

Young Heber J. Grant's Years of Passage

Ronald W. Walker

*O God, Thou hast taught me from my youth:
and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works.
(Psalm 72:17)*

As Heber J. Grant came of age, Mormonism was as much a part of the Utah landscape as the Territory's dusty valleys and vaulting mountain walls. Young Heber met religion everywhere—in his Salt Lake City home and neighborhood, at the Tabernacle on Temple Square, in the offices of Church and civic leaders where he sometimes ventured, and certainly in his native Thirteenth Ward, one of the most innovative and organizationally developed Latter-day Saint congregations of the time. Slowly young Heber internalized his religious culture, but not before encountering the usual perils of adolescence and “coming of age.” The process tells a great deal about Heber himself, but also about the beliefs, rituals, and worship patterns of early Utah Mormonism.

Heber J. Grant was a second-generation Mormon, born 22 November 1856 at Jedediah Grant's imposing Main Street home. His father, Brigham's counselor and Salt Lake mayor, died nine days later. In Jedediah's stead, the boy was christened by Thirteenth Ward Bishop Edwin D. Woolley, who found the spirit of the occasion to be unusual. “I was only an instrument in the hands of his dead father . . . in blessing him,” the bishop later remarked. That boy “is entitled [someday] to be one of the Apostles, and I know it.”¹

There were other harbingers of the child's future. Once Rachel, his mother, took the boy to a formal dinner at the Heber C. Kimballs'.

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¹Preston W. Parkinson, comp., *The Utah Woolley Family* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1967), 126; see also Heber J. Grant (hereafter cited as Grant) Typed Diary, 22 September 1924 and 2 February 1938, Grant Papers, Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives). The christening is recorded in the Thirteenth Ward Papers, LDS Church Archives. When citing material in the Grant collection, I have used box and folder numbers only when source identification cannot be established through the use of the collection's register.

After the adults had finished dining, the children were invited to eat what remained. Excited, little Heber was thoroughly enjoying himself when Brother Kimball suddenly lifted him atop a table and began prophesying about his future. The terrified child especially remembered the foreboding, coal black eyes of President Young's first counselor.² Moreover, there was the portentous Relief Society gathering held at William C. Staines's home, where Eliza R. Snow and Zina D. Young spoke and interpreted in the "unknown" tongue. Blessing each of the women present, they eventually turned to Rachel. Heber, who was playing on the floor, recalled hearing something about his becoming "a great big man." His mother's understanding, however, was more precise. "Behave yourself," Rachel knowingly told him as he grew to maturity, "and you will some day be one of the apostles in the Church."³

The Thirteenth Ward, the Grants' home congregation, made these auspicious predictions more likely. One of the largest and most culturally diverse wards in the Territory, the Thirteenth Ward also boasted major human and economic resources. Among its members were some of the most prominent men in the Territory, including General Authorities, prominent merchants, and land investors. These in turn brought a high level of prosperity. "The 13th Ward," observed one contemporary, "was richer than all the Saints at Kirtland when the Temple was built." Indeed, it may have enjoyed the highest income level in the Church during the years when Heber J. Grant was growing up.⁴

Such a ward was an ideal setting for the beginning of the LDS Sunday School movement. While churchmen had earlier organized a few scattered and short-lived Sabbath schools, the Thirteenth Ward's was the first established after the city's bishops agreed, in a major policy decision, to counter the post-Civil War denominational academies with Mormon Sabbath schools.⁵ A typical Sunday might find the children meeting at the Thirteenth Ward Assembly Rooms, where they listened to short talks, sang, and recited inspirational prose and poetry. Leaders might also "catechize" the youth with questions drawn from the Bible, Book of Mormon, or LDS church history, liberally awarding prizes for both correct answers and proper conduct.

²Grant to Helen Mar Monson, 2 November 1942, Grant Letterbook 81:601, Grant Papers.

³Grant, Conference Report, April 1927, 17–18.

⁴Zerubbabel Snow, General Minutes of the Thirteenth Ward, 1854–68, 12 May 1863, Thirteenth Ward Papers; Leonard J. Arrington, *From Quaker to Latter-day Saint: Bishop Edwin D. Woolley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 325.

⁵General Minutes of the Thirteenth Ward, 30 March 1867, Thirteenth Ward Papers.



Courtesy of LDS Church Historical Department

Rachel Grant and Her Son, Heber

Heber took advantage of the ward's new school. In fact, the ambitious and assertive boy was often at front stage. Excelling at memorization, he quickly mastered the Mormon "Articles of Faith"; the first five pages of John Jaques's *Catechism*; and Joseph Smith's health revelation, *The Word of Wisdom*, a frequent Sunday School recitation. "You were our prize Sunday School boy," remembered a classmate. "Bros. Musser and Mabin [John Maiben] predicted great things for you."⁶ On one occasion, he pitted his declamatory skills against Ort [Orson F.] Whitney, whose rendition of "Shamus O'Brien" proved superior to Heber's "The Martyrdom of the Prophet and Patriarch." But "Heber had another card up his sleeve," Orson Whitney recalled many years later. "He answered more questions from the *Catechism* than any other student in school, and won a prize equal to mine, which was the *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*."⁷

Yet Heber's confident facade concealed a desperate shyness. When first asked to pray publicly, he trembled "like a leaf" and feared imminent collapse.⁸ President Young's 1868 reconnoiter at the school had similar results. Unnerved, Heber stumbled badly in his recital of the *Word of Wisdom*, causing his classmates great merriment. Thoroughly confused, Heber had to begin his recitation anew. President Young later salvaged the incident by highly complimenting him. "I was my father's own son by not being discouraged [and quitting]," Heber remembered Brigham telling him, "but demonstrated a true spirit of determination to accomplish the task given me." Heber never forgot his embarrassment nor President Young's words of praise.⁹

As in Victorian England, Mormons used their Sabbath schools for both moral and social uplift. Children were taught scripture study, Sabbath observance, honesty, family solidarity, inviolability of the *Word of Wisdom*, and, of course, general propriety. At times the latter instruction was specific. Boys were told to stop stealing peaches from neighborhood gardens and warned of "the evil consequences of such evil conduct." Moreover, they should quit "throwing mud from the end of a stick which disfigured buildings that had cost a great deal."¹⁰

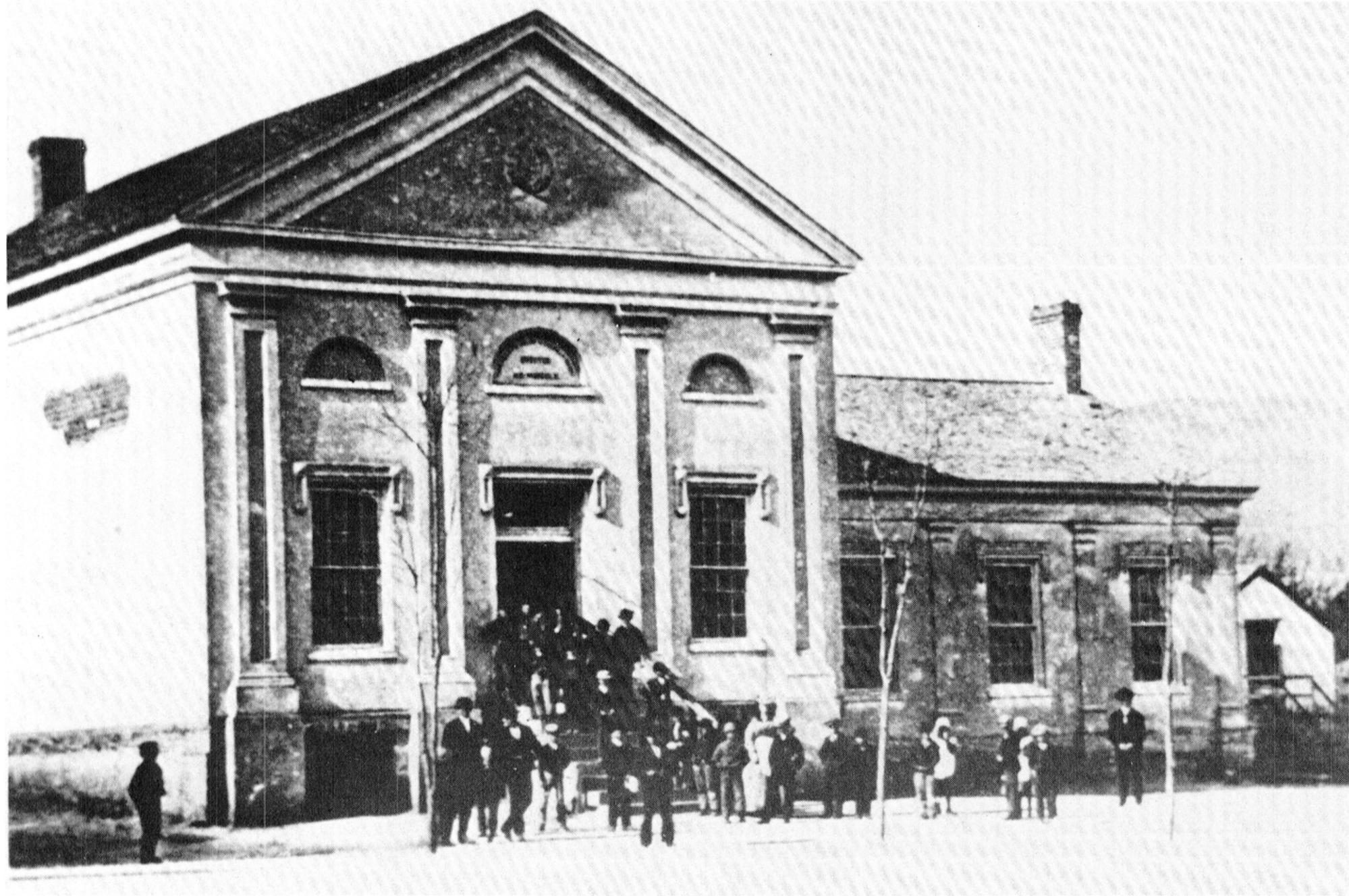
⁶Belle Whitney Sears to Grant, 20 February 1919, General Correspondence (hereafter cited as Gen. Corr.), Grant Papers. For Articles of Faith and Jacques's *Catechism* respectively, see Grant, "Remarks at the Dedicatory Service of the Pocatello Institute," p. 1, 17 October 1929, draft in box 156, fd. 5, Grant Papers; and Grant to Wilford Owen Woodruff, 19 September 1922, Grant Letterbook 59:753, Grant Papers.

⁷Orson F. Whitney, Minutes of Birthday Celebration, p. 6, nd, box 177, fd. 8, Grant Papers.

⁸Grant to Thomas G. Judd, 10 May 1926, Gen. Corr., Grant Papers.

⁹Grant, undated and loose diary sheet, box 177, fd. 5, Grant Papers.

¹⁰Sunday School Minutes, 23 August 1868, Thirteenth Ward Papers. For the social ramifications of Victorian reform, see George Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), 147-205.



Courtesy of LDS Church Historical Department

Thirteenth Ward Meetinghouse, circa 1870

Perhaps such a boyish misdeed almost drove Heber from the school. Angered by a reproof, the youth stormed from the Assembly Rooms, exclaiming that the school could go “plumb to hell.” “Being raised as an only child,” he later explained, “I was . . . rather . . . hot-headed . . . and I quit going.” After many entreaties to return, including those of George Goddard, his neighbor and a member of the school’s superintendency, Heber finally rejoined his classmates. Brother Goddard “kept me from going where I said the Sunday School could go,” Heber acknowledged.¹¹

Heber generally enjoyed the school and credited it as having a major shaping influence on his character. Clearly its impact went beyond rote learning and indoctrination. Goddard, Maiben, and school librarian F. A. Mitchell, who was always on hand to lend “good books to read,” were in fact role models that the fatherless boy desperately needed.¹² “Your integrity and devotion . . . has been an inspiration to me,” Heber wrote in mid-life to Maiben. “I look back with pleasure to the happy associations that I have had with you and Brother Goddard, Bishop Woolley and many other faithful Saints when I was a young man.”¹³

Heber’s youthful Thirteenth Ward experiences involved more than Sunday School exercises. While the pioneers’ first meetings were centered on Temple Square, almost from its establishment the Thirteenth Ward held a plethora of meetings. These included youth meetings, women’s meetings, men’s meetings, Quaker-type meetings that allowed broad-based participation, and preaching meetings that were held during the winter season as often as three times a week. Unlike most pioneer Mormons, who were chronically lax in their meeting attendance, Heber was often seated in a Thirteenth Ward pew. Indeed some of his fondest memories centered on “going to meeting.” There were Brother Blythe’s interminable half-hour prayers and George Goddard’s sweetly and often sung rendition of “Who’s on the Lord’s Side?”¹⁴ And then there was Bishop Edwin D. Woolley. Charitable, well-meaning, and firmly dedicated to his religion, Bishop Woolley could also be summary during a preaching meeting.

¹¹Grant to A. G. Gowans, 10 July 1919, Grant Letterbook 54:826; and Grant to Hyrum H. Goddard, 8 December 1937, Grant Letterbook 75:930, Grant Papers.

¹²Grant, Blessing of F. A. Mitchell, 15 September 1919, Grant Letterbook 55:70, Grant Papers.

¹³Grant to John Maiben, 19 July 1901, Grant Letterbook 31:98 (inserted between pp. 680–81). See also Grant, “Remarks at the Funeral Services of Franklin B. Platt,” 18 March 1928, Grant Letterbook, p. 332, in box 192, fd. 8, Grant Papers.

¹⁴W. S. Naylor to Grant, 22 November 1940, Ephemera Material (Birthday Tributes), Grant Papers; Emily Wells Grant to Grant, 11 August 1890, Family Correspondence, Grant Papers.

During one worship service, he “spoke warmly” of those who accused him of failing to act “the part of a Father” and urged his critics to air their feelings. When William Capener did so, Bishop Woolley peremptorily cut him off from the Church. Members debated the action the following week, with half the congregation refusing to sustain the excommunication. Bishop Woolley, however, refused to budge. Railing “about the whoredom and the wickedness” of the ward, the bishop vowed “by the help of the Lord and the brethern [*sic*]” to cleanse it.¹⁵

Heber’s memory of Bishop Woolley focused on more prosaic things—like the bishop’s heavy emphasis on tithe paying or his control of speakers and meetings. Bishop Woolley didn’t like meetings to last longer than two hours and invariably warned his preachers to limit their sermons to a single hour. Heber normally positioned himself in the northeast corner of the Assembly Rooms where, after the obligatory hour, he would periodically snap his watch crystal as a reminder of the hour’s lateness. The act usually was unnecessary. From his vantage point, Heber could witness the bishop’s surreptitious hand reach out and tug at a long-winded preacher’s coattails. But Woolley’s behavior was not automatic. A spellbinding speaker like John Morgan, fresh from his Southern States mission, received *carte blanche*. “Bishop Woolley knows whose coat to pull,” the boy thoughtfully observed.¹⁶

There were other speakers Heber remembered being drawn to. Young John Henry Smith, only eight years Grant’s senior, seemed always to carry “the inspiration of the Lord.” Joseph F. Smith, nephew of the founding prophet and youthful counselor to President Young, also spoke impressively. Even “as a little child . . . before I could thoroughly comprehend the teaching of the authorities of the Church,” Heber recalled, President Smith’s Thirteenth Ward preaching would “thrill my very being.”¹⁷

No speaker captivated him like President Young. Somewhat over five feet eight inches tall (above average for the time), Brigham Young carried himself with conscious presence. Observers who watched his delivery emphasized his lips, which “came together like the jaws of a bear trap” and conveyed “indomitable pluck.” While young Heber

¹⁵General Minutes, 21 and 25 December 1856, Thirteenth Ward Papers. According to Bishop Woolley, Capener had previously agreed that their long-standing dispute would be settled privately. The disgruntled communicant, however, had refused to come forth.

¹⁶Grant to Iva Hamblin, 23 May 1935, Grant Letterbook 72:644, Grant Papers. For Woolley’s emphasis on tithe paying, see J. H. Midgley to Grant, 16 May 1941, Gen. Corr., Grant Papers.

¹⁷Grant, “Remarks at the YMMIA Board Meeting,” 29 January 1919, box 157, fd. 3, Grant Papers.

probably failed to detect them, Vermont provincialisms such as *leetle*, *beyend*, *disremember*, *ain't you*, and *they was* gave color to his remarks and punctuated his easy, conversational style.¹⁸ Mormons and gentiles alike generally agreed on Brigham's pulpit appeal.¹⁹

Heber himself was enthralled by Young's "wonderful capacity to hold his audience" and his ability to inspire his listeners about "the principles of life and salvation."²⁰ Whether behind a Thirteenth Ward pulpit or more frequently occupying the rostrum at Temple Square where Heber often attended, President Young stated and restated his themes: Build Zion . . . Sacrifice time, talent and means for the community . . . Bear each other's burdens . . . Become the Lord's steward . . . Be self-sufficient . . . Avoid Babylon . . . Work hard . . . Perform your duty . . . Obey. So indelibly were they impressed on Heber's young mind that Young's themes became his own lifelong preaching texts.

Heber learned other lessons by attending the Thirteenth Ward's preaching meetings. One elder never used a simple word when several larger ones might do. On one occasion after delivering a fulsome sermon, he was followed to the speaker's stand by the ungrammatical Millen Atwood. During the first sermon, Heber, who was studying English at the time, penciled on his removable cuff a long list of unfamiliar words that required study. Eyeing Atwood, he proposed to continue his self-improvement exercise by listing a few solecisms. "I did not write anything more after that first sentence—not a word," Heber vividly remembered sixty-five years later. "When Millen Atwood stopped preaching, tears were rolling down my cheeks. . . . [Atwood's] testimony made the first profound impression that was ever made upon my heart and soul of the divine mission of the Prophet [Joseph Smith]."²¹

Heber's lay priesthood activity also helped mold him. Unlike Mormon young men of today, he apparently was never asked to break

¹⁸For these and other contemporary descriptions of Brigham Young's speaking, see sketch by S. A. Kenner in *History of the Bench and Bar of Utah*, ed. and comp. C. C. Goodwin (Salt Lake City: Interstate Press Association, 1913), 12; *Chicago Times*, report filed 22 February 1871, in Preston Nibley, *Brigham Young: The Man and His Work* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1936), 469; *New York Herald*, 12 August 1868; and "A 'Forty-Niner' Describes Brigham Young," in LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Journals of Forty-Niners: Salt Lake to Los Angeles*, vol. 2 of *Far West and the Rockies* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur R. Clark, 1954), 276 n.

¹⁹Ronald W. Walker, "Raining Pitchforks: Brigham Young as Preacher," *Sunstone* 8 (May-June 1983): 4-9.

²⁰Grant to Susa Young Gates, 16 March 1927, Grant Letterbook 65:167, Grant Papers.

²¹Grant, "The Spirit and the Letter," *Improvement Era* 42 (April 1939), 201. See also Grant, Conference Report, April 1901, 64; and Grant, *Reminiscences of President Heber J. Grant*, p. 25, nd, box 145, fd. 4, Grant Papers. Grant remembered the first speaker using such phrases as "We have indisputable and uncontrovertable evidences of the divine benignity."

and bless the sacramental bread.²² He did, however, serve as one of the ward's block teachers, whom Bishop Woolley admitted were not always the "best talents" or the "best men." They were, in Woolley's mind, simply the best that would "work with him."²³ This meant occasionally asking a youth like Heber to labor with an experienced companion like Hamilton G. Park. Heber's teaching activity was of more than passing importance. Park's faith was deep and visionary—he once announced that he had "seen the Savior and heard him speak."²⁴ As the man and boy walked around the block occupied by the imposing Salt Lake Theatre, Brother Park plied his impressionable companion with faith-promoting stories, many involving his personal experiences as a missionary to Scotland. Such moments convinced Heber that Hamilton Park was "one of the best spirited men in the Church & one that would sacrifice Everything for his religion."²⁵ At a time when few teenagers served as block teachers, Heber performed with uncommon diligence. In addition to his monthly teaching chores, he regularly attended the twice monthly bishops' report sessions at the Council House.²⁶ Every bishop, bishopric counselor, and teacher in the city was invited to these sessions, but leaders complained of "thin" and "woefully neglected" attendance. Typical meetings might find half of the city's bishops and only a handful of teachers present—Heber of course being one of them.²⁷

Commensurate with this activity, young Heber was ordained a seventy, pioneer Utah's most common lay priesthood office. At that time, Heber was very much a sapling among mature men.²⁸ Most Thirteenth Ward priesthood bearers were in their middle or late thirties. Even the few who held the "Lesser" or Aaronic Priesthood

²²Grant Typed Diary, 7 July 1901.

²³Minutes of the Bishops' Meetings, 29 April 1869 and 1 September 1870, Presiding Bishopric Papers, LDS Church Archives.

²⁴Anthon H. Lund Journal, 7 January 1900, LDS Church Archives.

²⁵Grant Manuscript Diary, 29 May 1881; Grant to the Family of Hamilton G. Park, 3 May 1912, Grant Letterbook 45:343–44; and undated draft manuscript, p. 4, box 177, fd. 5, Grant Papers.

²⁶Grant, "Sermon Delivered by President Heber J. Grant, 12 June 1921," draft in Gen. Corr., box 53, fd. 7, Grant Papers; and Grant, "Funeral Services for Edward W. Hunter," 1 December 1931, Grant Letterbook, p. 634, box 192, fd. 8, Grant Papers.

²⁷Minutes of the Bishops' Meetings, especially 11 November 1858, 27 September 1860, 19 November 1863, and 7 July 1870, Presiding Bishopric Papers.

²⁸A survey of ward priesthood officers in 1856, the last comprehensive Thirteenth Ward census, reveals that of the 130 boys and men over twelve years of age, fourteen held the Aaronic Priesthood (five deacons, three teachers, and six priests) and sixty-seven held the Melchizedek Priesthood (eleven elders, forty-five seventies, and eleven high priests). Forty-nine were unordained. The average age for deacons, teachers, and priests was twenty, thirty-five, and twenty respectively. For elders, seventies, and high priests the average age was twenty-five, thirty-four, and sixty-eight. Only three minors were ordained to either of the priesthoods (Ordinance Records, 1856, Thirteenth Ward Papers). The paucity of Aaronic Priesthood bearers continued at least until the late 1870s when there were only 170 in the entire city—or about nine per ward (see Minutes of the Bishops' Meetings, 31 August 1877, Presiding Bishopric Papers).

were normally adults. In contrast, Heber was ordained and assigned to the Thirtieth Quorum of Seventy when he was about fifteen years old.²⁹

Lessons, meetings, and priesthood duties were not the only shaping forces in the young boy's life. Books also influenced him. He found Parley P. Pratt's *Autobiography* to be "intensely interesting" and was "thrilled" by Pratt's *Key to Theology*. The Thirteenth Ward library furnished Dr. Paley's two works, *Evidences of Christianity* and *Natural Theology*, and Heber accounted Nelson's work, *Infidelity*, as having made a "profound impression" on him. However, none of these affected him as much as Samuel Smiles's chapbooks, *Character*, *Thrift*, and *Self-Help*, which in the Victorian style of the time idealized the self-made man. Equally important were his *Wilson* and *National* school readers. Their firm biblical values made such a powerful impact on the boy that he quoted from these elementary readers for the rest of his life.³⁰

Then there was the Book of Mormon, which Anthony C. Ivins, Heber's uncle, first persuaded him to read. Pitting the fourteen-year-old Heber against his own son, Anthony Ivins promised the first boy to finish the book a pair of buckskin gloves, a wild frontier extravagance. After the first day, Heber's hopes were virtually dashed. Young Ivins had stayed up most of the night and read 150 pages, while Heber, who hoped to read the scripture thoughtfully, had amassed only twenty-five pages. The incident, however, had a "Tortoise and the Hare" ending. "When I finished the book," Heber remembered, "I not only got a testimony [of it] but . . . the gloves as well." After his fast start, Heber's cousin never read another page.³¹

Young Heber, however, did not escape adolescence without its usual trials. By his late teens, he obviously prized his independence—even when dealing with the men whom he admired most. For example when Bishop Woolley asked him to manage a ward social—a dance—Heber hesitated.

²⁹Grant to Edward H. Anderson, 5 June 1900, Grant Letterbook 30:619; and Grant Typed Diary, 16 December 1930, Grant Papers. Toward the end of Grant's life, several sources indicate that he had been earlier ordained an elder. Heber J. Grant himself never mentioned such an ordination, nor is it confirmed by ward records.

³⁰Pratt: Grant Typed Diary, 22 November 1930, Grant Papers, and First Presidency Letterbook 63:517, LDS First Presidency Papers, LDS Church Archives. Paley: Grant, "Draft of Remarks at Tabernacle," 7 July 1895 and 26 January 1896, Grant Letterbooks 21:38 and 33:28, Grant Papers. Nelson: Grant, Draft of B.Y.U. Centennial Address, 16 October 1925, Grant Letterbook 63:548, Grant Papers. Smiles: Grant to Edward Anderson, 5 and 6 June 1900, Grant Letterbook 30:619–20, 622, Grant Papers. Readers: Grant to Leo J. Muir, 10 June 1941, Grant Letterbook 80:107, Grant Papers.

³¹Grant, undated and untitled draft of reminiscences, box 145, fd. 4; and Grant to J. M. Shodahl, 9 December 1927, Grant Letterbook 65:736, Grant Papers.

“I will do my best, but you need to agree to some conditions.”

There had grown a bond between the boy and his bishop that allowed such cheeky candor. Because of Heber's marble playing and perhaps his graver offense of ball throwing against the Woolley barn, Edwin had labelled him “the laziest boy in the Thirteenth ward.” But Heber had earnestly mounted a successful campaign to reclaim the bishop's confidence.³²

Heber made his first request. The dance would require a smooth dance floor, not the rough-hewn planks of the Thirteenth Ward Assembly Rooms. Only by whittling candle wax into the cracks could the floor be made smooth. Bishop Woolley had long opposed the idea for safety reasons. But he agreed to Heber's terms.

“And you must agree to pay the loss if there is one. You cannot have the party in the Thirteenth ward and make any money,” Heber complained. “The young people won't come any more. . . . You have got to have three waltzes.”

Neighboring wards permitted at least three of the new “round dances” such as the waltz and polka each evening. But Bishop Woolley insisted on quadrilles and cotillions, where dancers discreetly grouped themselves in old-fashioned lines or squares instead of pairing off in couples.

For a moment Bishop Woolley weighed philosophy and values against the possibility of another unsuccessful dance. An earlier party had failed to raise money for the St. George Temple fund, and the ward's proud reputation for always being in the lead had been tarnished.

“Take the three waltzes,” Bishop Woolley conceded.

As his last request, Heber argued that they must hire Olsen's Band—the only ensemble in town that played the “Blue Danube Waltz” to perfection. The problem lay with the band's flutist, whose drunkenness at an earlier ward engagement had caused a great deal of disorder. As a result, Bishop Woolley had strictly forbidden the band to return. But once again Heber won. “Take Olsen's Quadrille Band,” the bishop said. “Take your three round dances. Wax the floor.”

On the night of the dance, President Young himself came. “This is for the benefit of the St. George Temple, isn't it?” he asked Heber at the door. Squeezing a ten dollar gold piece into the young man's hand, he asked, “Is that enough to pay for my ticket?” and entered the well-decorated room.

³²Grant Manuscript Diary, 30 August 1903, Grant Papers.

That night the Thirteenth Ward raised \$80 for the new temple. No other ward earned half that much. “We scooped the town,” Heber recalled years later, “and we had *four* round dances!”

When the unauthorized fourth round dance began, President Young instantly recognized the change in the program and protested, “They are waltzing.”

“No,” said Heber, only technically correct. “They are not waltzing: when they waltz they waltz all around the room. This is a quadrille.”

Heber’s sleight of hand brought a laugh from Brigham and the mild rejoinder, “You boys, you boys.”³³

A short time later President Young played a central role in one of Heber’s greatest trials of faith. The Church leader had called the seventeen-year-old into his office to discuss the future, and he quickly focused their talk. “I think it is about time some of . . . [Jedediah’s] boys were putting on the harness,” he told Heber. “Don’t you want to go on a mission?”

“That is a splendid idea, and I approve of it,” Heber later recalled saying, “but I have some brothers three years older than I, and I suggest that you call them first.”

At length Brigham complied but found the Grant polygamous half-brothers to be even more hesitant than Heber. As a result, Rachel’s son was once more summoned to the President’s office, and this time Heber agreed to accept a mission call the following spring.³⁴

Actually, there were good reasons for his misgivings and mock resistance. He had left school at the age of sixteen to support his mother—and to fulfill his desire for a commercial career. His employers had promoted him rapidly, and now for the first time Rachel and her son enjoyed a measure of prosperity. But Heber’s feelings were by no means consistent. Patriarch Perkins had promised him while Heber was still an infant that Heber would “begin the ministry when very young.” Rachel and Heber had read and reread this blessing repeatedly, making it the boy’s text for life. Now with President Young’s call, the part about a youthful ministry seemed literally fulfilled. Excited, Heber began reading of the exploits of George Q. Cannon, Joseph F. Smith, and Erastus Snow—other teenaged missionaries—no doubt mentally comparing his skills and sinew with the young heroes who had

³³Rachel Grant Taylor, “When Brigham Young Watched a Waltz,” *Improvement Era* 44 (November 1941): 654, 678.

³⁴Grant to Leland H. Merrill, 14 June 1938, Grant Letterbook 76:611; Grant, “Draft of Remarks on Brigham Young,” 1 June 1924, box 157, fd. 5; Grant Typed Diary, 23 November 1928, Grant Papers.



Courtesy of LDS Church Historical Department

Heber J. Grant as a Young Man

preceded him.³⁵ He paid his debts and prepared for an immediate departure.

According to the custom of the time, formal missionary calls were announced during the official proceedings of general conference, and Heber entered the Tabernacle in April 1876 fully expecting to hear his name read. However, much to his bewilderment, the clerk failed to do so. Heber was devastated. During the next several days as he tried to complete his normal duties with Wells Fargo, he frequently wept in disappointment and perhaps in embarrassment.³⁶ Years later he would learn why no mission call had come. Erastus Snow and Daniel H. Wells had objected to his name when the list of prospective missionaries was submitted for General Authority approval. The boy, they claimed, was already performing “a very splendid mission” in providing for his widowed mother.³⁷

The wound was slow to heal. Unbeknown to his closest friends and even to Rachel in whom he often confided such matters, during the next four or five years the episode haunted him. The problem, he believed, lay in the efficacy of Perkins’s blessing—and in the larger question of religious revelation itself. Had not the patriarch erred? How “sure” was prophecy’s “sure word”? “I was tempted seriously for several years to renounce my faith in the Gospel because this blessing was not fulfilled,” he admitted. “The spirit would come over me . . . that the patriarch had lied to me, and that I should throw the whole business away.”³⁸

The Word of Wisdom also challenged the young man’s faith. While his Thirteenth Ward Sunday School tutors inveighed against coffee, tea, tobacco, and alcohol, the prohibition of these commodities was never made to be a religious test. Mormons could be considered “good” Mormons and still occasionally imbibe. In fact, devout Rachel’s boardinghouse first introduced Heber to the taste of coffee. He soon became addicted, and despite Rachel’s gentle disapproval he found that he could not abandon it. Time after time he quit, only to find his appetite uncontrollable. Finally, “Aunt” Susan Grant, his

³⁵The undated and unidentified blessing is found in box 176, fd. 23, Grant Papers. For its importance to Heber and Rachel, see Grant to Edward H. Anderson, 5 June 1890, Grant Letterbook 30:620; Grant to Rachel Ridgway Grant, 16 December 1901, Grant Letterbook 34:135; and Rachel Ridgway Grant to Grant, 23 May 1905, Family Correspondence, box 127, fd. 12, Grant Papers. For details of Heber’s youthful missionary call and his reading of teenaged proselyting accounts, see “Reminiscences of President Heber J. Grant,” nd, box 145, fd. 4, Grant Papers.

³⁶George H. Crosby, Jr., to Grant, 27 November 1931, Gen. Corr., Grant Papers.

³⁷Grant to Wilford Owen Woodruff, 18 August 1922, Gen. Corr., Grant Papers.

³⁸Grant to Marian Cannon Bennion, 2 March 1935, Grant Letterbook 72:284; and Grant, “Reminiscences of President Heber J. Grant,” pp. 17–18, nd, box 145, fd. 4, Grant Papers.

father's former plural wife, served him a cup of her special blend of creamed coffee. Heber demurred.

"Have you promised anybody that you would quit?"

"I have promised myself a number of times that I would quit," he allowed. But "now I have said I am going to take a cup of coffee whenever I want it and I haven't drank any for months."

"This is a fine cup to quit on," said the angelic Aunt Susan, who was entirely out of character as a temptress.

"All right, my dear aunt." Heber raised the cup to his lips, his mouth watering. But after a moment the full and undrunk cup returned to the table, and with that victory his craving for the beverage ceased.³⁹

The young man had greater difficulty with beer. Fearing an early death like his father's and convinced of the virtues of life insurance, Salt Lake City's youngest agent repeatedly sought coverage to protect his mother. Nineteenth-century actuarial tables, however, discriminated against slender girths and no company would issue Heber a policy. Determined to gain weight, Heber sought out Dr. Benedict, who had an immediate solution. If Heber would drink four glasses of beer daily, Dr. Benedict prescribed, within two years he would have the additional twenty pounds necessary for coverage.

At first Heber found beer "bitter and distasteful," like his mother's herbal "kinnikinnick" tea. But he quickly acquired both a business and a personal taste for it. Within a year, he secured the fire insurance business of most Salt Lake City saloons and Utah breweries, an additional ten pounds, and a growing relish for the savor of hops. His daily four-glass limit became five, and occasionally grew to six.

He warred with his acute sense of conscience. Rereading the Word of Wisdom, he resolved to abandon his drinking and place his health and his mother's future with the Lord, "insurance or no insurance." But resolutions were easier made than kept. "I wanted some [beer] so bad that I drank it again," he confessed. Finally, he found strength in the same formula that he had used with coffee. By telling himself he was free to take a drink whenever he wished, he overcame his obsession and ceased drinking. As quickly, he lost his trade with the saloons and breweries of the Territory.⁴⁰

³⁹Grant to Leslie [Midgley], nd, Grant Letterbook 74:294, Grant Papers.

⁴⁰Grant, "Draft of Remarks Made at the Inglewood Stake Conference," 4 February 1940, box 156, fd. 1; Grant to Leslie [Midgley], 23 November 1936, Grant Letterbook 74:294; and Grant to Mr. and Mrs. E. H. Huish, 20 April 1936, Gen. Corr., Grant Papers.

During this time of personal struggle, Heber learned firsthand of the apparent fallibility of Church leaders. With Rachel in St. George, Utah, doing temple work, he and Frank Kimball kept “bachelor hall” at the Grant home. Frank Kimball, a moral but not an outwardly religious man, was summoned by the Fifteenth Ward bishopric and tried for his membership. After attempting in vain to testify for his friend, Heber perched himself on a fence pole outside an open window of the second-story hearing room. Kimball found it difficult to make a confession of faith, but pled for a year’s probation to prepare himself. In response the bishopric, ignoring President Daniel H. Wells’s counsel “to go slow” with the case, demanded guarantees about his future tithing and several other duties. Heber was outraged. “No, I wouldn’t [agree], darn you,” he found himself saying under his breath, still seated on his pole. Minutes later Frank Kimball was excommunicated, a judgment which, at least according to Grant’s understanding, breached fairness and Christian kindness.⁴¹

Heber’s several problems and scarring experiences gnawed at his spirit. Uncertain of his inherited faith, he attended at least one meeting at the freethinking Liberal Institute, probably more in curiosity than in actual discontent.⁴² He also became “greatly interested” in the writings of Robert G. Ingersoll, nineteenth-century America’s antichristian curmudgeon.⁴³ Accordingly, his network of friends reflected his growing religious ambivalence. Balancing the young man’s many staunchly Mormon friends were others that he later came to regard as disreputable. They “smoked a little, and did things they ought not to do,” Heber recalled, “but I liked them, they were jolly fellows.”⁴⁴ He later considered his situation to be grave. “I stood as it were upon the brink of usefulness or upon the brink of making a failure of my life.”⁴⁵

Heber credited the Thirteenth Ward for his salvation. Bringing his Sunday School experience to full circle, the twenty-one-year-old was appointed a teacher. As in the earlier days of Brothers Goddard, Maiben, and Musser, Heber now stood before a congregation of

⁴¹Frank Kimball, the son of Mormon matriarch Sarah M. Kimball, refused to appeal the decision to the high council and remained out of the LDS church the rest of his life (Grant to Heber M. Wells, 8 April 1937, Grant Letterbook 75:246); Grant to the family of Elder John Morgan, 22 April 1937, Grant Letterbook 75:286–87; and Grant Typed Diary, 11 October 1940, Grant Papers.

⁴²Grant to Henry C. Link, 31 October 1938, Grant Letterbook 76:909, Grant Papers.

⁴³Grant to Fred (?), 26 April 1924, Grant Letterbook 61:832; and Grant, “Draft of B.Y.U. Centennial Address,” 16 October 1925, Grant Letterbook 63:549, Grant Papers.

⁴⁴Grant to Thomas Judd, 13 April 1936, Grant Letterbook 73:648; and Grant to Leona Walker, 15 May 1939, Grant Letterbook 77:791, Grant Papers.

⁴⁵*Contributor* 16 (August 1895): 640.

“scholars,” teaching, catechizing, praying, and serving as a role model. He frequently asked questions drawn from the Book of Mormon or the “Little Learner” section of the *Juvenile Instructor*. After several years’ service, his responsibilities were expanded to include assistant secretary and eventually secretary of the school.⁴⁶

Mormondom’s first ward Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association [YMMIA] also allowed him to serve. The Thirteenth Ward YMMIA called Heber as a president’s counselor at its initial meeting in 1875, and he continued in that capacity through a series of new presidencies for the rest of the decade.⁴⁷ The YMMIA’s weekly sessions were first designed to give men in their late teens and early twenties the chance for self-study and speechifying, though exercises later included readings, essays, music, lectures, and answering questions on religious and cultural topics.

The Thirteenth Ward YMMIA meetings were often high toned, though once the men peremptorily refused a member’s suggestion to take “the round dance pledge.”⁴⁸ Gospel topics were the primary staple, with each youth expected to speak. Since fifteen or twenty men were usually present (out of an enrolled thirty-three), meetings theoretically could be long. In actuality, most participants talked briefly. “Bro. H. J. Grant said he like the rest who had spoke before him was unprepared,” the minutes of one meeting recorded, “but according to the Book of Mormon he was satisfied that this was the Gospel of Christ restored.” On another occasion he was more loquacious. “If a person had any sense at all,” Heber observed, “he could see that Tobacco and Whiskey was not good for the human system as nearly any one that used Tobacco had to make themselves sick the first time and[,] Second[,] how disgraceful an intoxicated person made himself.”⁴⁹

Heber had other Mutual duties concurrent with his ward assignment. He acted as Salt Lake Stake YMMIA secretary and as a Mutual “missionary”

⁴⁶Sunday School Minutes, especially 27 May, 5 August, 23 December 1877; 13 January, 10 and 17 March, 19 and 26 May, 21 July, 18 August, 13 October, 3 November 1878; 13 April 1879, Thirteenth Ward Papers. See also Grant Manuscript Diary, 3 January 1886, and Grant to Thomas W. Sloan, 15 August 1905, Grant Letterbook 40:50, Grant Papers.

⁴⁷“Y.M.M.I.A.,” Thirteenth Ward Manuscript History, nd, LDS Church Archives. From pioneer times youth “improvement” meetings were held in the ward, some as late as 1874, but its meetings of June 1875 are generally credited with being the beginning of the modern YMMIA movement. (“Biographical Sketch,” nd, Grant Letterbook 58:177, lists Heber J. Grant as having served as president, although no corroborating evidence is found in the sketchy official minutes.)

⁴⁸Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association Minute Book, 1874–76, 20 September 1875, Thirteenth Ward Papers.

⁴⁹Ibid., 17 September and 11 October 1875.

in the emerging Churchwide youth organization. The latter calling required him to speak before various Utah congregations. Unlike his later forceful, machine-gun style delivery, his first effort was a halting, two- or three-minute affair which no doubt drew beads of perspiration. Lastly, the 1880 April general conference sustained him as secretary to the General YMMIA Superintendency of the Church. He thereby became associated with Elders Wilford Woodruff, Joseph F. Smith, and Moses Thatcher, members of the new superintendency.⁵⁰

Grant's adult Sunday School and Mutual activities reenforced the values and faith of his heritage and permitted him to navigate successfully the difficult adolescent years of passage. No doubt he inflated the seriousness of his early crisis of belief. Bright and curious, he was subjected to a man's world when sixteen, yet his acts never trespassed pioneer Utah's basic religious norms. His gambling was with matchsticks, he permitted himself no Sunday baseball playing, and when friends offered him a sexual liaison, he fled with the rapidity of Joseph of Egypt.⁵¹ More than he knew, his religious feeling was inbred.

"You must know[,] and I am the only person who would tell you so," he wrote to a friend, "I have got to be a very good boy. I attend meetings Sunday, generally twice a day, [and] go to the Elders Quorum [and my] Youngmen's Mutual Improvement Asstn."⁵² While many of Zion's youth found it chic to renounce plural marriage, Heber wrote a long, impassioned defense that, whatever it lacked in grammar, orthography, and argument, clearly set him apart among his contemporaries. "Shall we the sons and daughters of these men and women who have sacrificed so much for their religion resign any portion of that religion [viz. polygamy] to suit the notions and fancies of those who are our bitterest enemies?" He particularly scored his disbelieving friends who claimed that they would never enter into its practice. "Just stop and think for one minute what must be the feelings of a polygamist mother . . . [for] one of her children speaking lightly of an ordinance, by the practice of which they were born."⁵³ Rachel's influence was always close at hand.

⁵⁰Stake Secretary: Grant to James N. Lambert, 3 April 1923, in Grant Typed Diary, 5 April 1923, Grant Papers. Mutual Missionary: Grant to Emil A. Berndt, 16 July 1920, Gen. Corr., Grant Papers. Church MIA Secretary: Edward H. Anderson, "The Past of Mutual Improvement," *Improvement Era* (November 1897): 6.

⁵¹Grant to Leslie [Midgley], 23 November 1936, Grant Letterbook 74:294; Grant to Leona Walker, 15 May 1939, Grant Letterbook 77:791, Grant Papers; Grant, "Sunday Baseball," 16 *Improvement Era* (January 1913): 262.

⁵²Grant to Fera[morz] Young, 26 March 1876, Gen. Corr., Grant Papers.

⁵³The address, which the nineteen-year-old apparently delivered before his seventies quorum particularly censured the disbelief of Mormondom's youth (Grant, "Draft on Polygamy," 12 February 1876, box 156, fd. 5, Grant Papers).

Those who knew young Heber best understood his religious commitment. "He lives his religion," Richard Young reported, "but is seldom able to warm himself unto enthusiasm over a principle; his love is a practical, everyday, common-sense devotion to principles which from their superiority to all others, he chooses to believe are divine."⁵⁴ Bishop Woolley was less analytical. When Heber was called to preside over the Tooele Stake at age twenty-three (thereby fulfilling Patriarch Perkins's blessing in an unexpected way), Bishop Woolley made a point of being at the conference. He wanted to assure the people that they were "getting a man and not a boy." Later the bishop met John Henry Smith on a Salt Lake City street. Reaching up and placing his arms around the large Apostle's neck, Bishop Woolley became emotional. "John Henry . . . I can't remain here much longer, but when I am gone don't you forget Heber J. Grant. . . . [He] is worthy to be one of the Apostles, don't you forget him."⁵⁵

⁵⁴Richard W. Young Diary, 2:3-4, November 1882, Western Americana, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

⁵⁵Grant to Orson Woolley, 20 February 1917, Grant Letterbook 53:667, Grant Papers.