

GARY JAMES BERGERA, ed. *The Autobiography of B. H. Roberts*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990. xvii; 266 pp. Index. Paperback, \$12.95.

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Mormons now have a first-person narrative of a significant leader—a narrative that stands on the same level as the autobiography of Parley P. Pratt. Not just anyone who writes an account of his or her life will attract interest beyond the built-in audience of the immediate family. But when you combine a varied life extending over the turbulent decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a colorful personality and a vigorous writing style, the result makes for a good read.

Although Roberts never became president of the Church or a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, he touched the Mormon experience at so many points that his life provides a valuable vantage point for understanding the larger history. Here are some of the rubrics of his life: family conversion and immigration, growing up in a frontier environment, missionary work and defending Mormonism, polygamy, politics, the writing and editing of Church history, and tensions within the growing Church organization. In each of these areas, Roberts was a central, sometimes a noisy, figure.

Like the Pratt autobiography, this one followed a tortuous path before achieving publication. Written in the third person (a somewhat fashionable style since the success of *The Education of Henry Adams*), the manuscript was dictated in 1933 to his secretary, Elsa Cook, during the closing months of Roberts's life. That typescript was retyped by daughter Georgia Roberts Livingston. It was the happy idea of Gary James Bergera to do the necessary comparison and collation of these two typescripts, change the third-person narrative to first person, and make corrections and some deletions, as fully explained in the editor's introduction.

An appreciative foreword has been written by Sterling M. McMurrin, who has long been interested in Roberts. There is some nostalgia for the good old days here:

Where once he [Roberts] was easily the most interesting and exciting and stimulating person in its [the LDS Church's]

leadership, its most prolific writer, its chief theologian and historian, and its most capable defender, today his name is scarcely known to large segments of the membership of the church. He has been eclipsed by a deluge of writers of varying but lesser talent, many of whom lack even the grace to acknowledge their indebtedness to him. (vii)

McMurrin gives a judicious evaluation of Roberts's strengths and weaknesses as a historian and as a religious thinker. With the intelligence and analytical powers to be always informative, McMurrin, like Roberts, is sufficiently opinionated to be provocative.

Like all autobiographies, this one is selective. Roberts narrates his life from the time of his childhood in England. The father and mother separated but were not divorced. Then the mother and an older sister migrated to Utah, leaving the boy behind to live with a couple who were Church members but "scarcely ideal people for honesty and right living" (10). At one point he ran away, a waif in London reminiscent of the novels of Charles Dickens.

In 1866 young Roberts, age nine, was sent with his sister Mary to rejoin their mother in Utah. His later memories of the ocean voyage and crossing the plains remind us of how far from idyllic the journey with its human interactions could be. In Utah the boy continued his insecure existence and, growing up, came close to abandoning the standards of his faith. All these experiences are interesting, even inspiring, as he overcame extraordinary obstacles to survive and excel.

As we follow Roberts through his year at the University of Deseret, his service as a missionary and then a mission leader in the Southern States, a mission to England, a term in the Utah penitentiary for polygamy, and participation in Utah politics, there is an abundance of detail. If he ran for the U.S. Congress in 1895, losing a close election and then finding himself in hot water with Church authorities, he explains he ran partly because the impression had been given during the constitutional convention of that year that to prohibit General Authorities from running for office would deprive the state of some of its best minds. If he argued in the convention against female suffrage, he explains he did so originally and primarily on the grounds that such an inclusion might lead to a veto by the president. The extension of suffrage, he argued, could easily be



taken care of by legislative enactment after statehood. In telling of his election to Congress in 1898 and subsequent exclusion on grounds of polygamy, he explains why at the time it seemed not at all implausible that he might be allowed to serve. It is good fun to follow our hero through these stormy times, especially as he quotes from various editorials praising him and from some of his own speeches.

There are a few statements that might lead to misunderstanding. His description of the history of Joseph Smith (eventually published as the so-called documentary history) as “merely the publication of the daily journal he [Joseph] kept during his lifetime” (221) may reflect Roberts’s own assumption, but, as Dean Jessee has carefully demonstrated, it is by no means an accurate portrayal of the original work. When Roberts describes his triumphant verbal victory over opponents such as Orson F. Whitney, he may of course be the soul of disinterested evaluation, but that is not very likely. Throughout, one discerns an assertive personality, determined to put the best face on the life and labors of one B. H. Roberts. Like all autobiography, to a greater or lesser degree, this is an *apologia pro vita sua*.

Roberts did not lack confidence. He explains how he came to write the six-volume *Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that he may have been a little strong in praise of his own achievement, he manages a feeble disclaimer: “This may seem like much vaunting of praise for the work, but undoubtedly it is the masterpiece of historical writings in the first century of the church’s history” (229). While smiling, we should probably admit that he was right.

But the biggest problem is that of omission. For practical purposes there is nothing here about Roberts’s family life, his wives and children. Some of the controversies in which he became embroiled are passed over briefly or simply ignored. Editor Bergera’s three-page afterward briefly and selectively summarizes the circumstances under which Roberts prepared two manuscripts regarding “difficulties” of the Book of Mormon for private discussion by the Quorum of the Twelve. In the same afterward, we get a brief narrative about the writing of the still unpublished “The Truth, the Way, the Life,”<sup>2</sup> its review by

a reading committee of the Twelve, and subsequent discussion regarding the age of the earth. Both of these encounters require (and have received) much more lengthy treatment for adequate understanding. It is not Bergera's fault if Roberts failed to include something on these and many other topics in the manuscript, of course, but one wonders what Roberts might have done with his autobiography had he lived longer.

The final two chapters are concerned with his presidency of the Eastern States Mission (1922–27), remembered with loyalty and fondness by his missionaries to the ends of their lives, and his effort to defend what he considered the proper role and authority of the First Council of the Seventy.

For a more comprehensive life of Roberts, one still needs to read Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story*,<sup>3</sup> which, even with its adulation and omission of some controversial detail, remains the standard treatment. For some topics of interest, articles are the best resource. Other facets of Roberts's life still deserve study.

Suffering severely with diabetes and other afflictions, increasingly morose and incapacitated, continuing to feel a kind of persecution or lack of appreciation from his brethren, Roberts did not much enjoy his last two or three years on earth. It is to his credit that he managed to avoid a spirit of bitterness. As it stands, his autobiography, with all its deficiencies, is a sprightly, personal account that touches many bases of Mormon history. B. H. Roberts was a grand old warrior and, as Brigham Young would have said, had the grit in him. Right to the end.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Davis Bitton, "B. H. Roberts as Historian," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 (Winter 1968): 25–44.

<sup>2</sup>See Truman G. Madsen, "The Meaning of Christ—The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Analysis of B. H. Roberts' Unpublished Masterwork," *BYU Studies* 15 (Spring 1975): 259–92.

<sup>3</sup>Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980).