Mike: how are things? I'm still recovering from the onslaught in that session. Here's my response:

Response -- Mormon History Association Session, May 22, 1999
Todd Compton
[Only the first three or so pages were read at the meeting. A few responses were added after the meeting.]
First, of all, I like to take a moment and thank those of you who have supported my book in the last year and a half -- I was very moved by the awards given the book by the MHA and John Whitmer Society. But I sincerely think the awards were a tribute to the thirty-three women I wrote about, more than to me. My RLDS friends at John Whitmer have been great -- I'd been wanting to attend John Whitmer meetings for a while, but decided not to go last year, as I thought my presence might be misinterpreted as intentionally offensive. However, the John Whitmer Society then proceeded to invite me to their meeting and even give me an award. People told me that my book was being sold in the official RLDS church bookstore. So my hat is off to them for their openness. And of course, people in Utah have also been very supportive, with some exceptions. I would like to thank to Signature, who allowed the book to be published at the length it required, and to enlightened booksellers who carried it like Curt Bench, Sam Weller, Lynn Pulsipher and Will Quist.
I'd like to thank Dan, Val and Alma for their remarks. As you can imagine, I'd like to respond to Dan for a few minutes - exercising my keen hermeneutic gifts, I gather that he is not wildly enthusiastic about my book.[1] I met Dan a year or so ago and jokingly asked him to help me get a job teaching in the Church Educational System. With his recommendation today, I think my chances of getting a job with the CES are pretty slim. I think conservatives like Dan should have a voice in MHA, and I think that his review of my book represented a sincere religious expression. I would also like to thank him for getting his presentation to me a month in advance, so I could prepare for it. However, his portrayal of me and my book represents some serious misapprehensions, and in labeling me as anti-Mormon (ISL "has taken a step back into the 19th century and joined hands with Eber D. Howe, John C. Bennett, Joseph Jackson, William Hall and a host of other detractors who deny Joseph's inspiration"),[1:1] I don't think that he is following a productive, mature scholarly course. If an author is consistently exhibiting shoddy scholarship, as anti-Mormons do, it is possible to expose them using the tools of scholarship. It is easy to label someone. It is more difficult, but more convincing, to use the tools of scholarship to show an author is consistently reaching wrong conclusions.

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First, Mr. Bachman characterizes me as having naturalistic perspectives. I looked up the word "naturalism" in a standard dictionary: "naturalism . . . 2. Philos. The system of thought holding that all phenomena can be explained in terms of natural causes and laws without attributing supernatural significance to them. 3. The doctrine that all religious truths are derived from nature and natural causes and not from revelation." [2] So this is a total rejection of God and the supernatural, i.e., complete doctrinaire atheism. I think that this idea of me as atheist is the basis of Dan's whole presentation.

My response is that I was a believer in God and the supernatural when I began the book, at all times during the writing of the book, and have been at all times since the writing of the book. I have my own individual perspectives on how God works, but there is no question of my having naturalistic/atheistic perspectives. I openly stated my belief in God and the supernatural in In Sacred Loneliness, on p. 628. Strangely enough, I included that because I thought that non-Mormon readers had a right to know my theistic, Mormon bias.

Second, Mr. Bachman characterizes me as an anti-Mormon, writing an anti-Mormon book. Which means that he regards my book as a completely negative attack on Mormonism. He regards my book as focused on denying Joseph Smith's prophetic mission, and states that I call for decanonization of D&C 132.

My response is that I regard myself as a card-carrying moderate. I'm not intentionally a moderate. I just woke up that way one day. You can look at moderates sympathetically or unsympathetically, but I tend toward the sympathetic perspective. I think extremism is dangerous and can hurt the cause it seeks to defend. So as a moderate historian, I reflect problematic events in church history, but I also reflect "positive" aspects of church history.

I understand why some church members feel that problematic elements of church history should be avoided. You see the church as a family; you do not air your family's dirty linen in public. It is a matter of loyalty.

Despite my understanding of that point of view, even my sympathy for it, I believe is not practical and in fact, makes the problematic situations worse. First, I think there are ethical problems with suppressing truth -- when we take the gospel to the world, we owe it to our investigators to make the whole truth available to them. Second, I think that the gospel can deal with all truths. The gospel is afraid of no truth. Third, these "taboo" issues pop up all over Mormon history. It's impossible for a responsible historian to holistically work with Mormon history and avoid them. So I believe that Mormon historians have a moral imperative to deal with problem issues, not to suppress them or tap dance around them. However, I think historians also have a moral imperative to deal with these problems in a responsible, balanced way that does not sensationalize. Nevertheless, important "positive" elements are demonstrably in my book (see below), and Dan has not given them their due. I consider my book profoundly sympathetic to the Mormon experience.

I've heard it said that the burden of a moderate to be attacked from both sides. The late Leonard Arrington wrote that, aside from a Mormon historian's complex inner tensions, "we have a . . . two-front war.
externally -- against non-Mormons who think we LDS historians believe too much, and against super-Mormons who think we believe not enough." [2.1] And in fact, my book has begun to be critiqued by those on the opposite side of the spectrum. For instance, respected non-Mormon scholar of Mormon polygamy, Lawrence Foster, referred to my book as "apologetic" -- i.e., defending the church -- in the most recent Dialogue. [3]
So my views on prophets and prophecy are fairly unremarkable moderate positions. I believe in the "prophet is not always a prophet" principle (based on Joseph Smith's phrase). Thus a prophet may have inspiration at one time, and be left with his own personal and cultural limitations at other times. I reject the idea that any prophet is infallible - I think God put the book of Jonah in the Bible just to keep us from believing that. We Mormons tend to say that we don't believe church leaders are infallible, but then we look at a church leader's faults as mild and even endearing, not as serious.
For Dan, my looking at the environmental parallels and background to Joseph Smith's polyandry shows that I have a naturalistic points of view, i.e. I reject prophets and God. But there are well known moderate views of prophecy that accept both inspiration and revelation and environmental parallels and backgrounds. First of all, in my view, God often uses environmental factors as catalysts for prophets. In addition, God prepares situations, environmental factors and environmental elements as components for revelation. For instance, the language of the King James Bible was prepared by God as language Joseph Smith could use in his revelations. Dan states categorically that I advocated decanonization of D&C 132, but I have never done so, though I would interpret it differently than Dan would. So I don't want to underplay my liberal component -- I think prophets can make serious, tragic mistakes, as the book of Jonah shows us -- but I don't want to underplay my conservative component either, my belief that God works and speaks through men and women in subtle and mysterious ways. Dan underplays my conservative component considerably.
I think behind the emotion of Dan's presentation, and something that actually makes me feel sympathy for him, is the incredibly difficult issue of polygamy in our church, from its beginnings with Joseph Smith to present-day fundamentalism. I certainly have problems with polygamy, early and late, though my ancestors on one side of my family were all polygamists. The view of polygamy that I am closest to is that of Gene England in his article on polygamy and monogamy, in which he suggested that monogamy, rather than polygamy, is the eternal principle. [4] The temporary practice of polygamy in our church he regards as an Abrahamic test. I agree, and do not see Joseph Smith's polygamy as central to his mission. Interestingly, I think our institutional church is also distancing itself from polygamy. This position raises other problems, from a historical perspective, but I think it is the wisest policy.

Q: How did you come to write In Sacred Loneliness?
If you've heard this story, forgive me for going over it again, but it relates to Mr. Bachman's statement in his FARMS review that I had a priori (presumably, naturalistic, anti-Mormon) biases that shaped the writing of my book.[4.1]
Before applying for a summer fellowship at the Huntington in 1992, I had
done no serious Mormon history. My field was classics, Greco-Roman
literature, and I was interested in New Testament studies and comparative
myth. At BYU I had been influenced by Nibley and his myth and ritual
perspective; at UCLA, I was influenced by Scott Bartchy who saw social
justice, including justice for women, as a central teaching of Jesus and
the early apostles.

After I finished my doctoral work at UCLA and taught for a year at USC (in
classics), a friend of mine had received a summer fellowship at the
Huntington, and suggested I apply for one, using as my hook the overland
diaries of Eliza R. Snow, which the Huntington owned. She literally shoved
the application in front of me and told me how to write the application. I
applied on a whim, but it seemed like a waste of time, as my background was
not in Mormon history. To my complete surprise, Huntington gave me a
fellowship.

So we don't have Mr. Bachman's picture of the atheist anti-Mormon looking
about for the negative way to attack Joseph Smith — instead, someone else
recommended Eliza's journals to me. The Huntington Library, strangely
enough, gave me a fellowship to work on them. Eliza's overland journals
have little or nothing controversial in them. They take place after the
Nauvoo period. And Eliza is one of the least controversial of Joseph
Smith's plural wives. I had published nothing in Mormon history; I had no
pronounced opinions on polygamy, though I'd read some of the standard books
out of general interest in Mormon history, including Mr. Bachman's Purdue
thesis and Lawrence Foster's Religion and Sexuality, both of which I
recommend highly.

This left me in the pleasant position of being paid to study the journals
of Eliza R. Snow. Maureen Beecher's wonderful edition of those journals
hadn't been published yet, so I really felt it was important to identify
the women Eliza mentioned elliptically, sometimes by surname, sometimes by
given name, in her journals.

This led me to look for lists of plural wives — Brigham Young's wives,
Heber C. Kimball's wives, and Joseph Smith's wives. There were good lists
by Jeffery Johnson and Stan Kimball of the first two. But for Joseph
Smith's wives, the only modern, footnoted list was Fawn Brodie's appendix
to No Man Knows My History. Brodie's list I found to be very flawed —
first, it seemed to rely on secondary, published sources, rather than
primary sources by the women themselves. Second, its secondary sources were
often anti-Mormon sources that I felt were obviously skewed by bias, but
which Brodie did not critique. Third, Brodie's book was some forty years
old, so was quite outdated.

So I began to create my own list of Joseph Smith's wives, a list that I
felt was trustworthy, purely as a tool to help me identify women in the
Eliza Snow diary. This was the genesis of my book — it was actually an
attempt to understand a sympathetic primary text, and a reaction against
Fawn Brodie and anti-Mormon writing.

By the way, Anderson and Faulring seem to equate me with Fawn Brodie. They
describe me as naturalistic/atheistic, like Brodie, and refer to me as a
psychohistorian, a term specially associated with Brodie (a
characterization that really caught me off guard). However, I wrote the

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book as a reaction against Brodie. I even wrote an article developing a negative critique of Brodie's treatment of Joseph Smith's polygamy. [5] So I began writing little biographies of the women, in order to get their married names right, and began reading their journals, letters and autobiographies. Then I began to be get to know them and become emotionally involved with their lives. Notice that my further involvement came not as a result of reading secondary, anti-Mormon sources, which so influenced Brodie, but as the result of reading these women's own words. In particular, I found the holograph journal of Eliza Partridge deeply moving. Unlike her sister, Emily, Eliza said almost nothing about Joseph Smith and Nauvoo. Her journals deal mostly with her trials in Fillmore and San Juan County. So I slowly became immersed in the life writings of these nineteenth-century Mormon women. Though I loved diaries and autobiographies, I came to have a special affection for the obscure women who left little written record behind.

As a result of seeing polygamy from the perspective of women, I think, I was struck by the pattern of these women's loneliness and isolation, compared to modern Mormonism's emphasis on the presence of the father in the home. But this was years down the line after I started research. It was not an a priori perspective.

My research was always focused on the women. Mr. Bachman portrays my book as an attack centering on Joseph Smith. If I'd been trying to do that, I certainly would have focused on Joseph Smith. I would have been totally uninterested in the later lives of these women. I would have centered my narrative in Nauvoo, and the thirty-three women I looked at would have been temporary, sometimes minor characters. The story would have ended at Joseph Smith's death.

I did write a prologue dealing with aspects of Joseph Smith's polygamy, and this is where Mr. Bachman aims the evidential section of his presentation. The prologue is a small part of my book and was literally an afterthought. I had collected a great deal of material on the plural wives of Joseph, and was writing and rewriting the biographical chapters. As I remember it, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, who had generously shared material from her files with me during my research, strongly recommended that I write a chapter explaining some of the unfamiliar aspects of Nauvoo polygamy. So I wrote the prologue. Two of the main problems I wanted to understand were the sheer number of Joseph Smith's wives, and the issue of polyandry, Joseph marrying women married to other men. So in that chapter, I simply tried to make sense of the puzzle as best I could in that limited length. The subject, of course, deserves a full length book. But in that chapter I was consciously rejecting easy answers provided earlier by Brodie, that Joseph Smith married plural wives, and the wives of other men, because he was simply sexually overactive. Instead, I looked for religious, doctrinal reasons for the polygamy and polyandry. This is another example of how my book is moderate, rather than negativistic.

Mr. Bachman has limited the evidentiary part of his presentation to one section of my prologue. In it, I propose as a background for Nauvoo polyandry the concept that secular, legal marriages had no significance in the eternal scheme of things; only celestial marriage had force hereafter and thus had greater importance here. This is a commonplace in polygamy.

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interpretation -- both Lawrence Foster and Richard Van Wagoner use it [5.1] -- and it is a generally accepted doctrine in Mormonism today. Mr. Bachman seems to think that I assert that Mormons never practiced civil marriage. This would indeed be a ludicrous position, if I had ever held it, which I did not. However, Joseph Smith saw patriarchal, celestial marriage as having eternal significance, while non-celestial marriage (even if it had been solemnized by Mormons) did not. This provides a logical background for the celestial marriage taking precedence over the earthly marriage in the polyandrous relationships. (For example, in two of the polyandrous marriages, Mormons performed the first, non- celestial marriages -- Orson and Marinda Hyde, Henry and Zina Jacobs.) Since the rest of Mr. Bachman's presentation is so extreme (he equates me with some of the most anti-Mormon characters in Mormon history, such as John C. Bennett, and even with the early Christian Gnostic Marcion, who rejected the God of the Old Testament), this places a great burden on his presenting a strong case in the evidentiary side of his review. That he would choose as his main target such a mild, commonplace section of my book as his evidentiary target is extremely odd.

Question: How was your experience researching at the Church Archives?
I had a wonderful time researching at the Church Archives -- as Quinn says, every day was Christmas. The archivists at the Church Archives carefully followed the policies set up there, but they were extremely helpful and professional. Most of what I was interested in was written by women, and usually those writings are not viewed as sensitive. When I wanted things that were sensitive, the archivists tried to help me get access.
I was always completely open about my research focus, the wives of Joseph Smith. So they were very helpful in pointing me to documents relating to these women's lives. For instance, one daughter wrote a little memoir of her experiences with her mother, Elvira Cowles Holmes, in a letter, and an archivist mentioned it to me. There was nothing controversial in it, but it gave me a more in-depth understanding of Elvira's later life.

Q: What was your experience researching at the RLDS Church Archives?
When I flew into Independence one Christmas season, I didn't know the people at the RLDS archives, and they didn't know me, so I didn't know what to expect. I was slightly apprehensive, but again, I was completely open about my research focus. I remember my first conservation with Ron Romig on the phone, when I told him I was researching the wives of Joseph Smith.
"Well, I don't think we have much on that," he said, but told me I was welcome. As it turned out, the RLDS archives were a treasure trove for me. One of my subjects, Elizabeth Davis Brackenbury Durfee, and her Brackenbury sons, ended up RLDS, as I knew, so she was one obvious focus. But Barbara Bernauer knew a lot about Austin Cowles, the father of Elvira Cowles, and a very interesting person in his own right. There was also important Agnes Coolbrith Smith material there. I became fascinated by RLDS history in general, in which polygamy is an important thread. Ron was an expert on Mormon Missouri, and three of my subjects, Elizabeth Brackenbury, Mary Rollins Lightner, and Emily Partridge, had strong Independence histories,
so we could talk about their experiences.

One experience that stands out - Joseph Smith III, when he visited Utah, had met with Melissa Lott Willis, one of my subjects, and Joseph described the interview in his autobiography. Following my policy of trying to get to the most primary source possible, I was interested in seeing if he'd written about it in his diaries. So I made the request for his Utah diaries. Ron told me that he thought that the Joseph Smith III diaries in Utah were more like appointment books than diaries, so they wouldn't be very helpful, but he nevertheless got the diary and left me with it to go through by myself. So here I was, a Mormon researching Joseph Smith's polygamy, and I was given the unpublished holograph of Joseph III's record while in Utah. I really appreciated that kind of honesty and openness. (By the way, there was nothing earthshaking in those diaries, but there was an interesting confirmation of the meeting with Melissa.)

Q: What were some research breakthroughs that stand out for you?
One that stands out was when I hit a brick wall on the subject of Elizabeth Brackenbury Durfee's later life. Working out her early life was quite a chore also - one breakthrough was realizing that Elizabeth Brackenbury of Missouri and Ohio was also Elizabeth Durfee of Nauvoo. I finally put that piece together in the genealogical library at BYU, using the IGI to find the Missouri marriage record of Elizabeth and Jabez Durfee. However, Elizabeth Durfee disappeared after Nauvoo, and I really wanted a death date for her. By contacting some Brackenbury descendants on a hunch, I discovered to my surprise that she had returned to using her Brackenbury name and she and her sons had become RLDS in Southern California. I got not one, but two different death dates, which still stand in glorious opposition to each other.

That anecdote shows how much I owe to descendants of these women, who helped me in major and minor ways. Of course, I shared my research and archival notes with them, so we were both benefitted.

One similar experience relates to Sarah Lawrence, one of these women who left no holographs. Again I was missing a death date. Maureen Beecher had told me that there was information about her in the Mary Jane Tanner autobiography, which was very helpful. But after Sarah went to California, I hit a brick wall. Then one day at Sunstone Robert Larsen, who'd told me he was related to Sarah's last husband, plunked a manila folder full of xeroxes in my hands. In the folder was full information on Sarah's death, with cause of death, cancer of the uterus, death date, and even location of her grave. It was like manna from heaven. That information was very valuable in giving insight into her personality in the last years of her life. Mary Jane and Helen Mar Whitney, our two main sources on Sarah, had portrayed her very unsympathetically. However, knowing that she had cancer causes you to be more understanding.

So I am greatly indebted to many people who with incredible generosity shared information and documents with me.

Another memorable experience for me was finding the Fanny Alger passages in the Mosiah Hancock journal. Once again, I found these because of my policy of trying to find the most primary source possible for any document or historical event. I'd read published accounts by Levi and Mosiah Hancock.
that mentioned Fanny Alger, but they hadn't been published in a scholarly way. So I thought it would be worthwhile to check the holographs of Levi and Mosiah just for fun, and recover the original misspellings. I found that the holographs were at Church Archives, so one day I sorted through a confusing mixture of Levi and Mosiah Hancock documents. And to my surprise suddenly I was reading a detailed account of the formal marriage of Fanny Alger and Joseph Smith, with the marriage performed by Levi Hancock. These passages had been carefully edited out of the published versions of the journals. I knew that this story had not ever been published or discussed in any of the literature on polygamy that I knew about. So that was an exciting day for me at Church Archives.

Q: Why the strange footnoting system? What possessed you?
My father (who by the way, is a retired college professor) read a preliminary version of a chapter and complained that there were too many footnotes, and that they bogged the reader down. I remember in that chapter, with my mania for footnotes, there were something like 15 notes in the first paragraph. So I experimented with writing a chapter with end-references and liked how it helped the flow of readability.
I have yet to find a reader who likes my footnoting system. If there is anyone out there who likes it, I'd like to meet you and shake your hand. However, in my defense, I've since found a number of other widely respected books that use that system. I think it can be especially helpful for biography, in which you're telling a story of a life. Two biographies that use similar systems are Peter Ackroyd's Dickens, which has been acclaimed as one of the great biographies of the century, and Stephen Oates's biography of Lincoln, which has been acclaimed as the best Lincoln biography.

Q. Mr. Bachman has implied that you sought out a publisher that would be interested because of your book's naturalistic component. How did your book end up at Signature?
Here's the story. After my manuscript was developed to some extent, I sent it to three leading publishers of Mormon history, Illinois University Press, Utah University Press, and Signature Books. I also let Kent Jackson at BYU look at it for possible inclusion in its Religious Studies series, though I felt BYU was unlikely to be interested for obvious reasons. I felt all four publishers had pluses and minuses, but as an academic, I was leaning toward the academic presses. However, I very much respected Signature as a leading publisher of Mormon history. Illinois University Press rejected the book, in part, because a reader criticized it as too "apologetic." I think he or she felt that I should have treated the Fanny Alger relationship as an affair, not a marriage, see below. The manuscript was also in a much more primitive form than the final version. So Illinois was out of the picture. I heard through the grapevine that Kent Jackson was not interested in the book, as a result of reading the material I submitted to him. However, both Utah and Signature were interested in my manuscript. I initially chose Utah University Press, and was starting the editorial process with Linda King Newell there, when the press pulled the plug on their Mormon history series, and so my book was in limbo. I called up Gary

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at Signature and asked if they were still interested. They were. And though
in the editorial process, we had disagreements on style at times, they put
no pressure on me to change conservative aspects of my book. For instance,
they didn't ask me to remove my statement of belief in God or the
supernatural. They did not try to get me to take out frequent references to
the supernatural in my text. One of my editors, Richard Van Wagoner,
subscribed to the position that Fanny Alger/Smith relationship was not a
formal marriage. He also argued that Marinda Hyde married Willard Richards
polyandrously. (See below.) But when I disagreed, taking the conservative
point of view on these particular issues, no pressure was put on me to
change my opinion on that or other similar issues. Of course, I argued from
the data as I saw it -- I wasn't being conservative for the sake of being
conservative -- but I still came down on the "conservative" side of the
issue. I should note that in other cases, Richard and other editors caught
mistakes I'd made and offered valuable perspectives on polygamy.
Finally, I'd like to mention that I gave my friends at FARMS, and some
other very conservative friends, an advance look at my manuscript long
before it was published. I did not want them to feel that I was ambushring
them with this information. Certain liberals advised me not to do this, but
I did it anyway, to try to help prepare the institutional church for my
book's impact. (And by the way, I could only guess whether the book would
have a wide or narrow impact.)

Q. How was your research financed as you wrote your book?
I answer this question just in case someone might have a conspiracy theory
in which I wrote the book while being financed by opponents of the church.
After I became completely devoted to this line of research, I stopped
pursuing my classics career. I continued researching in excellent
California libraries, but most of my documents were in Utah. So I would
work in a temporary job, word processing, for a while, then take a break
and do research in Salt Lake City for a month or two, staying with my
sisters in Provo and Salt Lake City. When I ran out of money, I would
return to L.A. and get another temp job as quickly as possible. I didn't
want to get a good full-time job with benefits and security because that
would have chained me to the job. Sometimes I would miscalculate and run
out of money, so I would pay rent with credit cards (which gets you in a
financial hole very quickly), and go through frenzied job searches.
I remember one year, when I was in the thick of research, tax time came
and I was weighed down with dread -- how could I pay taxes? So at the last
moment, I collected my U2 forms and with fear and trembling added up my
earnings for the previous year. Then I started laughing with surprise and
relief -- I had earned only $5,000.00 in the whole year. I owed no money
for taxes.
I'm not complaining - I was pursuing my obsession of choice. It was an
enormous privilege writing In Sacred Loneliness and as I mentioned, every
day was Christmas while I was researching. I'm sure a lot of you have
similar stories of dry financial periods at certain times in your lives,
and we often look back at these periods with a kind of nervous affection.
But I just want to emphasize that I did not have a financial incentive to
write negative history or positive history while writing my book.

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Q. You call yourself a moderate. What are some moderate or conservative aspects of your book?

I've mentioned how my book began as an critique of Brodie. In many places in my book I took the conservative position, as opposed to Brodie's more sensational sexual focus. For instance, Brodie felt that Joseph Smith worked out his polygamy doctrine largely in Nauvoo, and that his pre-Nauvoo relationships with women such as Fannie Alger, Lucinda Harris and Presendia Buell were affairs, not marriages; and that no marriage ceremonies were performed in those relationships. She even identified a child of Joseph Smith as a result of an alleged adulterous liaison with Presendia Buell. If I were anti-Mormon, it would have been easy for me to simply accept the Brodie perspectives on these issues. However, I rejected her perspective in every case.

I always believed that the Fanny Alger relationship was a marriage, from very early in my research. The evidence pointed that way, I thought. When I discovered the holograph Mosiah Hancock memoir with the marriage ceremony between Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger, I found the account credible, even though it is late.

I was the first person to publish and comment on that important document. Now, if I'd been pursuing Brodie's position of the Alger relationship being an affair, there would have been ways I could have minimized Mosiah Hancock. I could have quoted him in passing, then critiqued him as late or unreliable. Or I could have buried the reference dismissively in a footnote. I could even have left it for someone else to discover years later. Instead, I quoted it at length and argued for its validity. Some of the early reaction I got about that chapter (first published in Journal of Mormon History) was interesting. A long time friend of mine, very active, sophisticated in Mormon history, called me up and thanked me profusely for rehabilitating Joseph Smith for her. She had been told by people she respected that the Fanny Alger relationship was just an affair. Obviously, that would be very disillusioning and depressing. So she was overjoyed to find firm evidence that, whatever the complexities in that Smith-Alger relationship, it was a marriage with a marriage ceremony.

Another friend of mine, this one on the liberal side of things, wrote a long letter to Journal of Mormon History taking me to task me for taking the conservative point of view in the question, and she rejected Mosiah's testimony. [6] So the first printed critical response to my book was from someone on the left, accusing me of taking the conservative side. More recently, Lawrence Foster, has referred to my book as "apologetic," i.e., defending Mormonism -- largely, I think, because I portrayed the Fanny Alger relationship as a marriage, not an affair. [7] Being attacked from the left, I think, is another sign that I am a card-carrying moderate.

--In the case of Presendia Huntington Buell (later Smith Kimball), she had a child, Oliver Buell, born either in 1839 or 1840 (there is conflicting evidence, as is common with birth dates back then) while she was married to Norman Buell, long before she married Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. Brodie positively identified Oliver as Joseph Smith's child. If this is accepted, it would prove beyond any doubt that Joseph Smith had extramarital affairs. However, despite Brodie's almost monomaniac desire to prove Oliver was

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Joseph's son, I went through her eight or nine pieces of evidence and showed why each was very unconvincing individually and even more unconvincing collectively. I hope no one tries to resurrect the Oliver Buell / Joseph Smith connection again; I think Brodie made a monumental lapse in judgment on that issue. On point after point, issue after issue, I countered Brodie and others like her, taking the moderate side, when the facts did not support her overly-negative methodology and conclusions: --Brodie argued that Joseph Smith was mobbed because he had been too "intimate" with the teenage Marinda Johnson Hyde. I wrote that the best evidence did not support this. Her reconstruction came from one piece of late, unreliable evidence, while better sources gave other reasons for the mobbing. ISL 231. --Sidney Rigdon and Ebenezer Robinson both wrote that Willard Richards married Marinda Hyde while Orson Hyde was on his mission, before she married Joseph Smith. Brodie and others have accepted this. If accepted, it looks very much like wife swapping. However, I argue that neither Rigdon nor Robinson was in the inner polygamy circle, so may have accepted a rumor on unreliable evidence. So I reject the Richards/Hyde marriage, once again taking the conservative side. ISL 238. --Joseph Smith married Helen Mar Whitney when she was fourteen - that is not controversial. Some authors have suggested a sexual element in that relationship. I see no firm evidence pro or con on the question. However, I interpret the relationship as "almost purely dynastic," ISL 497, and suggest that there was probably no sexuality, arguing from parallels in Utah polygamy, where sexual relations were deferred in cases of marriages to young teenagers. ISL 638, "marrying underage women." Mr. Allred, at MHA, and Anderson and Faulring strongly affirm that I take the opposite position, which leaves me mystified, considering my cautious treatment of the issue, and the fact that I agree with them. (On the other hand, I do not sugarcoat the toll such a dynastic marriage took on young Helen Mar. As a general principle, I don't think dynastic marriages are fair to the women used as links. Cf. the problematic consequences of dynastic marriages in the modern Kingston polygamous group.) --In the Henry Jacobs, Zina Huntington Jacobs Young, and Brigham Young triangle, I could have portrayed Brigham as entirely a villain and Jacobs as entirely a victim. Instead, I included evidence of Henry's human shortcomings, and positive data on Brigham as a husband. ISL 93 and 95. --There is lots of positive material in ISL on the Mormon tradition, lots about Mormon spirituality, Mormon miracles, that I didn't have to include. For instance, the healing of Marinda Hyde's mother by Joseph Smith. This is especially remarkable because it was reported by a non-Mormon source, as well as by Mormon sources. ISL 230. --Another example is my portrayal of the marriage of Elvira Cowles Holmes's three daughters to Job Welling. This was technically outside of the life of Elvira, especially the last daughter, who married Job after Elvira's death. I was especially struck by how the two older daughters brought the younger into their family. I was also interested in the dynamics of what looked like a successful plural family. So I could have ended the story at Elvira's death - instead I went out of my way to include
this "positive" polygamy data. ISL 555-56.
--Often women referred to reunions with those on the "other side" after
death, and their death scenes included references to these reunions. I
included references to these reunions. (See the Helen Mar Whitney chapter,
for example.) These references were not sarcastic or ironic on my part: I
think these women did have those reunions. I was very moved by these
moments where these women, my heroes, made their transition to the "other
country." Naturally, an agnostic would not find deep, visionary meaning in
these events. ISL 141-43; 533-34.
There are hundreds of other subtle but telling positive touches. For
instance, on p. 431, I included Emily's characterization of Joseph Smith:
"He was one of the noblest of men and those who knew him best, loved him
best." I could have easily left that out. There are hundreds of details
like that.
However, when the evidence showed an authentic problem, I did not try to
suppress it or sugarcoat it. For instance, Joseph Smith did marry very
young teens; he also married a number of women who were married to other
men. A daughter was probably born to Joseph Smith from one of these
polyandrous marriages, according to affidavit evidence. The documentation
for these base issues is not controversial; I think Mr. Bachman will not
dispute these facts. I made good faith efforts to understand them; I did
not create the underlying problems.

Q. How do we deal with problems in church history? Shouldn't a loyal church
member leave such events unpublished?
There are some church members who hold to this position, often from
sincere motivations. However, there are many Mormons who understand the
need for honest, balanced history. Recently I attended a presentation on
the Mountain Meadows Massacre in which descendants of Fancher, Baker and
John D. Lee, along with historian Gene Sessions, discussed the Mountain
Meadows Association and their dealings with President Hinckley. They said
that President Hinckley had met with them repeatedly, encouraged them in
their research, and gave them completely open access to the archives. It
was moving to see the friendship between a Lee and a Fancher and a Baker. I
reflected on how valuable President Hinckley's honesty and encouragement
had been, and Juanita Brooks's courage in researching and writing on a
subject that was so taboo at the time, in helping to bring about this
healing. Keeping subjects taboo only delays healing.
When Elders Howard W. Hunter and Harold B. Lee brought the late Leonard J.
Arrington into the Historical Department to be Church Historian, Apostle
Hunter cautioned him that care and discretion should be used in writing
Mormon history because of reverence church members felt for church leaders.
But he also told him that "he felt the Church was mature enough that our
history should be honest. He did not believe in suppressing information,
hiding documents, or concealing or withholding minutes for possible
censorial scrutiny. He thought we should publish the documents of our
history. Why should we withhold things that are a part of our history? he
asked. He thought it in our best interest to encourage scholars-to help
them and cooperate with them in doing honest research." President Harold B.
Lee said, "The best defense of the church is the true and impartial account

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of our history."[8] However, I am not denying that there are other currents of thought in our church that would pursue the suppression policy, and would label as anti-Mormon anything dealing with these taboo subjects. I've heard another anecdote about Leonard Arrington -- when he came into the Church Historian's office, he was looking through the library to assess its holdings, and he came upon his own classic book, Great Basin Kingdom -- filed under Anti-Mormon. The librarian discovered Leonard looking at the book in its classification and was immediately flustered and embarrassed.[8,1] To add to the irony, Apostle Hunter had specifically commended Leonard for that particular book, as showing how LDS writers could use the resources and techniques of scholarship, including sophisticated environmental analysis, to write implicitly faithful Mormon history. So in the ongoing tensions between open, honest history and suppression of history in our contemporary church, I hope the policies of Presidents Lee, Hunter and Hinckley win out.

Q. The anti-Mormon Tanners have used your book, as Mr. Bachman mentioned. Does that make your book anti-Mormon? People who have skewed perspectives will misuse truth. The Tanners have republished Andrew Jenson's article on Joseph Smith's plural marriage, written to defend the church, but that does not make it anti-Mormon.

Q. You have mentioned that you reacted against Brodie in your book. What historians did you take as models? I would give the name of Juanita Brooks, though she's an infinitely better writer than I am. Working within the church, she dealt with a "taboo" subject because she felt it was ethically necessary to do so, even though she endured social ostracism after its publication. So she's one of my heroes. Also Leonard Arrington; and Lowell Bennion, for his ethical insight and example, though he's technically not a historian.

Q. How have people responded to your book? Some conservatives like it a lot; some conservatives don't like it. Some people have told me that it strengthened their belief in Joseph Smith as a prophet. Mr. Bachman has a CES background and thoroughly dislikes my book. But another person with a CES background has written a positive review of my book.[9] Some moderates and liberals like it a lot; some have reservations about it, and think it doesn't go far enough. (Some agree with Brodie.) I've been really moved by the responses of the descendants of the women. One descendant of Eliza Partridge Lyman was weeping when he finished reading the chapter about her. I like that because I often responded the same way when I finished writing or editing a chapter. I'm glad that that feeling sometimes comes through, despite my stylistic limitations as a writer. One descendant of Elizabeth Brackenbury was overjoyed that I had treated her sons so sympathetically - she said they had been dealt with almost contemptuously before. She thought I made them look almost heroic. Once again, I had not ignored problems they'd had, such as an

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excommunication, so I was pleased that she liked the overall impression. One experience that stands out for me. At last year's MHA, I bought Leonard Arrington's Adventures of a Church Historian and I stayed up half the night one night reading it. My roommate Newell Bringhamhurst happened to tell Leonard that he'd robbed me of a night of sleep. The morning after, Leonard and I ended up in the lobby together, and he made a playful joke about his book and my book. I remember that I felt honored to have him make a joke about my book. But a week later, I got a handwritten letter from Leonard because he had worried that I might have felt his joke was flippant. "You are a good scholar," he wrote simply. I thought that was a wonderful gesture toward a struggling young scholar, and I'll always treasure that letter.

Q. What are you working on now?
I'm collaborating with Charles Hatch on editing the journals of Helen Mar Whitney, mostly at Utah State's Merrill Library, written from 1884 to 1896. Another fascinating, emotionally involving project.

Q. Mr. Allred brought up the subject of sexuality in Joseph Smith's marriages. How do you respond?
This is indeed a difficult issue. For the historian, there is the crossfire of evidence and the perplexing ambiguities that characterize all history, not just Mormon history. Again, I take a moderate, even conservative position on the issue. Brodie sees Joseph as motivated largely by sexual drive; therefore, she sees him as engaged in promiscuity before he developed the doctrine of polygamy, largely in Nauvoo (and thus polygamy is treated as an afterthought). Accordingly, she sees his early relationships not as marriages, but as affairs; there were no ceremonies. (Thus she sees Oliver Buell as Joseph's child long before Joseph married Presendia Buell.)
My moderate position is that Joseph Smith developed the theology of polygamy very early, and the early relationships were marriages, with marriage ceremonies. (Ironically, this is a point of view that Mr. Bachman pioneered [10]; I have supported and strengthened his position.) I held this position even before I came across the Mosiah Hancock journal in Church Archives. I believe that the marriages included sexuality, but this is not controversial -- the Mormon view of marriage is that it should include sexual relations and offspring. The controversial issue is whether or not there were marriage ceremonies.
In the nineteenth century, the RLDS developed a position that Joseph Smith's marriages, if they existed in any form at all, did not include sexuality -- therefore they were not real marriages -- therefore Joseph Smith was not a polygamist. [11] To combat this argument, the LDS defenders encouraged Joseph Smith's plural wives to testify openly if they'd had sexual relations with Joseph, and a number of them did. This was the conservative LDS position in the nineteenth century.
One of the ironies of twentieth century LDS attitudes toward Joseph Smith's polygamy is that many contemporary Mormons have appropriated the nineteenth century RLDS position toward it -- the idea that Joseph Smith did not have sexual relations in his plural marriages.

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You could add up the evidence and develop this position. There are some ambiguities in the evidence. But the conservative nineteenth century LDS Mormons collected some persuasive evidence (including explicit court testimony in the Temple Lot trial and affidavit evidence, the Fisher affidavit, ISL 637) that there was a sexual dimension in Joseph's plural marriages. I believe the sexuality was limited (which sets me apart from Brodie), but that it was there.

In Mr. Allred's speech, he ended by attempting to disallow two important pieces of evidence on this issue. One was the Josephine Lyon Fisher affidavit, in which Josephine affirmed that her mother, Sylvia Sessions Lyon, told her on her (Sylvia's) deathbed that she (Josephine) was the daughter of Joseph Smith. That affidavit was sought out and witnessed by Andrew Jenson, Assistant LDS Church Historian. It was also witnessed by the local Bountiful Stake President, Hyrum Grant (strangely enough, my great grandfather) and by one of Josephine's sons. Andrew Jenson had long been involved in defending Joseph Smith and his polygamy against RLDS polemic, and in 1887 had published affidavits relating to Joseph Smith's polygamy and a list of 27 wives. Jenson was not anti-Mormon, to state the obvious. The other document is by Angus Cannon, long time President of the influential central Salt Lake Stake, and brother of George Q. Cannon, long time member of the first Presidency (ISL 637). It was a record of a conversation Angus had had with RLDS Church President Joseph Smith III, in which he tried to convince Joseph that his father, Joseph Smith, Jr., had practiced polygamy, and that these marriages were real marriages, and thus included sexual relations. In this interview, to bolster his defense, he referred to the Josephine Lyon Fisher case.

I think a good, honest scholar might disagree with Andrew Jenson and Angus Cannon on this issue. Or he or she might agree, as I do. But Mr. Allred should acknowledge that I am working with extremely conservative nineteenth century Mormon sources, sources who knew the plural wives of Joseph Smith very well. Cannon was the stake president of many of Joseph's widows, and he had long conversations with Eliza R. Snow before her death. ISL 339.

Q. Mr. Bachman has accused you of using questionable late, second and third hand sources, and not applying basic standards of historical criticism to sources. How do you respond?

Even the most casual glance at the sources of my book shows how important it was to me to work with the most primary sources possible. I spent hundreds and hundreds of hours in many different archives deciphering nineteenth-century holograph scripts. Incidents I've mentioned above (with the Mosiah Hancock autobiography and Melissa Lott Willies) show how I continually tried to work my way backward to the best, most original documents. I read the entire, vast Oliver Huntington journal in holograph at the Huntington Library.

Many of the moderate positions I've taken above rely on my critique of sources. For instance, my rejection of the Marinda Hyde / riot story is based on my critique of a weak, late anti-Mormon document. My interest in assessing the validity of sources -- part of the fascination and challenge of all history, but certainly of Mormon history -- is reflected in my Brodie article and in the Fanny Alger chapter of

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ISL [12] It's ironic that Mr. Bachman should label me as being anti-Mormon, as my distaste for anti-Mormon writing should be obvious to any reader of ISL. Anti-Mormon writing is usually exaggerated, sensationalized, secondary, shallow and wrong-headed. However, the more primary anti-Mormon writing must be read and digested (e.g., memoirs of people who were involved first hand in the events of Ohio, Missouri and Nauvoo, then left the church) - sometimes it provides part of the picture, and some people who left the church nevertheless had character and integrity. But my methodology is to use this as supplemental; on important issues, I try to build the foundation with sympathetic, primary sources.

No source is perfect. Every document, however contemporary and primary, has only part of the total picture. Imperfect evidence (i.e., all evidence) can still be valuable, as part of the total picture. Mr. Bachman himself used late and secondhand evidence in his thesis, as was correct. One should use it with care, but to say that a historian should disregard autobiographies or reminiscences (by definition late) is absurd. One of Mr. Bachman's odd charges is that I use various kinds of evidence. A good historian should use different kinds of evidence - diaries, reminiscences, newspaper reports, genealogical records.

Q. Professor Avery asked if any of Joseph Smith's plural wives ever apologized to Emma.

Not that I know of. I did not focus on Emma in my book, as Val and Linda had already written their wonderful, classic biography of her. But obviously, she is a very important woman who faced enormous challenges. An interesting article could be written about her relationships with Joseph Smith's plural wives. Clearly I see her through the eyes of the plural wives; Val might see the plural wives through her eyes. Two women stand out for me -- Emily Partridge (and there are few people in Mormon history whom I admire more) had a difficult relationship with Emma. Emily testified to Emma's great kindness to her and her sister, Eliza, when they lived with the Smiths. Emma picked Emily and Eliza as Joseph's wives when she acceded to the doctrine of plural marriage. But then Emma could not deal emotionally with polygamy and forced Emily and Eliza out of her house. According to Emily, she used very harsh, hurtful language at the time. Later in her life, Emily looked back, forgave everything, and hoped Emma would take her place in the celestial kingdom. See her moving statement at ISL 732-33. Another woman is Elizabeth Brackenbury Durfee, who was a close friend of Emma in Nauvoo. Then Elizabeth and her boys left the westward moving main group of Mormons and returned to Nauvoo and Elizabeth renewed her friendship with Emma. Probably it is not a coincidence that Elizabeth and her sons ended up RLDS, as Elizabeth clearly sympathized with Emma. However, I personally doubt that she ever told Emma that she'd married Joseph, or ever apologized.

Finally, here is my credo, as a Mormon who looks on himself as believing, and as a historian who tries to be honest and balanced: I believe that all truth is faith-promoting, if we're talking about authentic faith. No authentic truth damages authentic faith. Truth, even difficult truths, will only deepen and give breadth of vision to authentic
faith. Only brittle, oversimplified faith will break easily when confronted with difficult truths. When we face difficult truths, we should not sensationalize them, but we should deal with them straightforwardly and honestly, using historical context and sympathetic insight to put them into perspective. Sometimes, when we have had oversimplified faith, we will need to deepen and broaden our faith to include tragedy and contradiction and human limitation, but that is not a matter of giving up our faith — it is a matter of developing our faith. I realize that this can be a painful process at times, but it is a process that gives our faith more solidity and more breadth. The eye of faith sees greater depth, perspectives, and gradations of color; the heart of faith responds more to the tragedies of our bygone brothers and sisters, who become more real and more sympathetic to us.

I believe that the gospel includes all truth, and all truth is part of the gospel. I believe that the gospel is afraid of no truth. All truth, both the brightness of love and the shadows of tragedy, contributes to the infinite beauty of the gospel. Thank you.


[1.1] All of these wrote anti-Mormon books. The long first paragraph of Mr. Bachman's oral presentation equates me with the early gnostic heretic Marcion.


[4.1] Bachman, FARMS review, 118.

reviewers referred to this article.


[7] Foster, "Sex and Prophetic Power." He refers to ISL as a "massive and thoughtful apologetic study." Thus he sees ISL as apologetic, a "defense" of Mormonism and possibly Joseph Smith and polygamy. 75, n. 33. ISL "is the first major study to focus broadly on the full range of Joseph Smith's likely plural wives as individuals in their own right." Ibid. This is positive, but is followed by a negative, the probable reason he regards me as "apologetic": "...though he tends to assume that any apparent sexual relationship with Joseph Smith was a 'marriage.'" Ibid. He then cites Janet Ellingson's letter to the editor and my response to it, see above.


[11] E.g., Valeen Tippetts Avery, From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 172: "That the prophet did not father children with his other wives, and therefore could have had no other wives, became a standard argument of the Reorganized Church."


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