

RICHARD P. HOWARD. *The Church through the Years*, vol. 1, *RLDS Beginnings, to 1860*. Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1992. 402 pp. Bibliography, index. \$27.50. Vol. 2, *The Reorganization Comes of Age, 1860-1992*. Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1993. 531 pp. Bibliography, index. \$27.50.

Reviewed by William Dean Russell, Professor of American History and Government at Graceland College, Lamoni, Iowa.

In 1934 the RLDS Church published Inez Smith Davis's *The Story of the Church*, a one-volume history intended for its members. A very amateurish and apologetic work, Davis's book remained the only one-volume history of the RLDS Church for fifty-seven years, until Paul Edwards published *Our Legacy of Faith*.¹ With the publication of the two-volume work *The Church through the Years*, the RLDS Church has completed the process of making Davis's embarrassing book a thing of the past.

The Story of the Church reflected the common RLDS attitude toward the much larger LDS Church. It was one of a great many articles, pamphlets, and books which were published during the first century of the RLDS Church's existence and which examined Mormon claims and found them wanting. The last major book-length, anti-Mormon diatribe was published in 1965. Written by Aleah Koury, a seventy who was about to become an apostle, *The Truth and the Evidence: A Comparison between Doctrines of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*² was a survey of the major differences between the two churches. Key issues raised were the doctrines of God, marriage, tithing, and succession in the presidency of the church. In every instance, the RLDS Church had the truth, and the LDS Church was wrong. It was a clean sweep for the little-known rivals of the kingdom out west. The RLDS Church did not even have to settle for being "right" on three out of four issues. The book was appropriately titled: the author began with "the truth" and then marshaled his evidence.

But by the time Aleah Koury's book had been read by very many members, RLDS historians were aware that a new, more professional, non-apologetic approach to history was needed.

The book by Davis in particular needed to be replaced. Robert Flanders, author of *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*,³ Paul Edwards and Alma Blair at Graceland College; Richard Howard, the first professionally trained historian in the office of RLDS church historian; and others in the RLDS Church began to push for the publication of historical writings that were more professional and less apologetic.

By the late 1970s, Alma Blair had been commissioned to write a one-volume survey to replace Davis's book. However, Blair was not able to get his project off the ground, so in 1982 Paul Edwards, newly appointed president of the Temple School in Independence, assigned Howard, who had already produced a documentary history of the RLDS Church, to write the one-volume survey. In the process of writing that survey, however, Howard decided instead to produce a two-volume work that would not be so much a survey history as a collection of reflective essays on RLDS history. Not all members of the First Presidency were pleased when they learned that Howard was producing a collection of essays, so they assigned Paul Edwards to write the long-awaited, one-volume survey.

Volume 1 of Howard's work, covering ground that has already been examined by many authors, deals with early Mormonism until the post-martyrdom events. Mormon readers may be interested in the interpretation of early Mormon history offered by an RLDS author who could be characterized as an "institutional liberal." Howard, the church historian for nearly thirty years, has been one of the participants in the movement of the RLDS Church from a sect which held itself to be "the one true church of Christ on earth" (1960s and before) to a denomination that considers itself merely a part—although hopefully a vital part—of the body of Christ on earth. Howard wrote a historical column in the official publication, *The Saints' Herald*, for fifteen years (1969-84), as well as several significant articles on topics like the book of Abraham, the First Vision, and polygamy. His *Restoration Scriptures*,⁴ which traced the evolution of the text of the three standard books of the RLDS Church (the Inspired Version of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants), won a Mormon History Association award.

A more important volume for LDS readers will probably be volume 2, which covers RLDS history since the 1850s. Mormon readers will be particularly interested in the chapters dealing with the RLDS relationship to their cousins in Utah. Needless to say, the attitude was hostile. Fortunately, in the past twenty-five years that hostility has eased considerably. Howard has participated in that effort as well. He has a long friendship with Leonard Arrington, former LDS church historian, as well as many other historians through active participation in the Mormon History Association, including one year as its president. Howard also negotiated with the LDS Church over one of Mark Hofmann's forgeries—the Joseph Smith III blessing letter. As a result of that encounter, Howard was one of the first historians to distrust Hofmann. While Hofmann was speaking at the 1982 MHA meeting in Ogden, the editors of *Sunstone* heard Howard utter in disgust a word that is not found in the publications of either church. In volume 2, Howard does discuss the fact that the RLDS have become more friendly toward the Mormons in recent years but strangely omits any mention of the Mormon History Association, which played a major role in easing tensions. He also does not mention Mark Hofmann. Perhaps Howard was reluctant to discuss events in which he was a participant.

Three practices in *The Church through the Years* are refreshing reversals of past customs. An officially published RLDS history, it accepts the word *Mormonism* in reference to the early years of the church. The RLDS have in the past rejected the word altogether because of their desire to distance themselves from their Utah cousins. Herald House has also routinely added the LDS citations for Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants passages. In addition, the RLDS Church historian herein acknowledges that Joseph Smith became a polygamist. The RLDS Church felt honor-bound for about a century to deny his practice of plural marriage, largely because Joseph Smith III was emotionally committed to the proposition that his father could not have introduced that doctrine because he was a good man. The past decade has seen a shift in RLDS willingness to face the issue. Howard's

article "The Changing RLDS Response to Mormon Polygamy" in the 1983 issue of the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* was a milestone in that regard.

I was particularly impressed with the chapters on the development of the canon and on the tension in the 1870s and 1880s between Apostles Zenas H. Gurley, Jr., and Jason W. Briggs on the one hand and the First Presidency and other leaders on the other hand. Briggs and Gurley finally resigned from the church.

LDS readers will probably be interested in Howard's account of the evolution of women's roles in the church, culminating in a 1984 revelation calling for their ordination. Since November 1985, when such ordinations began, more than 3,500 women have been ordained, according to Howard. He does not say how many total priesthood holders there are in the RLDS Church, but this reviewer would hazard a guess that at the present time about one-third of the active priesthood holders are women. Howard's treatment of the women's issue and the aftermath—a nasty split that has occurred in the church since 1985—is well done. While Howard's sympathies are clearly not with the schismatics, he is fair in his treatment, with only minor examples of bias.

I think LDS members who are interested in what has happened to the little splinter church, headquartered in Independence, Missouri, and led so far by Joseph Smith's male heirs, will find Howard's two-volume survey a useful account.

NOTES

¹ Paul M. Edwards, *Our Legacy of Faith* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1991).

² Aleah Koury, *The Truth and the Evidence: A Comparison between Doctrines of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1965).

³ Robert Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

⁴ Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures* (Independence, Mo.: Department of Religious Education, RLDS Church, 1969).