

**The Sweet Singer of Israel:
David Hyrum Smith**

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Paul Edwards

*Let me be happy too. Oh! Restless soul,
Fold thy quick limbs and rest from care a while;
Watch the great clouds in fleecy volumes roll;
The lakelet in the sunshine seems to smile;—
Would God my friends were here to share my thought—
Would I could find the rest I long have sought.

Would I could speak the language of the hills
Would their plush velvet grace I could make known;
Could I translate the talking of the rills
That from their crowning dimples wander down—
I would not sing, and yet I can not cease;
I can not murmur, yet I have no peace.¹*

Thus wrote David Hyrum Smith in December of 1870. It is a song of discontent, and so he labeled it. But perhaps more than that it is the effort of a simple and poetic man to make his voice heard among those who were unaffected by the great truths that nurtured his life.

There is little written and much less said about this young man who was the fifth living son of the martyred prophet, the youngest brother of Joseph Smith III—missionary, counselor, artist, poet—probably because he was, and is, an embarrassment to the Reorganization (RLDS church) and minor in importance to the Latter-day Saints. His contribution is sketchily acknowledged and his illness treated with kind but firm respect. But in a movement with the tendency toward hero worship, there is surprisingly little interest in his life and thought or in his impact on the Reorganization movement, or even an acknowledgment of the fairly safe poetic and musical nature of his character.

This paper was anticipated as an introduction to the poetry, sketches, and paintings of David H. Smith, annotated by some analysis of the character and thinking of the man as indicated from his letters, first to his wife and then to his son. These works of art, letters, journals, as well as some unpublished partial essays, are owned by David's grandson, Lynn E. Smith of Independence, Missouri. This collection includes letters from the period of David's confinement; and, except for one or two prints of his Nauvoo painting, his collected poems, *Hesperis*, and a few scattered articles and sketches in the *Saints' Herald*, the complete primary clues to this man rest in the Lynn E. Smith collection.

Unfortunately, for reasons that can only be known by the family, though suspected by all of us, the final arrangements to use this material resulted in permission being withdrawn. This led this researcher to a vast treasure hunt seeking available information. But, with the exceptions of a brief account of his missionary work—and a statement of his illness—there is almost nothing said about him, anywhere. Inez Smith Davis, for example, does not see fit to mention him except in her listing of the counselors to Joseph III and in a side reference to the Utah trips. His name does not appear in the index, nor are his birth, ordination, or death listed among the chronological events of the Reorganized church.”²²

Thus, my objective has been to draw together doxographical information to introduce David Smith and some of his poetry to an audience sympathetic to the need for more historical investigation and biographical identification. I have been assured that his sketches, letters, and paintings will be available “in due time.”

David Hyrum Smith was born in Nauvoo on 17 November 1844, some five months after the assassination of his father. The impact of this tragedy made its mark on the young man. Opportunities were few and David’s education was limited, but he early indicated an almost unlimited interest in his environment. He was an avid reader and an artistically talented young man. Passionately fond of music, flowers, and people, his education was primarily self-created from these interests. When he was baptized into the Reorganization in October of 1861, the Montrose, Iowa, Branch was informed that David was to be “one of our church pillars, for the Spirit says so.”²³ John Shippy reported that young David was gaining fast “and will soon astonish the nations” with his music and poetry.

United with his brothers in Nauvoo, he grew in stature and in insight, taking on the physical characteristics of the Smiths and the attitudes of his older brother. His maturing years were spent during the great civil upheaval of our nation, but his participation was prevented by the vision of noninvolvement seen by his brother.”²⁴ His connection with the Reorganization in these years seems firm if not too well worked out, and he wrote at Nauvoo in 1864 of other pressures.

*Such voices come to all
And whisper softly in our inmost heart;
They bid us nobly stand, or weakly fall,
And ask us to endure, or give up all.
Say, shall we choose the good or evil part?
Answer, ye saints most dear,
And choose the good things of the Lord, our God;
Trusting in him to bring us help and cheer,
Nor let our righteousness forsake us here;
So shall we be with Christ—nor fear the rod.⁵*

He was ordained a priest in March of 1863 and seven months later, at Council Bluffs, Iowa, received ordination as an elder. Following this, he was assigned to work in the Michigan and northern Indiana area, traveling often with either Joseph or Alexander.⁶

The Conference of 1869, meeting at St. Louis, optimistically appointed David and his older brother Alexander to Utah and the Pacific Slope to contact the “scattered saints” there. It was also expected that they would meet and exchange ideas with the leaders of the Utah church⁷—“to be conducted, on our part, in a frank and fearless, though kindly manner.”⁸ David started west early in the summer of 1869, arriving in Utah by October of that year.⁹ Letters from Utah indicated increasing difficulty in developing meaningful communications with his cousins and with Brigham Young; but they also reported some acceptance of these “sons of the prophet, especially of David.” Because Alexander was “otherwise occupied,” David authored a series of articles in the *Herald* about his “experiences” at Salt Lake. These letters and accounts are filled with a surprisingly more than ordinary amount of homesickness and with descriptions of the countryside, the wildlife, and occasionally a detailed evaluation of the day. The brothers returned from their not too successful mission in March of 1870—Alexander, because of his wife’s illness, and David “on account of being too incapacitated by illness for the field.”¹⁰

Yet, in May of 1870, David was strong enough to marry eighteen-year-old Clara Charlotte Hartshorn at the home of her parents at Sandwich, DeKalb, Illinois. A son, Elbert Aorivl, was born at the mansion house in Nauvoo in March of the following year.¹¹ In that year (April 1871) at Plano, Illinois, David was ordained president of the Second Quorum of Elders and in that capacity labored as assistant editor of the *Herald* and in the church in the Fort Madison, Iowa, area.¹²

During the next two years, Alexander and David Smith served in the String Prairie and Nauvoo districts. They had considered another Utah trip at this time, but circumstances had prevented their going. While in Nauvoo, David was chosen president of the Olive Branch and was responsible for its reorganization.¹³ At the annual conference of 1872 at St. Louis, the brothers were asked to make a second journey to Utah.¹⁴ Later, Joseph indicated that this was an unwise decision and that the sensitive young man had taken on too much, and David’s son, Elbert, suggested his father had returned to Utah without fully recovering from his bout with “brain fever.” But David agreed to go—spent a month in Omaha on the way—then set out across the prairie, arriving in Utah in mid-July.¹⁵ This second trip was less reported, but the brothers seem to have spent a great deal of their time with scattered groups of saints around Salt Lake, resulting in a variety of responses.

Soon after his return from Utah, David was called to the First Presidency of the Reorganization by a message, 3 March 1873, and was ordained at the conference.¹⁶

It was increasingly evident that David's health had weakened during his second mission to Utah, where he suffered a "severe attack of brain fever." Less than a year after his ordination, the *Herald* reported, "Brother Smith is ill again." Then again in April, "David is at Nauvoo where he will probably remain during the summer and fall. . . he seems to be recuperating."¹⁷

His illness continued to worsen. In July of 1874, Joseph editorialized that David had suffered "a partial relapse 'in his malady.' "He was "much disturbed mentally as well as bodily." David managed a visit to Lamoni in 1875, but his condition was obviously worsening. Later, he was reported taking part in the Rock Creek Branch meetings, but only as a listener, except for the singing which he still enjoyed. He was taken, early in 1876, to Alexander's farm home in Illinois to be allowed to rest. The purpose was partially to get him away from the pressures of church activity but also to put off any decisions until Joseph's return from his own Utah mission.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the illness did not decline during the resting period, and David became more and more of a problem to the community. He had developed the idea somehow that he was the director-owner of a large railroad company and would often slip into town sending numerous telegrams each day to various persons, all in the belief that he was conducting the business of his railroad. In 1876, when Joseph returned and discovered David was no better, he considered the need for permanent institutionalization. The efforts of the local people to secure this aided in the decision.

An inquiry was held at Yorkville, and, with little or no hesitation, a commitment order was authorized, and David was committed to the Illinois Hospital for the Insane on 10 January 1877. The period of his commitment was marked by the quiet that usually accompanies those things not understood; yet there were efforts made to determine the nature of his illness and many reasons were offered for his internment.

There had been considerable unrest over the direction of the Reorganization, much of this unrest centering around Joseph and suggesting that perhaps some other person might more aptly carry the mantle of leadership.

In 1869 *The Utah Daily Reporter* published an editorial entitled "The Son of the Prophet" which suggested that while many rejected the claim of "young Joseph" they were seemingly ready to follow David who, perhaps, looked more like one would expect a prophet to look.¹⁹ Words of this kind and the suggestion that David was considered by many to be the obvious choice, had caused the young man to record his sentiments in these not too subtle verses as early as 1863:

*Joseph is the Chose prophet
Well ordained in God's clear sight
Should he lose by his transgression
Alexander has the right.*

*Joseph, Alexander, David
Three remaining pillars still;
Like the three remaining columns
Of the Temple on the hill!*

*Joseph's star is full and shining
Alexander's more than mine;
Mine is just below the mountain
Bide its time and it will shine.*

*Joseph is the Chose prophet
Well ordained in God's clear sight
Should he lose by his transgression
Alexander has the right.*

There seems to be little doubt, from this researcher's point of view, how young David saw himself in relation to his brother Joseph and to the cause which he led. David reaffirmed the support of his brother again in the pages of *The Utah Daily Reporter*, Sunday, 15 August 1869: "My free, willing, independent, unfaltering service, faith, countenance, aid and influence, I give to my brother, Joseph."

However, more than one person within the Reorganization and many without, accused Joseph of "having his brother put away" for reasons that ranged from silencing his disloyalty to his trying to take over the church. Joseph made reference on his trying to take over the Church. Joseph made reference on several occasions to this feeling and assured the Reorganization that all possible was being done for his younger brother. The Mormon missionary, Edward Stevenson, visited David in September of 1895 and reported his visit to the *Deseret News*. He stated that David was well in body and went on to express a firm denial that the man was imprisoned because he favored Utah. The two men had gone for a brief walk together and managed rational and congenial conversation. Smith, he reported, had grown much heavier and grey but still carried himself well.

Writing in 1893, Joseph again spoke concerning his brother and appealed to the saints to heed his comments. "All that was in our power to do was done; he was frequently prayed for, and many of the eldership were asked to, and did, administer to him as required in the law; all of which did not prevent the mental disturbance from culminating in losing the balance of a well-poised mind; the causes of which are to be conjectured only."²⁰

Another theory was that David was poisoned while in Salt Lake City. Joseph, answering a letter to this effect in December of 1877, indicated that David was away from his regular boarding place in Salt Lake when his first

attack occurred. Yet Joseph went on to report he did not wish to believe rumors of a poisoning, or of anything of that sort, and that no one knew anything about it.

On 4 June 1880, Joseph wrote to Dr. E. A. Kilbourne who was in charge of David's case. He indicated appreciation for the concern of the doctor and continued by expressing his sadness at the tragedy that befalls a man which causes him to become unbalanced. "There must be some subtle relation between the unseen and men, by which such disturbances are governed, produced and removed. O, that it were found. Darwin, Huxley, Tyndall, with all their research of the primal man are no nearer this secret source of life. . . ." ²¹

A later letter revealed something of the difficulty Joseph had had during those trying years. "I kept him till it was dangerous to *wife* and children, in the face of an antipathy he formed to my wife; and it was only when he interfered with the *Railway employees* and the *Harvester works* here that I was compelled to take him to Elgin." ²²

Years later, Joseph was to write in his account of the church that David had become associated with spiritualists in Salt Lake City and later in Malad, Idaho, when in that area in the 1870s. He felt that somehow this was connected with his concern over the manifestations of the spirit, which grew out of hand. "I am convinced," Joseph was to write, "that insidiously there was inculcated into my brother's mind the idea that his father was either a polygamist in practice or that he was the spiritual author of the Utah plural marriage philosophy." ²³ Joseph continued to discuss the pressures brought on David, later acknowledging that "from my knowledge of his character I do not believe my brother had the power to resist such insidious teachings. . . ."

At the annual conference of 1885, held in Independence, considerable concern was expressed about David's condition, and interest was indicated about the role he would continue to play in the work of the church. The tenth day of April was set apart as a day of prayer and fasting for the improved condition of their ill counselor. Yet, on the eleventh, hardly allowing time for a cure, the move to sustain members of the quorum resulted in question concerning the continuation of David's position in the Presidency. Joseph was asked if any communication had been received on the subject. President Smith replied that "the Voice of the Spirit is that David H. Smith be released. He is," it continued, "in mine hands." ²⁴

There is little evidence of David's condition for the next seven years. On 4 February 1893, Joseph, who was then working at Kingston, Missouri, received a telegram which informed him of David's death. Joseph immediately went to Elgin and discovered that the wire had been sent as a result of mistaken identity. He used the visit, however, as an occasion to report that

he found his younger brother safe and comfortable and in good health physically even though the malady of the mind continued to control his behavior. Continued inquiry by the saints into the state of David's condition finally led Joseph to report a communication of patience he had received: "My servant David H. Smith is yet in my hand and I will do my will in the time of its accomplishment. Be not troubled or fearful in this matter for it shall be well for my work in the end."²⁵

At a quarter to four in the afternoon of 29 August 1904, David Hyrum Smith died. The cause of his death was directly related, it was said, to his illness, termed as Melancholia Dementia. Notice of his death was registered in the 31 August *Herald*, and a small close group met at Lamoni on 1 September for the funeral and burial at Rose Hill Cemetery. The announcement of his death to the people among whom he had worked indicated that while many expected interposition of divine providence, the hope was not shared by President Smith, who seemed "to foresee but one ending, the final release of death." While the church must mourn the loss of "so brilliant a man," it said, "it will be with chastened hearts and unshaken faith that we go forward."

The historian wears many hats, some more comfortable than others. At the risk of involving myself in a literary debate, I would like to don one such hat to suggest that poetry is a more primitive and a more natural form than the elaborate prose which is so common. Thus, it is a more natural form for a man who wishes to express emotions or to pronounce insights which are either extremely hard to identify or difficult to communicate. Except for our casual conversation, our prose depends on the fairly sophisticated development of an objective reality which is separated from the *Self*. It was just such a distinction which seems to have troubled David Hyrum Smith. It appears that he was trying to stretch his language to express the feelings that were within him, feelings which were as hard to identify as they were to separate—that is, objectify—to himself. These thoughts, not so well defined, perhaps, were more feelings than definitive statements and thus not to be expressed in the flowing prose of his brothers. Articulation, or more accurately, lack of it, was a factor in his poetry and music as well as in his art work. In a very real sense, it can be said that for David Smith the medium was a major portion of the message. Thus one must be careful of the criticism, particularly of romanticism, that is leveled against him.

I entered into this study with the skepticism of a historian and with a healthy disrespect for nineteenth-century poetry. Yet, I would suggest that you learn from my experience—that if you have not looked into the distant mind of David Smith or felt the nagging loneliness of imprisoned thoughts searching for expression or the isolation of a separate reality—do not judge this mystical man too quickly.

A poet by nature as well as activity, there was early evidence that this sensitive member of a sensitive family felt the need to express some of the ideas and feelings that were being associated in his mind. Deeply moved by things beautiful, melancholy at times, yet strangely well-tempered and overflowing with humor, love, sympathy, and humility, he felt compelled to speak what was often unspoken.

During his association at Nauvoo, he discovered a place just back of the mansion house by a waterfall which formed a natural amphitheater overlooking the grassy slope and the water. There he would go and read and write and meditate—often spending long hours with his thoughts. This retreat, called “David’s Chamber,” was probably the inspiration for his best statement of his attachment to nature:

*In every nook some sight of beauty wakes a tender thought;
Some flower blooming by some old gray stone;
Or tiny bird’s nest with abundant skill and labor wrought;
Or faithful shadow over shining waters thrown.
The thickets darkly dense and still,
Where scarce the slender vine leaves thrill;
Unbend, oh brow! and sad heart, take thy fill
Of rest, beside the lonely woodland path.²⁶*

Hesperis was published in 1875 on a small hand press during the period of decline leading to his last and permanent illness. It includes much of his work, mostly pastoral in nature, employing a rather consistent use of the dramatic monologue and a natural interest in strongly accented verse. It is an unfortunate and perhaps an unfair collection, for much of the young poet’s works appear other places—*The Saints’ Herald*, primarily—and this collection is not a valid representation. In addition, there is some evidence that David continued to write poetry after his commitment to the hospital for the mentally ill and that this poetry is still in existence. Unfortunately, these materials, as with his letters and paintings, are not available. *Hesperis* did save much of what was available, however; and, while as a whole I would not recommend it for light reading, there are some very interesting moods, ideas, and expressions that are worth noting. Something of his “frame of reference” can be drawn through an appeal to his written work. His deep feeling and involvement with nature served as his constant analogy, sometimes simply descriptive:

*Between the trees, the green sward slopes away,
Barred with the sunshine, with the shadows crossed;
Where leaves, like flitting fingers, deftly play
A melody, when by the breezes tossed.*

San Francisco, 1870²⁷

Sometimes as reflective of his search for an endless life:

*Though the waves of death flow o'er thee,
Tis the rest that gathers power
For the endless life before thee;
Fear no dying;
Like the resurrection flower,
Death defying.*

Salt Lake City, November 22, 1872²⁸

Sometimes in the desperate urge to give permanence to a mood:

*Now, gentle friend, release thy clinging hold;
The spray beads rest upon thy forehead cold;
The tide is ebbing out, and o'er its swell
I must away across the solemn sea. Farewell.*

July 15, 1867²⁹

While not taking himself all that seriously, he discusses his role as poet:

*Then do not dream he means each line
A Revelation of himself;
Sing of himself—conceit sublime.
You'd lay his book upon the shelf.
The preacher preaches righteousness;
The actor seeks to show each light
And shade of feeling, to express
Our thoughts and keep himself from sight.
Think of the Poet least and last,
And take his song for what 'tis worth.
An universal life he leads,
He lives in you, and many more;
From every field a flow'ret steals
And gleans a gem from every shore.³⁰*

Yet, early in 1872, probably in Iowa, he paused to reflect on the cognizance of his own changing character:

*I turn unto my tasks with weary hands,
Grieving with sadness, knowing not the cause
Before my face a desert path expands,
I will not falter in the toil, nor pause;
Okay, my spirit somehow understands,
This mournful truth—I am not what I was.*

Iowa, January, 1872³¹

A significant part of the poetic expression of David Smith was in the field of music, a passion that was noticeable in early youth. He was just eighteen when he attended a prayer service in October of 1863 at Manti, Iowa, with his brother Joseph; following a message from his older brother

he rose to sing *The Pebble Has Dropped in the Water*, which went to the tune of *Faded Flowers*. This hymn holds a very traditional role in the Reorganization. A few lines are enough to remind you:

*Let us shake off the coals from our garments
And arise in the strength of our Lord
Let us break off the yoke of our bondage
And be free in the joys of the world.
For the pebble has dropped in the water
And the waves circle round with the shock —
Shall we anchor our barks in the center
Or drift out and be wrecked on the rocks.* (1862)³²

Known to many as “The Sweet Singer of Israel,” David’s powerful voice was often raised when other means of expression failed him. He wrote several hymns during his short productive life, hymns which now occupy positions of importance for the contemporary Reorganization despite the fact that some are so traditional as to be meaningless. Among these are several which are in the current *Hymnal*: “A Calm and Gentle Quiet” (66); “Let Us Pray for One Another” (98); “Worldly Cares a Moment Leave Us” (99); and “You May Sing of the Beauty” (280)—the latter being an interesting example of his style:

*You may sing of the beauty of mountain and dale
Of the silvery streamlet and flowers of the vale
But the place most delightful this earth can afford
Is the place of devotion, the house of the Lord.*

There are other hymns which through numerous editions and printings have been excluded; “The Saints Shall Wear Robes as the Lilies,” “We Come with Joy the Truth to Teach You,” the “Hymn for Confirmation,” and the melancholy “The Unknown Grave” which appears in the Mormon publications.

His musical talent was recognized and used by the church on many occasions. He was directly involved in numerous music committees and played an important role in collecting material for the *Saints’ Harp* and was indirectly related to the movement which resulted in the 1889 publication of the *Saints’ Harmony*.³³

As a painter and artist we can say little, for the one or two works that remain at large are not sufficient to judge. Certainly his works have some historical value in terms of restoration projects such as the one being accomplished at Nauvoo. His sketches are fairly common, for he left them with friends throughout the church, and they have been saved. It was true as his mother once remarked, “that he leaves sketches of flowers everywhere he goes.”

The role of this young man as poet and artist awaits more formal analysis, as does the history of his life and his contribution. These brief comments are intended only to interest those more qualified to seek some

insight into the life and thought of a man, torn by internal conformation, who felt he had a message but who could only write:

*I would not sing, and yet I can not cease
I can not murmur, yet I have no peace.*

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2. Davis, Inez Smith. *The Story of the Church*, Herald Publishing House, Indep., Missouri, 1945.

3. *Saints' Herald*, Volume 2, p. 166.

4. Anderson, Mary Audentia (ed.) *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, Herald House, Independence, Missouri, 1952, p. 196–199.

5. Smith, David H. *loc cit.*, p. 203.

6. *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Volume 3, p. 496. (Hereafter called RLDS History.)

7. *Ibid.*, p.519.

8. *Saints' Herald*, Volume 15, p. 337.

9. *RLDS History*, Volume 3, p. 527, 530, 547. .

10. *Saints' Herald*, Volume 17, p.180

11. *Brother Elbert*, Herald House Publishing House, Independence, Missouri, 1959, p. 11–14. (Revised from Smith, Elbert. *On Memory's Beam*, 1929.)

12. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

13. *Saints' Herald*, Volume 18, p. 20.

14. *RLDS History*, Volume 3, p. 694.

15. *Ibid.*, Volume 3, p. 702–703.

16. *Brother Elbert*, p. 28. *Book of Doctrine and Covenants*, Herald Publishing House, Independence, Missouri, 1962, Section 117.3. (Hereafter called D&C.)

17. *RLDS History*, Volume 4, p. 460–469.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 120, 71: *RLDS History*, Volume 3, p. 273.

19. *Autumn Leaves*, Volume 25, p. 507–512.

20. *Saints' Herald*, Volume 40, p. 52.

21. *Joseph Smith III, Letter Book No. 3*, p.177.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 167–168.

23. *Saints' Herald*, Volume 82 (1935), p. 1361.

24. *RLDS History*, Volume 4, p. 479: D&C, Section 121.1b and 122.4b.

25. *Saints' Herald*, Volume 40, p. 69 and 82.

26. Smith, David H., *loc. cit.*, p. 126.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

33. Anderson, Mary Audentia (ed.). *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, Herald House, Independence, Missouri, 1952, p. 621.