

The Historians Corner

Edited by James B. Allen

In this issue of “The Historians Corner” we are delighted to present two short and important essays.

The first is concerned with how one separates fact from fiction in attempting to verify a legendary account. In a way, it sheds light on the fact that there is little light on one of Mormonism’s most persistent legends. The tale of Emma Smith’s pushing Eliza R. Snow down the stairs has become almost commonplace; yet the historical evidence is not only inadequate but whatever there is raises questions as to whether it happened at all. The essay brings together in a unique collaboration the three women who know most about the lives of Emma Smith and Eliza R. Snow: Maureen Beecher is preparing a biography of Eliza, and Linda Newell and Valeen Avery have a biography of Emma in process of publication. Items such as this emphasize the continuing need for writers and tellers of history to verify their facts before they present them with too much finality. Perhaps the better course with regard to such tales is to withhold judgment, as our authors do at the end.

The second essay, by Donald Q. Cannon, is of a different sort, for it sheds well-documented light on a very specific practice in the early history of the Church. The licensing of priesthood officers and missionaries began early, and Dr. Cannon has outlined in detail its significance in that period. We are particularly pleased to present his essay here for, as far as we can tell, this is the first time anyone has provided much insight into this important aspect of early Church history.