

The Founding Vision of *BYU Studies*

Clinton F. Larson

Time is of little consequence when an Event is near. In a rush and emphasis of time, three of us stood in a field to the north of Temple Hill. Darrel¹ said, “I want to establish a language training center for missionaries of the Church. I want it to be part of the department of foreign languages so that the beauties of the languages can be seen with the Truth that is in them.” As with Portuguese, as Gerrit² had said, it may be velvet brown; on emerald, silken and lovely, on which the Truth may glisten, as in inflection; down from the radiance of the past, the color and image of each language’s meaning for us.

And I thought of the possibility of a magazine for the university, as it might be, drawing its breath from the influence of ages past, from literature and the books wherein it lies. These images convey the source of thinking and feeling from which the magazine began:

BELOVED BOOKS

I met Sir Thomas in a shaded hall,
Where legend hung like tapestry: silver gold
Against a wall, and beyond, a silver lake
Shimmering in a light of evening and brightening in a mist
Of stars. The hush was like a confidence
That rests unspoken in the hush of mind.
“Arthur is there in glory,” he said. Silence
Attended him forever, like the legend
Of the crests that shine against the glowing light.
Blue frost wavered into memory. A lantern
Gathered light from the drowsing sun and kept
The hall in light that remained above, a clerestory
Of the legend of colors: the wash of eglantine,
The purple of Lancelot, deep chrome, vineyard
Ivy, Roman gold, shipwake holly, and the sangria

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Of stories retold in havens of the yellow gold.
Dim tones illumined them and swept into a panoply.

II

Edmund, Sir, the wondrous years have called
Your platinum into magnificence in the holy
Avenue of stories that shade and brighten declensions
Of your weaving light. Britomart bends across
A stream before the bright and almond Parsifal.
He beckons as if to the Atridae, "Come and know
The will of starlight in your eyes. Lohengrin
Will brighten across the murmur of the lake."
Deep in the shadows the guest of vision moved
To show the scabbard of Excalibur and hastened
Into the ochre hall. Holinesse is the emerald
Star he holds before you. The willows part
And he comes, resplendent in the azure white
And fall of silver green. She hesitates
And follows him. A Celtic rose wavers
Into iridescence where Stonehenge reveals
The evening sun and the morning where the shape
Of air holds briefly in the sun.

III

Bookes solemnized into books address the conscience.
They began in his ecstasy that he could see
The threading weave into a history. The Messiah
Nodded to him across the centuries, across
The Avon, under lamps in London town,
The English scriptures, and in the far sunset
Of the Cordillera. The rivers mount into a tide
In a seaward rush. O Ariel, the crest
Sweeps up and nearly falls before the rush
Bequeaths the Milton of the bluing sky,
Alfred of the Idylls, Robert of the drama,
And suddenly the American.

We stood together in the field talking, and a cow stood near, nodding and lowing, it seemed, in assent. We had a compact for a beginning. Not too long, but after the Escalante accident in which Darrel, and many others, died,³ the Language Training Mission became a reality. The magazine became a reality, too. I remember John Bernhard's concern for

its success. I was able to allay it. In my enthusiasm for what I called it—*The Wasatch Review*—I remembered how my interest in literature began, from *My Book House*, a set of illustrated books in which the myths of old became real in my imagination, especially those of the Arthurian Legend. Then reading, in my college days and later, became part of my career as a teacher and a writer, hence the poem, “Beloved Books,” in which I use the antique spelling of *book*. I hope that a reader of this account can see in the poem the vistas of opportunities in writing for writers and aficionados in the creation of a learned journal at the university. President Wilkinson agreed with my vision, although, I suppose, with reservations.

I made my presentation for *The Wasatch Review* in a luncheon of administration and faculty, to which the poet Carl Sandburg had been invited because he was in town for a forum assembly. I spoke; President Wilkinson arose and in a loud voice said, “We’re not going to call it *The Wasatch Review*. That would be an insult to the mountains.” Later, he named the magazine *Brigham Young University Studies*. Wilkinson, as a student at the university in the World War I period, had assembled some papers of fellow students with his own and had dropped them in a manila folder and called them that. So the magazine had its inception; I was the first editor and sole staff member.

Because time varies according to intensity and motive, I sought, and seek, the correlatives that will make both real. One cannot particularize items satisfactorily over a space of time unless he or she is willing to risk disproof as they disappear into the past. But the poem “Beloved Books” comprises, I think, my attempt to make *Brigham Young University Studies* a threshold to opportunity for writers in the Church to create a meaningful literature for the Church. Besides being a threshold for the creative writer, it could be a threshold for the scholarly or scientific writers. The emphasis of the magazine was originally upon “writers” in order to attain a proper purview, to achieve literary significance. This is also the purview for my anthology *Modern Poetry of Western America*.

How can I tell all the names of all those I always intended to include within that purview? I do not intend to consider fewer than I should. I think of Alfred, David, Levi, Eileen, Douglas, Ronald, Sally, Claudia, Susan, John, Edward, Marden, Franklin, Charles, Max, Randy, and all those who have contributed poems, stories, and articles to the magazine. At any rate, the historical authors named in the poem have influenced scores of writers implicitly named under the title “American,” a title which comprises hints of the American dream, or the dream of Zion. All writing is imagination, from hieroglyphs and cuneiform to the present; especially when one considers those painted and pressed marks, the

history of mortal man is, comparatively, the time of a wink in the duration of the earth from its identifiable beginning. All is imagination in the Lord's gift of life.

To some, the mention of writers that arrive from myths and legends of spiritual history may not, or cannot, be accepted. Such a disqualification is arbitrary and for that reason cannot itself seriously qualify. But automatic disqualification is an anti-intellectual pretext that must be seen for what it is. It is like Jonathan Edwards suspending a spider over the fires of a nonacademic hell and implicitly saying, "Roast, roast."

On the contrary, to show that certain names supply meaningful precedents for *BYU Studies* is to show what the writers are and what sort of thing it is that they hope for. Names like Mahonri Moriancumer, Nephi, Alma, Third Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni are well accepted as precedential, and the notion of personal revelation, which cannot be denied by aestheticians, is within the purview. "Three Theories of Religious Language" by Truman G. Madsen⁴ warns of the dangers of acceptance and nonacceptance. Open-mindedness may therefore serve to include serious inquiry even into what seems historically possible in the legendary imagination, into what I term "Atlantis of Switzerland" and "Switzerland of Egypt" (Mont Blanc, Matterhorn, and Jungfrau, which an ancient people imagistically transformed from the wish and memory of a more ancient home into the three large pyramids of Egypt). Therefore, Zarahemla, Sherrizah, and the Library of Alexandria have nearly the same hold on the mind and imagination, at this distance, as Oxford, Cambridge, The University of London, and Harvard. All people have a basis in experience to create what each of them will.

So it is and has been with *BYU Studies*. The magazine heralds spiritual and intellectual opportunity according to personal revelation. Nephi does not prescribe limitations for writers who are honest in heart. He said:

Now, I Nephi, cannot write in an effective, powerful way. When a man speaks, the Holy Ghost can reach the hearts of his listeners. But because men harden their hearts, they do not put great value upon writing. But I have written what I have written, and I know my writing is of great value to my people. So, I pray continually for my people by day, and I weep for them by night. I cry to my God in faith, and I know he will hear me.⁵

This is also the persuasion of the writers who have contributed to *BYU Studies*.

NOTES

¹The three were H. Darrel Taylor, Ernest J. Wilkins, and Clinton. H. Darrel was at that time chairman of the Language Department at Brigham Young University. He served the BYU campus from 1948 until his untimely death in 1963. Ernest J. Wilkins later became president of the Language Training Mission. He taught in the Language Department at BYU from 1953–74.

²Gerrit de Jong, Jr., founding dean of Fine Arts, musical composer, and professor of modern languages at Brigham Young University. He served on campus from 1925–70.

³On June 10, 1963, a group of boy scouts and their leaders were on their way to Hole-in-the-Rock, the Southern Utah historic site where Mormon pioneers blazed a shortcut across the wilderness. They intended to begin a river trip on the Colorado. The two-ton cattle truck in which the group was traveling stalled on a steep hill and rolled backward off a thirty-foot embankment. Six adults and seven youths were killed; among them was H. Darrel Taylor.

⁴Truman G. Madsen, “Three Theories of Religious Language,” *BYU Studies* 2 (Spring–Summer 1960): 227. Also see “Revelation,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1226–27.

⁵2 Ne. 33:1–3 (paraphrased by the author).



