

Authorship of the History of Brigham Young: A Review Essay

Howard C. Searle

Leland R. Nelson, comp. *The Journal of Brigham*. Provo, Utah: Council Press, 1980. x + 223 pp. \$8.95.

Reviewed by Howard C. Searle, Church Educational System college curriculum writer and instructor, Salt Lake Institute of Religion, adjacent to the University of Utah.

It is regrettable that a compilation such as *The Journal of Brigham* could not have been reviewed and exposed before it was sold through a concerted advertising campaign to a trusting and somewhat credulous public as the official diaries of Brigham Young. Criticisms of the *Journal of Joseph*, produced by the same compiler and publisher in 1979, have not deterred them from misrepresenting additional excerpts from the early Church annals as the "personal thoughts" and "writings" of Brigham Young (promotional flier in *BYU Today*). The introduction to *The Journal of Brigham* brazenly asserts that "although many books have been written *about* Brigham Young, here at last is his own story in his own words, a compilation of his first person writings from his manuscript history."

In his foreword Nelson admits that Brigham Young lacked literary skills, and that he utilized the services of "more than 20 scribes," but the extent and implications of this practice are not pursued or explained at all. Its relevance to the book's title and contents is completely ignored in the publisher's publicity releases.

Nelson's expansive claims for his publication are apparently based on the fact that Brigham Young did write three small diaries after he joined the Church in 1832. He must have started the first diary some time after his baptism, for he apparently erred in recording this significant date; the 9 April date in the diary had to be corrected to 14 April when his history was later written for publication.

There are five extant first person diaries of Brigham Young, but only three of these are holographs. The five diaries were written as noted in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Brigham Young's First Person Diaries

Dates Covered	Pages	Handwriting	Comment:
9 [14] April 1832 to 9 Sept. 1836	68	Holograph	Description of six short missionary journeys
27 July 1837 to 1 April 1845	116	Holograph	Large gaps in the narrative.
19 Oct. 1840 to c. 28 July 1844	130	Holograph	Interrupted narrative, small faded pages.
28 Sept. 1844 to 3 Feb. 1846	124	William Clayton Evan Greene John D. Lee Willard Richards	First person account kept by others.
27 May 1857 to 21 September 1857	61	Thomas D. Brown Joseph A. Young	Started by Brown in the third person, but entries from 17 June to 21 September 1857 were written in the first person by Brigham Young's son, Joseph A.

Only 314 pages of Brigham Young's early diaries are in his own handwriting (see Table 1). These pages are quite small, faded in places, and often difficult to read. The diaries are primarily missionary journals and have frequent gaps of several months and sometimes a year or more between entries. The rather sketchy and intermittent nature of these holographic diaries is indicated in Table 2 which lists the entries by year.

TABLE 2
Brigham Young's Holograph Diary Entries by Year

Year	Approx. No. Words	Year	Approx. No. Words	Year	Approx. No. Words
1832	112	1837	280	1842	31
1833	1,960	1838	27	1843	1,575
1834	None	1839	650	1844	2,400
1835	2,275	1840	2,975	1845	1,750
1836	1,260	1841	2,100		

On 28 September 1844 President Young's secretaries and the Church clerks began keeping his diary for him—just as they had done for Joseph Smith.¹ After writing the diary in first person narrative for a little over a year, the scribes switched to a third person style, which must have been easier and more natural for them. There is a definite contrast between Brigham Young's holographic diary entries and those of his scribes. The faulty spelling, unpolished grammar, colorful New England vocabulary, straightforward style, and distinctive handwriting all help to make his personal writing recognizable. The absence of many of these characteristic elements in the writing of the scribes would suggest that they were not recording verbatim dictation. Also, there does not seem to be any contemporary documentary evidence that Brigham regularly dictated his diary entries. Soon after he assumed the heavy responsibilities of Church leadership, Brigham Young apparently followed the precedent of the Prophet Joseph Smith in having his secretaries and scribes write his diaries for him.

What is deceptive about Nelson's *The Journal of Brigham* is that it was not compiled from Brigham Young's diaries at all, but from printed versions of the "History of Brigham Young," which was written by the Church Historian and his assistants after 1856. After the completion of the "History of Joseph Smith" up to 8 August 1844, the official Church annals were continued as the "History of Brigham Young." This transition in the title of the Manuscript History of the Church apparently took place in January 1857. At this point in the history, Assistant Church Historian Wilford Woodruff, who was in charge of the project in 1856–57 during the absence in the East of the Church Historian George A. Smith, digressed from the chronological organization of the preceding narrative to include some genealogical information on President Young's family and a first person biographical narrative of the new Church leader from his birth in 1801 to 8 August 1844. Inasmuch as Brigham Young had begun his leadership of the Church as the senior officer of the Twelve Apostles, it seemed appropriate to Elder Woodruff and the other compilers of the history also to include biographical flashbacks of all of the other Apostles from the time of their births to 8 August 1844, when the Twelve were sustained to lead the Church. Wilford Woodruff, the prime motivator of the project and also secretary of the Twelve at the time, proceeded to collect the materials. Where the Apostles were available, he tried to get them to write a short autobiography and

¹See Howard C. Searle, "Authorship of the History of Joseph Smith: A Review Essay," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21 (Winter 1981): 110–22.

even offered them assistance if they wanted it. In the cases of some of the early Apostles who had died or apostatized, a biography was compiled for them—a few of them written in the first person. Church Historian George A. Smith returned to Utah in the spring of 1858 and was able to assist in the final stages of the project. When the “Histories of the Twelve,” as they were called, were completed, they were copied by the clerks into a new journal which was captioned “Book G of the Manuscript History of the Church.” Except for the biographical account of Brigham Young, which was first, the “histories” were entered in the order of the Apostles’ seniority in the quorum. Although the accounts differed in length and quality, a compilation was included for every member of the quorum prior to 8 August 1844.

After the “Histories” had been copied into “Book G of the Manuscript History,” they were read to Brigham Young and other members of the Presidency and the Twelve for approval and correction. During this process, twelve pages of notes which were to be incorporated into the published version were added at the end of the book. These “Histories” were first published serially in the *Deseret News* from 27 January to 8 September 1858 and later republished in the *Millennial Star* from 9 March 1863 to 2 September 1865. Brigham Young’s biography ran in the *Deseret News* from 27 January to 24 March 1858. The “Histories” of the other Apostles were all published as subtitles of the “History of Brigham Young.” With the printing of this series, publication of the Church annals was abruptly stopped. The “History of Brigham Young,” beyond 8 August 1844, was never published in the nineteenth century; and only excerpts have been printed in the twentieth, as is shown in Table 3.

After the digressive flashback which sketched the lives of President Young and the early Apostles, the manuscript of the “History of Brigham Young” was continued as a day-by-day narrative of Church affairs as they were conducted by President Young and the Twelve after 8 August 1844. B. H. Roberts published part of this history in 1932, bringing the narrative down to 28 February 1846. The entries from 29 February to 31 July 1847 were published for the first time in 1970 by Elden J. Watson, who obtained his material from some typescript segments of the history in the Utah State Historical Society.

The entire contents of *The Journal of Brigham* have been taken from these previously published excerpts of the “History of Brigham Young.” Not only is the book a republication of available printed material, it is also a greatly condensed version of it. The

TABLE 3
The Twentieth Century Publication of the History of Brigham Young

Dates Covered	Title as Published	Editor(s)	Abridged Version in <i>The Journal of Brigham</i>
1801 to 8 Aug. 1844	<i>Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1801-1844</i> (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1968), 202 pp. Republished from the <i>Millennial Star</i> .	Elden J. Watson	pp. 1-72
9 Aug. 1844 to 28 Feb. 1846	<i>History of the Church</i> (Salt Lake City, 1932) 7:247-603. Taken from the Manuscript History of Brigham Young, located in Church Archives.	B. H. Roberts	pp. 72-135
1 Jan. 1846 to 31 July 1847	<i>Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1846-1847</i> (Salt Lake City, 1970), 611 pp. Taken from a typescript copy of the Manuscript History of Brigham Young, located in the Utah State Historical Society.	Elden J. Watson	pp. 135-223
21 July 1847 to 29 Dec. 1867	<i>History of Brigham Young</i> (Berkeley, 1964). 374 pp. Contains Manuscript abridgment of portions of the History of Brigham Young which were sent to H. H. Bancroft during the preparation of his <i>History of Utah</i> .	William L. Knecht, Peter L. Crawley	

abridgment was made without the use of ellipses or any other means to indicate where omissions from earlier publications were made.

To what extent does this abridgment from the “History of Brigham Young” comprise a “journal” or the “personal thoughts” and “writings” of President Young? Nelson boldly asserts that Brigham Young’s first person manuscript history was “put together from his personal diaries” and that “the diaries were incorporated into the manuscript history” (p. ix). The most superficial comparison of Brigham Young’s diaries and his manuscript history would clearly show that this was not the case. There are hardly any entries in the diaries that have been used verbatim in the history. Although the same chronological organization is used, there are numerous entries in the Manuscript History for dates that do not appear in the diaries at all. In fact, there is not very much in the diaries that is even recognizable in the later history. Even when Brigham Young made significant entries in his diary—such as for 8 August 1844 when he was sustained to lead the Church—the compilers of his history did not copy the diary; they either utilized other more polished sources or composed their own narrative. An indication of the relationship between the diaries and the Manuscript History is shown by the fact that where there are approximately 17,395 words in the holographic diaries from 14 April 1832 to 1 April 1845, the history for the **same** period was amplified to about 112,668 words. If the holographic diaries had been used verbatim in their entirety—which they were not—they would represent only about fifteen percent of the completed Manuscript History for the same period. There were no holographic diaries available for Brigham Young’s history from 2 April 1845 to 31 July 1846; yet excerpts from this period comprise fifty-nine percent of Nelson’s book (pp. 90–223).

If Brigham Young’s diaries were not the major source for his later Manuscript History, then what sources were utilized by the compilers? Did President Young dictate much of the history to the writers as suggested by Mr. Nelson (p. ix)? It might be assumed that the genealogical and biographical data relating to his family and early life before he joined the Church were written or dictated by Brigham Young himself, but Wilford Woodruff also solicited information from all of President Young’s brothers and sisters.² Although President Young may have personally supplied some of the information, it was actually Wilford Woodruff and the clerks in the Historian’s office

²Wilford Woodruff to Orson Pratt, 28 February 1857, Library–Archives of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as Church Archives.

who compiled the account for publication.³ Several rough drafts of this early biographical account are still extant in the Church Archives, but none of them are in Brigham Young's handwriting. It is, of course, understandable that President Young could not get too involved in the daily details of writing his history in 1857–58, for this was the period when, in addition to his temporal and ecclesiastical duties as LDS Church President, he was faced with such pressing concerns as famine, the Mormon Reformation, the Mountain Meadow's Massacre, the untimely death of his counselor Jedediah Grant, the invasion of Johnston's Army, and his replacement as governor of Utah Territory.

Many firsthand reliable sources were available to the Church Historian and his staff for compiling Brigham Young's history after he joined the Church in April 1832. The "History of Joseph Smith," which was completed in January 1857, would have been helpful, but there were also such sources as the official Church minutes and Church periodicals, and the journals of Willard Richards, George A. Smith, Wilford Woodruff, John D. Lee, William Clayton, and others. Many of these men were President Young's missionary companions, fellow Apostles, or secretaries, and their lives often paralleled that of their leader. These sources, bolstered by personal recollections, were apparently utilized in compiling the history to a far greater extent than the imperfect holographic diaries of Brigham Young. Of course, a detailed study still needs to be made to determine, if possible, the original authorship of the various sources that were amalgamated into the Manuscript History.

Is the first person style an evidence that Brigham Young wrote his own history? The precedent for using scribes and ghostwriters was well established during the compilation of the "History of Joseph Smith," and the Church Historian and his staff merely continued the same methodology as they wrote the Church annals for Brigham Young's administration. A rough draft of the history which begins with the narrative of 9 August 1844 was originally started in the third person, but modifications were later made, right in the text, to convert it to a first person narrative of Brigham Young. All the other sources were similarly changed to fit the first person format which had characterized the Church annals since they were begun by Joseph Smith.

There is no evidence in the Historian's Office Journal that President Young was personally involved in the compilation of his history

³Historian's Office Journal, 16 November 1857, Church Archives.

until it reached the stage where it was read to him for approval. There is little doubt that he was responsible for much of the addenda added at this time, but this certainly does not make the entire contents his personal thoughts, dictation, or writing. If Nelson would have his readers believe that this book is a "journal" of the personal writing or dictation of Brigham Young, the burden of proof still rests upon him.