at Brown University. It was a chance for a young scholar to do interdisciplinary work in a secondary field. So, after only three years at BYU, the Bushmans (now five of them) and their imported Volkswagen (another legacy of their year in Europe) were headed back to New England for a two-year fellowship in Providence.²³

Psychology was the natural choice for a secondary field for Bushman. As we've already seen, he had been reading Freud since his first year at Harvard. And Bushman's timing at Brown was fortuitous. Erik Erikson was offering a seminar at Harvard, and Bushman was drawn to the prospects of psychohistory represented in Erikson's acclaimed biography, *Young Man Luther*—only four years off the press at that time.²⁴

Bushman made the trip to Cambridge from Providence to ask Erikson if he could join the seminar. The meeting became something of a legend in Bushman lore. Bushman marveled at the famed psychologist's ability, almost effortlessly, to draw out of Bushman an unbroken stream of self-analysis. Bushman in turn found himself, almost involuntarily, confessing that he seemed to have this need to challenge all of his professors. When Bushman expressed his worry that he would inevitably do the same in a seminar with Erikson, the Harvard luminary placidly replied, "I feel perfectly safe in your hands."²⁵

Thus, every week for a semester, Bushman made the hour-plus trip from Brown to Harvard to study with Erikson. Bushman wrote three essays in the psychobiography vein—two on Jonathan Edwards and one

22. See, for example, copies of letters of recommendation in box 1, folder 18, Bushman Papers.

23. See Oscar Handlin to Richard L. Bushman, December 19, 1962, box 1, folder 16, Bushman Papers.

24. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958).

25. Richard L. Bushman, interview by the author, November 13, 2020; see also the retelling in Richard L. Bushman, "The Inner Joseph Smith," *Journal of Mormon History* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 65–69.

on Benjamin Franklin.²⁶ They are pieces that drew the admiration of colleagues²⁷—and Bushman made an impression on his psychohistory mentor. A decade later, the University of California at Santa Barbara planned a retrospective conference on the life and work of Erikson. The psychologist made a special request of the conference organizers that they invite Bushman to be one of the key participants.²⁸ Bushman's schedule meant that he had to decline the invitation—he had just returned from a month of teaching at a naval station in Antarctica (Antarctica!) as part of a military remote college instruction program, so he was thick into catching up in his regular classes. But Erikson's esteem was obvious. By that time, though, Bushman's enthusiasm for psychobiography had waned. He was concerned about the implications of this approach of turning all of his historical subjects into patients. Yet it is not hard to see Bushman's sensitivity to psychology in his biographies of Joseph Smith and in a number of his essays—especially in his attention to the relationship between Joseph Smith Junior and Senior.²⁹

It is also not hard to see this kind of sensitivity in Bushman's attentiveness to students—and in his Church ministry. By all accounts, the Bushmans are, characteristically, root-planters. Even though Richard was only going to be at Brown for two years, he jumped into the local Latter-day Saint community. He and Claudia knew many in the congregation from their New England States Mission-wide MIA days, when they had been youth leaders while Richard was a Harvard graduate student. Now back in Providence, Bushman was called as the branch president. And he also signed a contract to teach part-time for the Church Educational System's local Institute of Religion, offering religion classes for Latter-day Saint college students. Bushman received a letter from William E. Berrett, CES Administrator for Seminaries and Institutes, expressing “full approval for the course” that Bushman had proposed, including a vote of support for his “taking an occasional

26. See Richard L. Bushman, “Jonathan Edwards and Puritan Consciousness,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1966): 383–96; Richard L. Bushman, “On the Uses of Psychology: Conflict and Conciliation in Benjamin Franklin,” *History and Theory* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1966): 225–40; and Richard L. Bushman, “Jonathan Edwards as Great Man: Identity, Conversion, and Leadership in the Great Awakening,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 15–46.

27. See Nancy [Roelker] to Richard L. Bushman, April 6, 1965, box 2, folder 3, Bushman Papers; and David Hall, interview by the author, April 28, 2021.

28. See Walter Capps to Richard L. Bushman, January 28, 1972; and Gerald Bradford to Richard L. Bushman, February 4, 1972, box 3, folder 10, Bushman Papers.

29. See Bushman's discussion of this in “The Inner Joseph Smith,” 69–81.

session devoted entirely” to “frank discussion of student problems.”³⁰ As he was launching this institute class, Bushman wrote a note to fellow institute teacher, Terry Warner, who was then at Yale: “I find I miss teaching religion more than I realized.”³¹

Pastor and professor—a pattern was emerging.

The Bushmans returned to Provo for the 1965–66 school year, where new assignments were waiting for Richard. BYU Honors Program director Robert Thomas tapped Bushman as an associate director; the program was five years old at the time. President Wilkinson appointed Bushman to the university speakers committee.³² Wilkinson turned to Bushman as an ad hoc adviser to get his thoughts on influential books and speeches of the day.³³ Bushman was even asked to consider taking on the editorship of *BYU Studies*, but ultimately university administrators agreed with Bushman’s entreaties that given his other responsibilities with the Honors Program and an upcoming research leave, the timing was not right.³⁴

One of those other responsibilities that had come to Bushman was a special role in recruiting new faculty. He wrote to Martin Hickman, then at the University of Southern California; Hickman would come to BYU as the first dean of a new College of Social Science in 1970. Bushman also wrote to John Sorenson, then at a California think tank, who would come to BYU as a professor of anthropology, and to his former Harvard classmate Carlfred Broderick, who expressed sincere interest in BYU but ultimately left Penn State for a position at the University of Southern California instead.³⁵

These were heady days at Brigham Young University—but challenging ones too. Bushman was very forthright in a May 1966 letter to outside accreditors about what he saw as BYU’s weaknesses—low faculty morale, faculty who did not invest in research efforts as they should, a serious

30. William E. Berrett to Richard L. Bushman, November 12, 1963, box 1, folder 16, Bushman Papers.

31. Richard L. Bushman to Terry Warner, October 19, 1963, box 1, folder 16, Bushman Papers.

32. See Stephen R. Covey to Richard L. Bushman, October 21, 1966, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

33. See, for example, Ernest L. Wilkinson to Richard L. Bushman, September 20, 1966; Wilkinson to Bushman, November 15, 1966; Bushman to Wilkinson, January 26, 1967; Wilkinson to Bushman, December 5, 1967; and Bushman to Wilkinson, December 7, 1967, all in box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

34. See Richard L. Bushman to Earl C. Crockett, November 28, 1966; and Crockett to Bushman, December 16, 1966, both in box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

35. See “Faculty Recruitment,” box 2, folder 6, Bushman Papers.

disconnect between the president and the faculty—and strengths—a general (and perhaps unexpected) “openness to all viewpoints,” in that “teaching is never censored,” and a religious environment that inspired a seriousness of intent and purpose “because so much is at stake.”³⁶ Yet even in that candid letter—and especially in letters to potential faculty members—Bushman was optimistic about the direction things would go.³⁷ Bushman remembered that Robert Thomas had inspired him and Truman Madsen with the possibilities of mapping out a future for BYU curriculum.³⁸ There was no question that Bushman felt called to be at BYU.

But that did not stop others from calling on him.

Bushman’s successes and his resume meant that a steady stream of academic suitors reached out to him. And Bushman did not immediately shut all of them down. Bushman’s attitude at the time seemed to have been that it would take a lot to persuade him to leave BYU, but he was dispositionally suited to keeping his options open, even as a religious nod to his sense of providence. Bernard Bailyn, his other Harvard mentor, wrote Bushman a note in 1964, saying that he would keep his “eye open” for opportunities for a new position for Richard.³⁹ It is hard to know whether this represented Bushman’s initiative or simply Bailyn’s estimation that Bushman could do better than BYU. It seems more the latter than the former. Harvard’s graduate office provided a service to its alumni of distributing curricula vitae when history departments across the country made inquiries. Bushman took advantage of this service and

36. Richard L. Bushman to Laurence Gale (academic vice president, University of Montana), May 5, 1966, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

37. See, for example, this passage in Bushman to Gale, May 5, 1966: “As one who has tutored at Harvard (as a graduate student) and taught at Brown (as a research fellow and lecturer in history), I can assure you that our campus compares favorably as a forum.” Seven months later, Bushman wrote to Carlfred Broderick, “BYU seems to be on the edge of a time of greatly accelerated academic growth. . . . I personally believe, and others share my opinion, that our limitations will be our foreshortened imaginations rather than inadequate funds.” Richard L. Bushman to Carlfred Broderick, December 29, 1966, box 2, folder 6, Bushman Papers. See also Richard L. Bushman to Robert K. Thomas, March 29, 1968, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers. Bushman informed Thomas that he had turned down a job offer from UCLA, saying, “I came through the whole experience feeling better than ever about BYU.”

38. Richard L. Bushman, interview the author, July 23, 2020. See also Richard L. Bushman, introductory note to “Faithful History,” in Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3.

39. Bernard Bailyn to Richard L. Bushman, November 16, 1964, box 1, folder 18, Bushman Papers.

asked for his vita to be mailed to various inquirers—but he always came back to BYU. He was a serious candidate at Tufts in 1965, but even before Tufts had announced a decision, Bushman informed the search committee there that he had decided to renew his BYU contract. UCLA offered him a job in 1968, but Bushman decided to stay at BYU. Nor was he swayed by interest from other schools in California or Montana or Texas. BYU always won out.⁴⁰

But then came interest from Boston University.

Bushman had won the Bancroft Prize, that premier prize in the American historical profession, in April 1968 for his first book, *From Puritan to Yankee*.⁴¹ So prestigious was the award that President Wilkinson, who had received confidential word of the pending announcement, jumped the gun in his enthusiasm for publicizing that a BYU history professor had won. Bushman had to fire off a quick note to Wilkinson to say that the public announcement needed to come from Columbia University.⁴²

When word did come out through official channels, Bushman, whose stock had already been on the rise, drew all kinds of new attention. The most intense came from Sidney Burrell, chair of the history department at Boston University. Burrell was not to be deterred. When Bushman responded to Burrell's initial overtures by referencing his deeply felt commitment to BYU and its mission, Burrell was quick to assure Bushman that Boston University would be happy to have Bushman's services even for just a handful of years. In other words, he said, Come to BU for a few years and return to BYU when you feel like you should.

The offer was too good for the Bushmans to pass up. They could not deny Boston's gravitational pull on them, after all of their years and life experiences there; Bushman has said that he had never felt more himself than at Harvard⁴³—and that was something that Sid Burrell had going for him. He was courting the Bushmans while they were already in Boston; Richard had a yearlong fellowship at Harvard's Charles Warren Center at the time. Bushman took Burrell's offer and communicated with BYU accordingly. Administrators at BYU were happy to hold out hope for a few years that Bushman would indeed return, but that was not to be.⁴⁴

40. See the items in folder "Jobs Correspondence," box 2, folder 3, Bushman Papers.

41. See the announcement of the prize in "Columbia Presents Bancroft Prizes in U.S. History," *New York Times*, April 19, 1968, 43C.

42. See Richard L. Bushman to Ernest L. Wilkinson, April 10, 1968, and Wilkinson to Bushman, April 12, 1968, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

43. Bushman, interview, July 23, 2020.

44. Bushman, interview, July 23, 2020; see also the items in folder "BU Jobs Correspondence," box 2, folder 9, Bushman Papers.

It is not hard to see why Richard Bushman would say that winning the Bancroft Prize “changed the trajectory of my life,” considering the chain of events it triggered.⁴⁵ In an autobiographical sketch for his twenty-five-year class reunion at Harvard, Bushman said that his life “oscillated between two poles”—between Salt Lake City and Boston.⁴⁶ His life would continue to oscillate between those two poles in a number of respects literally and metaphorically, but geographically the Bushmans would become permanent East Coasters. And that move would indeed prove consequential in all else that would follow.

Advocating for Fearlessness and Trust

Still, and even in this high-level overview of Bushman’s decade as a full-time faculty member at BYU, one can see traces—marks—of the institution’s impact on Bushman, and Bushman’s impact on the institution. But more than that, two key moments in his BYU years stand out for the way Bushman articulated a philosophy, a *modus operandi*, and a mindset. These two moments matter for what they show of Bushman’s consistency and his characteristic approach to Latter-day Saint history—and it is this approach that has proven compelling and persuasive.

Early in his tenure as a young professor at BYU—pre-Brown University fellowship—Bushman remembered feeling “furious” with university president Ernest Wilkinson. By all accounts, *furious* is not a note on the Richard Bushman register that gets played very often. The Bushman children all attest that the equanimity Richard inherited from his father was rarely ruffled. But Bushman remembered that he “blasted” Wilkinson—and that is Bushman’s word—in an open letter to Wilkinson (and to the school’s *Daily Universe* newspaper) to express his displeasure.⁴⁷ The occasion? A university assembly in May 1963 at which a Russian speaker had been invited to represent the Soviet point of view to a BYU audience—only the BYU audience learned at the end of the speech, much to their surprise, that the Russian speaker was actually an actor who had been engaged to show the ridiculousness of the Soviet position. It was, as Bushman came to realize, an intentional caricature—and he had been deceived. His anger was not just over the deception, however. It was centered on the lack of trust in the BYU audience. “Why can’t we be trusted to listen for Russians to speak for themselves?” Bushman wondered. And in a note that reflected again his inherent “hermeneutic

45. Bushman, interview, November 13, 2020.

46. Richard L. Bushman, “Class Life,” typewritten draft, box 6, folder 4, Bushman Papers.

47. Bushman, interview, December 18, 2020.

of generosity”—to use that really fitting phrase that Stuart Parker has used in analyzing Bushman’s work⁴⁸—Bushman saw the hypocrisy in this counterfeit communist stunt: after all, Bushman noted, “We want Mormons to speak for themselves!”⁴⁹

“After the first anger passed,” he noted in his open letter,

I saw that the capacity crowd in the field house could teach us all a lesson: our students would like very much to hear a real live communist.

I believe they attended in such large numbers because they know they have nothing to fear from trying to understand communism. If they were afraid they might have been won over, they would have stayed away. Apparently our students believe in constitutional democracy and free enterprise strongly enough that they could risk hearing an opposite point of view.⁵⁰

By implication, what might it say to students and faculty, Bushman was asking, that university administrators seemed reluctant to let an authentic advocate for the Soviet system present his or her ideas for consideration? In other words, what did a position that seemed based on fear communicate instead?

It was a theme he took up again, five years later, in a letter to then-New England States Mission President (and eventual Church Apostle) Boyd K. Packer.⁵¹ The letter is framed as a continuation of an interrupted conversation that Bushman and President Packer had been having at church on the previous Sunday. This was when the Bushmans were living in Boston for Richard’s yearlong fellowship at Harvard’s Charles Warren Center. Packer and Bushman had been discussing the best way to screen and select speakers for BYU assemblies, and Bushman had an insider’s perspective: he was on the university’s speakers committee.

(As a not-insignificant sidenote, it is worth highlighting here that it seems to say something about the character of both Ernest Wilkinson and Richard Bushman—and their relationship—that Wilkinson even appointed Bushman to the speakers committee at all in the fall of 1966. Wilkinson made that appointment even *after* Bushman’s serious objection

48. See Stuart Parker, “The Hermeneutics of Generosity: A Critical Approach to the Scholarship of Richard Bushman,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 12–27.

49. Bushman, interview, December 18, 2020.

50. Richard L. Bushman to Ernest L. Wilkinson, May 15, 1963, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

51. Richard L. Bushman to Boyd K. Packer, May 16, 1968, box 2, folder 14, Bushman Papers.

to the “counterfeit communist” assembly in 1963, and *especially* after Bushman’s spring 1966 letter to accreditors with some frank descriptions of what Bushman saw as Wilkinson’s alienating of faculty with his “intransigent advocacy of rightist philosophy” and the corresponding string of highly conservative speakers Wilkinson consistently invited to the university—and Bushman had sent a copy of that letter to Wilkinson.⁵² The speakers committee was a committee that the president’s administrative assistant, Stephen R. Covey, described to Bushman in his letter of appointment as a “very very important committee” in the president’s mind.⁵³ It seems that Bushman had cultivated with Wilkinson a special kind of respect for his unvarnished appraisals of Wilkinson’s actions, even beyond university assemblies, something that Wilkinson apparently appreciated. That seems to be something worth noting for its own sake.)

While Bushman’s letter to mission president Packer does not indicate what Packer’s position was, in terms of the university’s process for approving proposed speakers, Bushman made it clear that the two of them were in strong agreement in their opposition to offering a BYU platform to any speaker who would openly or brazenly advocate for something indisputably evil: “Evil men are heard clearly enough elsewhere and their message reaches us perfectly well,” Bushman wrote. What made for more complicated cases, in Bushman’s mind, were speakers who fell into “the gray areas,” who were not so easily categorized. Bushman presented two possible approaches—and he then made a strong case for the second of the two. As a first possible approach, Bushman presented a scenario in which the BYU faculty speakers committee might feel compelled to regularly turn down the student council’s recommendations for assembly speakers out of concern for giving the podium to those who *might* advocate for ideas that were counter to gospel ideals. However, as Bushman pointed out, in this thought experiment, because not all books or speakers are so straightforwardly classified, this could lead to a divided faculty committee: “Our committee which is composed of solid members of the Church simply cannot tell which figures in the secular world are for the Gospel and which against, and we are compelled to send on the names to a higher authority.” Ultimately, such an approach would essentially require “an index, an authoritative pronouncement on what is acceptable to Church authorities and which not.” As problematic

52. Bushman to Gale, May 5, 1966.

53. Stephen R. Covey to Richard L. Bushman, October 21, 1966, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

as creating such an index would be, even more problematic, in Bushman's view, would be the sense students would have that their teachers and leaders did not trust them to choose the speakers, or even to be confronted by the ideas that the speakers propounded. Were the ideas themselves so dangerous? they might wonder. They might feel as if the administration were saying to them that "they are still children and cannot be allowed to listen to men who may lead them astray. Their judgment and devotion are not strong enough. Gradually the feeling grows that the University is afraid of the outside world, afraid Mormon youth will not stand by the faith, afraid even to listen."⁵⁴

In his characteristically generous way, Bushman acknowledged that this would certainly not have been "the original intent of the administrators" in such an approach. "There was no fear in the original policy, only a determination to stand for the right." Bushman was quick to see a positive motive in those who would advocate for this more cautious handling of selecting speakers. "But that policy leads almost at once to an index, to judgments about what is right in the gray areas, and to the interpretation *that fear* underlies the policy."⁵⁵

It was this perception of fear as the driver that worried Bushman—and he had an alternate proposal at the ready:

Let me now suggest another view of the University, an idealized one, but the one toward which policies might be directed. The motive in the first place is the same as before—a desire to present the Gospel clearly to the world and to identify evil wherever it may lie. But in this case the first response is to listen carefully whenever a worldly voice speaks.

Say, for example, that [an author] has just published [a] book on the new morality. Word reaches Provo that this book is having a powerful influence over the lives of young people. Since that is of the greatest concern to us, we immediately invite him to visit us. We want to know precisely what he stands for. We listen to him courteously, ply him with our questions, and then talk it over carefully among ourselves. Out of our discussions comes a clear and fair understanding of what [the author] believes, an exact definition of the differences between his position and ours, and probably an appreciation of Gospel morality we did not have before. (*Comparisons always illuminate truths you felt you already understood.*) We are now ready not to refute [the author], because as you said that is a fruitless exercise, but to state clearly where we stand on the

54. Bushman to Packer, May 16, 1968.

55. Bushman to Packer, May 16, 1968, emphasis added.

issues he raises and to describe what we see to be the consequences of our respective positions.

The general tone of the campus under this policy is open and free. Students do not feel restricted; they feel trusted. We do not have an index because we do not undertake to identify every evil voice in the world but to state our own position more precisely and persuasively.

There are dangers in this policy. Some students hearing [the author] may be persuaded by him. Freedom requires that good men constantly exert themselves to stand for the truth. We must personally be more godly and righteous so that the superiority of our way will shine forth. There certainly is no guarantee that truth will triumph in the market place unless the truth is represented forcefully. But I think in the long run that is the only way. We must advance our cause not by excluding all evil, [or] building a wall around Zion, but by living and speaking the truth.⁵⁶

The fearlessness that Bushman advocated for—and the inherent risks that he acknowledged as the inevitable byproducts of such openness—should not be mistaken for indifference to the spiritual welfare of the students he taught or the Church members he shepherded. His was not a “take it or leave it” attitude. It was just that he had come to realize that all attempts at sheltering would, ultimately, break down. He preferred to be open about that and to be engaged in the dialogue—and he was motivated by a hard-won faith from the crucible of personal experience. In a 1986 essay titled “My Belief,” Bushman recounted the creeping agnosticism that plagued him as a Harvard sophomore about to embark on his missionary service and the way that his faith had been battered by real—and imagined—questioners at Harvard. But as he came to settled faith through his study of the Book of Mormon and through, “more than anything,” what he called “church work”—his service in his callings, his ministering—he came to see that “ideas did not strike me as dangerous; they were too weak to be dangerous.”⁵⁷ This is the same spirit in his 1968 letter to President Packer: Bushman had come to the conviction that religious truths would be persuasive on their own merits, especially, and perhaps primarily, when advocated for—and made concrete—by those who, as he wrote, were striving to “personally be more godly and righteous.”

56. Bushman to Packer, May 16, 1968, italics added, underlining original.

57. Richard L. Bushman, “My Belief,” in *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*, ed. Philip L. Barlow (Centerville, Utah: Canon Press, 1986), 21, 24.

Some Later BYU Touchstone Moments

Two decades after this exchange with then-mission president Packer, Bushman echoed these same sentiments, with a memorable metaphor, in an address to BYU graduates at the university's summer commencement ceremonies in 1991, something of a homecoming for Professor Bushman, now tenured at Columbia. His talk offered the students a dose of realism not always typical of such celebrations: "We take a great risk when we invite you here to join the world of scholarship. . . . [The university] cannot and does not attempt to remove from the shelves every book that attacks the Church, casts doubt on the existence of God, or criticizes traditional standards of conduct. These books are in the BYU library as they are in every other university library in the land." Bushman then related an experience that his son and daughter-in-law had when they lived in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in the opening days of what would become the Gulf War. Because of the pressing fear of chemical warfare at the time, gas masks had been issued to the family—even specially designed masks for their two very young children. Bushman told the BYU audience that "our son said that their two children could not abide the gas masks and would not keep them on for a minute. Likewise, there is no way you can be sealed off against ideas that oppose the gospel. It cannot be done. You would not tolerate such treatment in this university either, and furthermore, it would not be right to subject you to it. You were not sent here to be isolated from evil. It would be wrong to attempt to create a safe room, and it would not work."⁵⁸

What to do, then? "What can we your teachers, your believing teachers, say to you about the unbelief in the world of scholarship? How could we have asked your parents to send you to the university where you learn about error as well as about truth?" Bushman's response in that instance reflects the credo he has lived by: "We can only say one thing: you will, with God's help, find the path. Having taught you what we believe and what we know, we trust you. That is the only way: trust."⁵⁹

Six years after that commencement address, in June 1997, the same month that he celebrated his sixty-sixth birthday, Richard Bushman was back at BYU, standing in front of half a dozen students as they launched the first "Archive of Restoration Culture" summer seminar.⁶⁰ This quiet

58. Richard L. Bushman, "Learning to Believe," reprinted in Bushman, *Believing History*, 35.

59. Bushman, "Learning to Believe," 35.

60. See published papers from the seminar as *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows' Papers, 1997–1999* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day

inauguration of what would become a two-decade annual tradition on the Provo campus may, in the long view, stand out as the Richard Bushman-at-BYU moment that most deserves to be remembered.

The seminar began as something of a summer research team to help Bushman collate source material as he was writing *Rough Stone Rolling*—but it quickly expanded beyond that initial purpose and became a wide-ranging summer experience of expansive forays into Latter-day Saint history and thought. The list of seminar alumni is remarkable and includes at the time of this writing the current occupants of the Mormon Studies professorships at Utah State University, Claremont Graduate University, and the University of Virginia; the current editor in chief of *BYU Studies*; and the current managing director of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' History Department, as well as his immediate predecessor—to name only a few. David Holland, Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard Divinity School and a member of that inaugural 1997 group, put it this way: “It is not an exaggeration, it is not hyperbole, to say that he [Richard Bushman] is the reason I am a historian today.”⁶¹ “He is a father in the church, literally a patriarch,” *BYU Studies* editor in chief Steven Harper reflected, “and he is a father to a hundred people like me.”⁶²

The key point here is that Bushman’s mantra in those seminars was simple—and it was the same approach he had been advocating since his first decade at BYU: we will skirt no issue, but we will go right through the center of every issue. We will not be driven by fear.⁶³ Student after student, year after year, affirms that is precisely what they did. And in six-week chunks, summer after summer, Richard Bushman shaped a generation of Latter-day Saint thinkers.

There is something fundamentally “Latter-day Saint” in this approach, something fundamental to the cosmology of the restored gospel—and that may be a primary reason why Bushman’s half-century-plus of advocating for this approach has proven to be so influential. It resonates for Latter-day Saints on a deep level with their religious sensibilities. The backdrop against which all of these calls for fearlessness and vulnerability

Saint History, 2000); and *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows’ Papers, 2000–2002* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 2005). See also Bushman’s overview of the project in Richard L. Bushman, “Archive of Restoration Culture, 1997–2002,” *BYU Studies* 45, no. 4 (2006): 99–106.

61. David Holland, interview by the author, November 23, 2013.

62. Steven Harper, interview by the author, August 30, 2013.

63. See, for example, Mark Ashurst-McGee, interview by the author, June 20, 2014; Jed Woodworth, interview by the author, September 10, 2021.

and trust play out is the Latter-day Saint conception of the plan of salvation, where each human's existence began long before birth on earth—and where individual growth is contingent upon agency exercised freely. Bushman's words to the BYU graduates in 1991 mirror what Latter-day Saints essentially imagine God may have declared about the experience—and risks—of mortality in general. This is the ultimate grounding for Bushman's confidence; this, Latter-day Saints would say, is God's way.

In response to a letter from a concerned Latter-day Saint leader who wondered early on if *Rough Stone Rolling*, with its in-depth analysis of Joseph Smith's life and times and its consideration of appraisals from critics and coreligionists alike, might aid and abet the Church's enemies, Bushman wrote this: "Thanks for your candid letter about my biography of Joseph Smith. I can understand why some of the stories may worry people. I certainly hope that no one's testimony is damaged by anything they read. If you hear of anyone who is upset by the book, please have them write me. . . . I want young Latter-day Saints to know that one historian has looked at all the evidence, suppresses none of it, and still believes in Joseph's divine call. . . . As you can tell, I am one for getting everything out on the table. Personally I believe that is the only secure position. If we are not candid and open, young Latter-day Saints doubt us when they hear the negative stories from another source."⁶⁴ There is deep resonance here with something Bushman wrote nearly forty years earlier—in 1968—to BYU administrators who asked his advice on how to handle a request from a graduate student at another university who wanted to see materials in the BYU archives—materials that could potentially paint some unflattering portraits of university leaders in BYU's past. Bushman wrote then, "My feeling is that suppressing material is only short term wisdom. In the long run it would be preferable to clear all scholars to make sure they have a serious interest and are reputable. (Everyone allowed into the British Museum reading room has to have character references.) Then leave the rest to them. Certainly we will get stung on occasion, but the reputation for being open and candid is much more valuable than avoiding an occasional sensational piece that dies and is forgotten shortly after it appears."⁶⁵

The same Bushman who recognized for himself in 1950 the futility of keeping Freud from "pounding on the walls" if Freud were to be placed in

64. See Richard L. Bushman letter, January 7, 2006, box 74, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

65. Richard L. Bushman to Robert K. Thomas, March 26, 1968, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

some kind of separate mental compartment was the same Bushman who, in 2006, responded to a Church member who had just read *Rough Stone Rolling* and had written in to ask how he might think through the new things he was learning about Joseph Smith and the history of the Church. “I personally think it is never good to let problems like this swim vaguely around in your head,” Bushman wrote in reply.

Be sure you get all the facts right. . . . Consider the biases, both pro and con, of those who describe the events. . . . Try to be hard-headed about this. Don’t let your feelings swamp you. . . . If you are going to do all this in the Latter-day Saint way, you will also put your trust in that Spirit that leadeth to do good (D&C 11:12–14). You will ask, What are the consequences of these beliefs? Have they resulted in good in your own life and the life of others you have known? If they have, then you want to treat them with respect. As with science, a religion that works and produces results has to be taken seriously.

And the key takeaway for Bushman was that there was nothing to fear in doing this: “Others might give you other advice, but this has worked for me. After all these years of studying Joseph’s life, I believe more than ever.”⁶⁶

These kinds of exchanges beat in rhythm with counsel that Elder M. Russell Ballard gave in a February 2016 worldwide broadcast to all religious educators in the Church Educational System. “You should be among the first,” Elder Ballard said, “outside your students’ families, to introduce authoritative sources on topics that may be less well-known or controversial so your students will measure whatever they hear or read later against what you have already taught them.”⁶⁷ And Elder Marlin K. Jensen, the Church Historian and Recorder (from 2005 to 2012) who shepherded the Joseph Smith Papers, the inception of initiatives like the Gospel Topics essays,⁶⁸ and the four-volume *Saints* project, told a gathered audience at the Mormon History Association meetings in 2012 as his time as Church Historian was ending, “I’m also pleased that we have

66. Reprinted in Richard L. Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author’s Diary* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 110–11.

67. M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century,” address to CES religious educators, February 26, 2016, transcript at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century>; the address was also slightly revised for a more general Church audience and was reprinted as M. Russell Ballard, “By Study and by Faith,” *Ensign* 46, no. 12 (December 2016): 22–29.

68. The essays are accessible at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/essays>, and on the Church’s Library app under the “Church History” tab.

labored diligently to be completely open and honest about the Church's past. After all, it is of truth that the Holy Ghost testifies. The internet almost mandates transparency as the order of the day, but it is also the right way to do our historical business.”⁶⁹

As much as—or more than—Bushman *expounded* the same kind of historical philosophy that Elder Ballard and Elder Jensen described, the summer seminar participants affirm that Bushman simply *modeled* this. He modeled a commitment to the highest professional ethics and a commitment to historical honesty and openness and candor that were to him religious commitments, as well. This was, after all, the Richard Bushman who had written in 1969 an essay he called “Faithful History,” a manifesto of sorts that he published in the journal *Dialogue*—an essay that he later described as “the fruit of my six years at Brigham Young University.”⁷⁰ Bushman said in that essay that to be true to the kind of historian he wanted to be—to be a *Latter-day Saint historian*, and not just a historian of the Latter-day Saints—to write the kind of history he wanted to write, he could not “[neglect] any of the evidence. . . . As I look at the world in my best moments, this is how I see it. I am not lying to any part of myself, neither the part that prays nor that which interprets documents.” This, he said, is “faithful history.”⁷¹ And it is a fearlessness and an integrity that Richard Bushman has encouraged Latter-day Saints everywhere to try on—and trust—for themselves since his first days in a BYU classroom.

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69. Marlin K. Jensen, “Minding the House of Church History: Reflections of a Church Historian at the End of His Time,” *Journal of Mormon History* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 89.

70. See Bushman’s introductory comments to a reprint of “Faithful History” in Bushman, *Believing History*, 3. For the original essay, see Richard L. Bushman, “Faithful History,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 11–25.

71. Richard L. Bushman, “Faithful History,” 25.