Speech given at Meeting of Association of Intermountain Booksellers
February 25, 1998

This is a great honor, to be invited to speak to this group. Jorge Luis Borges once said that he had always imagined paradise to be a library; bookstores also have a bit of the heavenly about them. Though obviously, you have to balance practical concerns like making money, I know that many booksellers enter into the trade because they love books, and the issues and concerns discussed in books -- history, philosophy, religion, art, literature, travel, psychology, ecology, social justice, feminism, the sciences. The invention of the modern book and movable type was one of the great steps forward in the liberation of the human spirit, and books are useless if they are not available. So I think the mission and service of the moral, discerning bookseller is an important one, and you should be commended for the service you render to free thought, as well as to enlightened entertainment.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank those booksstores who are carrying my book, and I hope it sells enough copies to make the effort worthwhile for you. I would also like to thank readers of the book, I've really enjoyed meeting many of you at book signings.

I like the concept of an independent bookstore. It brings to mind a bookstore with character, with oddities, with useful specialties, a bookstore that cares about specific issues. I sympathize with the independent bookstore, and the risks you take, because I wrote In Sacred Loneliness as an independent historian. When I attended academic functions, and was asked to identify myself by institution, I was at a loss what to put since I had no teaching job, so I sometimes put "independent researcher." Which is a euphemism for unemployed academic.

But there are advantages to being unemployed, unconnected to an institution that can subtly divert you from your real interests and swallow up your energy. It was a great privilege, and enormously stimulating, to write about the 33 women I look at in my book. But if I'd had a normal, outwardly successful academic career, I would be writing articles and books about ancient Greece and Rome right now, and would have missed meeting those women.

As I tell you how my book came to be written, you'll see that it is completely an independent work, not a book calculated to further my academic career, my economic wellbeing, or even my church career. In the summer of 1991, a friend, who was studying American and Mormon history at University of Utah, came down to southern California because she'd received a fellowship to study at the Huntington Library. I'd received my doctorate from UCLA in classics, with a focus in Greek literature, comparative myth, and history of religions. I taught a year at USC, but though I'd hoped that would give me a platform for getting a permanent position, the teaching jobs had mostly dried up. So I was left at a difficult, discouraging crossroads.

At this point my friend suggested that I apply to the Huntington library to receive a summer fellowship. It would give me a little extra money and I could further my publication production. I did not think it was a very practical idea. But she said that applying wouldn't do me any harm. The Huntington has the Eliza Snow overland diaries, she added; apply to work on them. She even suggested things that I could write in the application, then gave me the application.

I looked it over. It didn't look like it would take too much work. I spent an hour or two writing the application, wrote some quick letters to people I knew for recommendations, and sent it in. I won't get it, I said. I have no background in Mormon history.

Four months later I received a letter from the Huntington Library telling me I had received a three month
fellowship to study the diaries of Eliza R. Snow the following summer. I was astounded, and am still surprised in retrospect. Well, I said, I guess I have to study the diaries of Eliza R. Snow now. This would be a bit of a detour from my classics career, but I looked forward to it, as I've always been fascinated by Mormon history and feminist issues.

Such are the blessings of being unemployed, or, to give the situation a genteeel spin: of being an independent scholar. If I'd been connected with an institution, I never would have applied for that fellowship.

So I went into the reading room of the Huntington Library the next summer, and sat down at a table with the little books, with tiny crabbed handwriting, that Eliza R. Snow wrote in when she was crossing the plains. It was a thrill just to hold them in my hands, to realize that Eliza kept these very books with her on the long overland trip, a trip my great great grandmother, Susan Noble, made with her. As I began to read through them, I immediately faced the problem of identifying the many women whom Eliza referred to in the diaries, either by first name or last name. I found it perplexing not to know who these women were, what their life histories were. You must remember, now we have three major women's diaries printed with tentative identification of characters (Eliza R. Snow's, Patty Sessions', and Mary Haskin Parker Richard's). Then, we didn't have those tools. So I felt that the first thing I needed to do was find lists of the wives of Joseph Smith (as Eliza had been his wife), Brigham Young (as Eliza was his wife) and Heber C. Kimball (whose wives were very close to Brigham's wives). I found a good Dialogue article by Jeffery Johnson (volume 20, 1987, 57-70) listing Brigham's wives, and Arrington's biography of Brigham was also helpful. Stanley Kimball's biography of Heber C. Kimball had a good listing of the Kimball wives in an appendix.

But the best I could find for Joseph Smith's wives was Fawn Brodie's appendix in No Man Knows My History, which listed 48 wives. This was the only modern, scholarly treatment, but I felt it left much to be desired. First of all, though Brodie deserves credit for even attempting the task, and collecting material for the list, much of her data came from sensationalizing, anti-Mormon sources that looked to me to be unreliable. Second, the book was very outdated, some 45 years old. So I began to create my own list of Joseph Smith's wives, using Brodie and other modern writers on polygamy such as Van Wagoner, Bachman, Newell, Avery, and Foster (none of whom had created a new list of Joseph's wives, though all of them were insightful and helpful).

Now, in making my own list of Joseph's wives, I felt I had to have their names right, with married names in proper sequence, and their dates of birth and death, in order to even be sure I was talking about the right person. To get their married names in order, I had to list their successive marriages with names of husbands and explanation of marriage ending (divorce, separation, death). And to do that I had to write a small history for each woman and her husbands.

But many of these women had extremely complex marriage histories, and just to write their full names correctly I had to understand those convoluted successive marriages. Of course, those of you who've been following the issue of polygamy in Nauvoo know that Joseph Smith married some women who were married to other men, so the woman ended up married to two men simultaneously, thus creating polyandry. Van Wagoner and Bachman had dealt with polyandry, but I hadn't realized Smith had practiced it as extensively as he had. I remember one defining moment in my research at the Huntington: I had the date of Brigham Young's marriage to Zina Huntington Jacobs (previously married to Henry Jacobs) in the Nauvoo Temple on February 2, 1846. Of course, Zina was later widely known as Young's wife, and she was probably Eliza R. Snow's closest friend, I really couldn't ignore her experience in polygamy. Then I was reading the diary of Eliza Partridge Smith Lyman in the Huntington, and she casually noted two months later, in early March 1846, that she met Henry and Zina traveling across Iowa together. What was
Henry doing with Zina again, I wondered, and I realized that I couldn't even write Zina's name correctly until I answered that question. (As it turned out, he had never left her.) But I was also interested in understanding the phenomenon of these enigmatic marriage situations, what the experience was like for the women and men involved in them.

So solving the complex marriage histories of these women became a fascinating detective puzzle. People compliment me on my book's length and its extensive endnotes as if I'd done something admirable. I try to say something gracious in reply, but I'm always tempted to say, I haven't done anything admirable. It was fascinating from beginning to end.

My little biographies gradually turned into longer biographies, as I tried to untangle the knotty tangle of documentation relevant to these women's marriages and lives. The riddles were not just unusual forms of polygamy. I found that many of these women did not have death dates or birth dates. An equally annoying problem was women who had two or three birth dates or death dates -- which I thought was too much of a good thing. There were also puzzles related to these women's children and husbands. Puzzles simply led to more puzzles.

One minor triumph in my research was sorting out the marriages of Elizabeth Davis (Goldsmith Brackenbury Durfee Smith Lott), with the help of her descendants. I followed her to Nauvoo, traced her crossing Iowa, then hit a brick wall. Did she die? Remarry? Come west to Utah? There was no information that I could find. So one day, in frustration, I said to myself: she evidently divorced Durfee; was widowed by Joseph Smith; then apparently separated from Lott. She had three sons by Joseph Brackenbury. Is it possible that she went back to using her Brackenbury name? So following that theory, I picked up the phone there in my Los Angeles apartment, and called Utah directory assistance and asked for any Brackenburgys in the state. To my surprise, there were a few. So I began calling them out of the blue. Hello, I would say, I'm researching a woman in Nauvoo named Brackenbury. Is there anyone in your family who does genealogy? And soon I received the phone number of a woman who did Brackenbury genealogy. I got her on the line and asked her: can you give me a death date for Elizabeth Davis Durfee Brackenbury? Yes, she said. She was run over by a train on November 10, 1876, near Fanning, Kansas. I fell off my chair. And not only that, she said. I can tell you that in her later life she became a member of the RLDS church, and died RLDS. I fell off my chair again.

As the biographies became longer, I began reading everything I could relating to these women at the Huntington, both primary and secondary sources. But then I took another step in my research. While I started merely trying to solve the puzzles of complex marriage histories, I soon found myself caught up in the drama of these women's lives. Another defining moment for me was the diary of Eliza Partridge. At the Huntington was a reproduction of the holograph diary of Eliza Partridge Smith Lyman, one of the great masterpieces of Mormon literature. It told the history of a tragic marriage to the problematic apostle, Amasa Lyman, a grim struggle for survival in pioneer Utah by a plural wife who did not see her husband on a regular basis; her daughter's doomed marriage to an older church leader, and the daughter's death after an excruciating childbirth; Eliza's heroic pioneer journey to San Juan county through the Hole in the Rock with her two sons. Nothing really controversial, but I felt that I had experienced her life, and the nobility and intelligence of a great person.

So this book became an emotional journey for me, as well as a historical puzzle. Thirty-three women became more and more real as I began collecting evidence systematically. Even when a woman was largely undocumented, I found the scraps and tatters of evidence left in the historical record from her shadowy life could be fit together to make a more coherent story than we'd previously had. At some point, I don't know when, I began to wonder if this list could become an article or a book. Of course, four years later, Signature was begging me to put it from 900 pages to 600 pages.
Unfortunately, my time at the Huntington ended after a few months (and by the way, that library, with its extensive gardens, is very close to paradise). The practical thing for me to do should have been to return to job searching in classics. Instead, I took a word-processing job that allowed me to spend my free time researching and writing, and I began to make long research trips to Utah, other archives in California and in the midwest. I was now an independent researcher. Though there are drawbacks to being an independent researcher (possessing an old VW bug that barely runs; inadequate living space for files or books; lacking a steady career because of frequent trips to Utah), I'm not complaining. Writing my book has been intensely rewarding and emotionally very moving. I'm very lucky to have found the subject I did.

So as an independent researcher, I feel a kinship with you as independent booksellers. Despite the drawbacks and risks of your profession, I'm sure you wouldn't have it any other way. Now my next goal is to become independently wealthy -- but don't hold your breath. Thank you.

Return to home.