

The First Vision of Joseph Smith Jr.: 200 Years On

A Conference at the Huntington Library,
January 24–25, 2020

Richard E. Bennett

This special issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly* features the proceedings of a conference held at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith's First Vision. In presenting slightly modified transcripts of the papers delivered at this conference, we hope *BYU Studies Quarterly* readers will gain insights into both this experience of Joseph Smith's and the various ways scholars have come to view it.

Why was the Huntington Library interested in sponsoring a conference in late January 2020 on Mormon history, specifically during the two hundredth anniversary year of the initial vision of Joseph Smith, the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? These are fair questions, and as the one who suggested the idea for this conference in the first place, I will try to give at least a short answer or two.

Not well known is the fact that the Huntington Library has long held some of the most precious early Latter-day Saint historical documents extant. These include several letters and writings of Oliver Cowdery, who was Joseph Smith's primary scribe while translating the Book of Mormon, "second elder" of the newly organized Church of Christ, and personal assistant to Joseph for so many years. Furthermore, decades ago, the family of John D. Lee, the man who was executed in 1875 for his lead role in the horrific Mountain Meadows Massacre of September 11, 1857, donated his papers to the Huntington in hopes that here they would be carefully preserved and freely utilized. Later in the twentieth century, Juanita Brooks of St. George, Utah, whose persistent research led her to write more about the Mountain Meadows Massacre than any

other person, also donated her valuable papers and findings to the Huntington Library. With a sizeable grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Huntington even hired Brooks as a field agent in the 1940s to collect several more regional histories of Latter-day Saints and other residents living in southern Utah. The Huntington has very recently catalogued hundreds of these Mormon-related collections that exist nowhere else and has added to this sizeable collection since then. Never before has the Huntington highlighted its holdings in this field of research. Thus, a conference of this kind not only focused attention on its impressive holdings but also underscored its continuing commitment to build upon its reputation as the leading center in California for Mormon studies.

There may be other reasons. The growth in membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Southern California has been significant in recent years. In the year 2020, thousands of Latter-day Saints who reside within a certain radius of the Huntington are commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of the founding vision of their faith and appreciate the Huntington Library's desire to showcase its holdings. Many are also aware that a chair in Mormon studies has recently been established at nearby Claremont College. Thus 2020 promised to be a year of many celebrations and commemorations, to which this conference was to have been a kick-off of sorts, the first of many significant remembrances. However, the coronavirus pandemic has obviously placed a damper on many of these celebrations. Fortunately, the Huntington conference was able to take place not long before stay-at-home directives began to be issued in the United States.

Entitled "The First Vision of Joseph Smith Jr.: 200 Years On," the conference featured speakers from across the religious spectrum. Some were Latter-day Saints; others were leading scholars from other faith traditions. The program also positioned Smith's claim to visions and revelations within the larger context of American religious history, explored its historicity and theological ramifications, and more generally illuminated what remains, even at two centuries' distance, a highly contested moment in American history. *BYU Studies Quarterly* is pleased to present the proceedings of this important conference.