

Epilogue

On 7 February 1952 the funeral of Joseph F. Merrill was held in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. David O. McKay conducted, beginning by reading a telegram from Utah senator Arthur V. Watkins, saying, “He was a vigorous, courageous, and able defender of the faith, and one of the West’s greatest statesmen. The Church and the West have lost a great man.”¹ McKay praised Merrill’s spirituality, declaring, “If anyone passed from the life with the readiness to die it was Elder Merrill.” J. Reuben Clark, McKay’s counselor in the First Presidency, recounted his long acquaintance with Merrill, stretching back to when he was one of Merrill’s students at the University of Utah. Searching for a word to describe his old teacher, he settled on “rugged,” referring to Merrill’s physical and intellectual qualities. “He was rugged in that he never temporized with truth; rugged in his whole mentality, approaching all problems fairly and squarely. He was rugged in spirituality—truth was truth and he followed it where he knew it.”²

As the services continued, the remarks of the speakers turned towards the theme of science and religion. Joseph Fielding Smith, president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, reflected, “He loved the

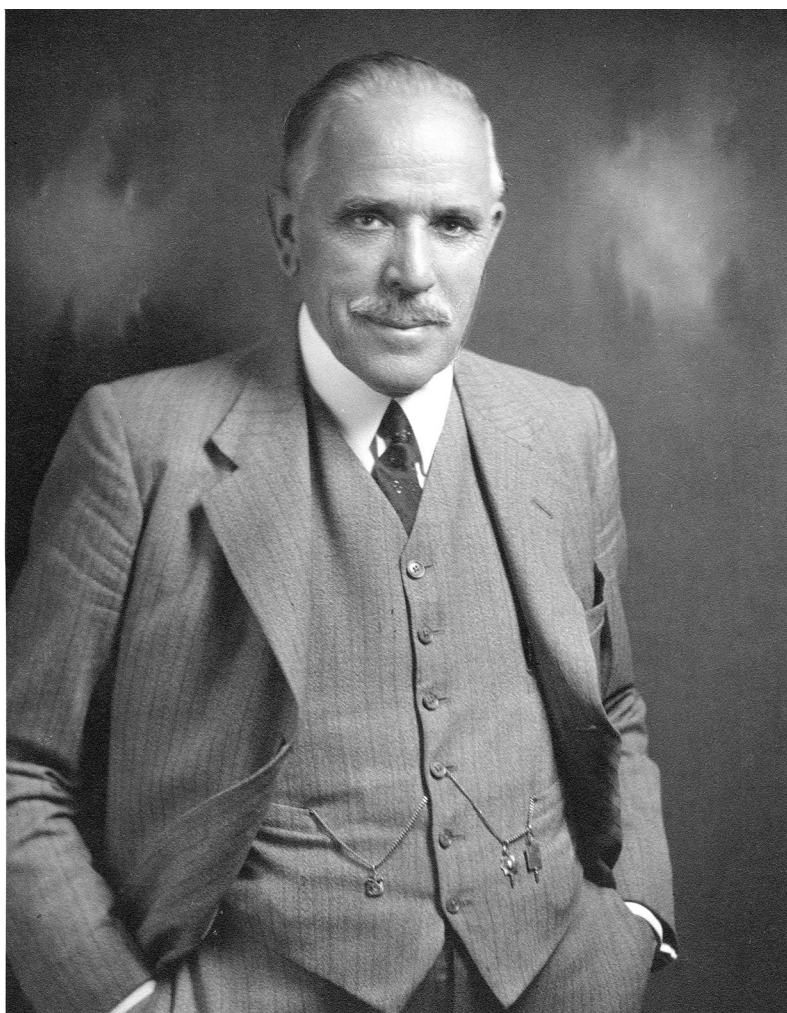
truth of science, but even more he loved the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . Nothing Dr. Merrill received in his secular education ever influenced him against the fundamental teachings of the gospel.”³ Dean Taylor, a longtime associate from the University of Utah, added, “To me he was a great scientist because his knowledge increased his belief in God and his testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel. . . . Even a skeptic must have been made to think twice when they saw a great scientist become also a great religious leader.”⁴

A statement issued by the First Presidency summarized Merrill’s service: “For years he has fulfilled every call made upon him, never excusing, never shirking, never complaining. He has been a minuteman in the service of the Lord, ready to meet every appointment given to him.”⁵ Gordon B. Hinckley wrote a stirring tribute appearing in the official Church magazine and noting their long association and friendship. Concluding on a wistful note, Hinckley mused, “He now has gone, also. But to those who knew him and worked closely with him, he will remain as a monument of integrity and as an example of the virtues that have made us strong—industry, loyalty, and faith.”⁶

At the end of his funeral services, Merrill was laid to a rest in a small, inconspicuous grave in the Salt Lake Cemetery. He was buried next to the three most important women in his life—Annie Laura Hyde, Emily L. Traub, and his daughter, Laura Merrill—the last laid to rest only a few years before. The grave is only a short distance from a number of impressive spires, most conspicuously the monument to Church President John Taylor, the grandfather of Merrill’s first wife. Stationed on a small hill, the final resting place of Joseph F. Merrill is easily overlooked amidst the more impressive monuments of stone surrounding it.

Rediscovery

At times the biographer’s art is to praise, to produce hagiography conforming the measure of greatness for a figure already well known and well loved. On other occasions the task is to criticize, to tear down false idols, and to shine the harsh light of historical analysis on an individual



One of Elder Merrill's last apostolic portraits taken near the end of his life. Courtesy of Annie Whitton.

who merits a reevaluation. Other times the work of the biographer is to discover, to sift through the documents, reminiscences, and the musty collections of history to *rediscover* an individual vital in his time but forgotten in the larger memory of his people. This work belongs in the third category because Merrill is largely unknown by both the people of the West and the Latter-day Saints today.

What is Merrill's legacy? The most prominent monument to Merrill's memory today is the Merrill Engineering Building on the campus of the University of Utah, proudly described by its builders as a "sparkling, glass-walled structure" that "used more glass, by weight, than any previous building in the Mountain West area."⁷ The structure, home to the only nuclear reactor in Utah, is a fitting starting place in considering Merrill's contributions to his homeland and his culture.

Merrill's upbringing within the Latter-day Saint kingdom provided the foundation for his character and personality. A personal theophany was, and still is, a desired experience for most of the faithful Latter-day Saints, but Merrill's narrative was distinctly different from the experiences shared by his father and other members of the first generation of the Church. Merrill claimed no vision, and no angels but only a quiet, penetrating witness. Merrill's experience, while not as grand as the one given to his father, was nonetheless sufficient to give him a firm witness of the faith. The conversion narrative told by the younger Merrill is much more likely to be similar to the experiences of a modern Latter-day Saint than that of his father.

When Merrill arrived at the University of Utah, he found his life's work. The most consistent thread through the work of Joseph F. Merrill is not found in the field of physics, education, or even religion, at least not directly. At the university he became acutely aware of the divide between his people, the Latter-day Saints, and those they dubbed "Gentiles." In truth, he never felt really at home in either camp, instead trying to build a life and a reputation where he could exist in both worlds. He wanted the Saints to believe a person could move freely in the world of reason and still have faith. He wanted the world outside the kingdom to believe a person could believe in the distinctive worldview of his faith and still be a person of intellect. His journey follows the same trajectory as the path of the Latter-day Saints from the late nineteenth century to the twentieth century. Merrill personifies the transformation of the faith during this period, and he was a key contributor to many institutions that made this metamorphosis possible.

He began his own personal transformation by leaving the kingdom to travel to a world almost completely foreign to it. His letters to Laura

Hyde while he studied in the eastern states show two keen young minds working out the particulars of their childhood faith with the realities of the larger world around them. He returned home with a greater understanding of how the world outside functioned, and he used those skills to build bridges between the warring parties surrounding him. His contributions to the School of Engineering at the University of Utah are obvious, but perhaps his most far-reaching innovation is found in the seminary program. Conceived and executed on a shoestring budget, seminary provided a solution to the educational difficulties vexing Church leaders of the time. Previous Latter-day Saint educational efforts had dedicated themselves to duplicating or subverting the growing public system of education; instead Merrill used the public schools to his advantage. Religion classes sponsored by the Church started the practice of supplementary education, but Merrill, with his connections in the larger educational community of Utah, managed to negotiate an arrangement essentially turning every public high school into a Church school, with the Saints paying only for the theological department across the street.

The institutes of religion program was largely an extension of the seminaries on the collegiate level. In some ways it was not Merrill's child, because it was conceived of and executed before he came to the office of Church commissioner of education. But Merrill arrived in time to provide guidance in creating the fundamental mission of the institutes. He wanted the institutes to allow Latter-day Saint students to connect the teachings of the college classroom with the principles of the faith—to provide them with the tools to connect religion and reason throughout their lives. The objective of the institutes, according to Merrill, was “to enable our young people attending the colleges to make the necessary adjustments between the things they have been taught in the Church and the things they are learning in the university. . . . The primary purpose, therefore, is not to teach them theology. . . . We want to help them to see that it is perfectly reasonable and logical to be really sincere Latter-day Saints.”⁸ His motives for working to retain Brigham Young University as a part of the Church educational system are tied into the same ideals. Speaking in favor of keeping the university,

he argued, “We need in the Church a group of scholars learned in history, science, and philosophy, scholars of standing and ability who can interpret for us and make plain to us the results of research and the reasoning of the human mind.”⁹

Measured by the number of students, there is no doubt that the seminary and institute programs are Merrill’s most enduring legacy. By the twenty-first century, the seminary program enrolled 391,680 students, while the institutes of religion claimed 352,488 students, with programs in 137 different countries.¹⁰ The effectiveness of these programs is difficult to quantify, but in recent years scholars of other faiths have begun to take notice of the effectiveness of the Latter-day system of supplementary religious education. One Protestant scholar even speaks of “Mormon envy,” writing, “Latter-day Saints teenagers are significantly more likely to hold religious beliefs similar to their parents (73%), attend religious services once a week (43%), and talk about religious matters in their families more than other teenagers (80% once a week or more).”¹¹ This scholar goes on to cite seminaries as a key factor in these statistics, pointing out that “Mormons rigorously and unapologetically plunge teenagers into a peculiar God-story, and surround them with religiously articulate adults who demonstrate how to approach their creed, community and understandings of vocation and hope to enact a Mormon way of life.”¹² Knowing Merrill’s background, his education, and his struggles during his time in the East, it is not difficult to understand why Merrill was so intent on creating a culture designed to help young Latter-day Saints survive the complicated world of academia. He was preparing the way for others who would follow his own path.

Merrill’s work impacted not only the inner life of the Latter-day Saints but also its outer perception to the wider world. He considered himself a teacher throughout his life, and his most important protégé came not from the university but from his tenure in the European Mission office. Young Gordon B. Hinckley took the lessons learned during his service under Merrill and spent nearly seventy years applying them to the wider Church. Assigned by Merrill to impress upon Church leaders the need for a more sophisticated media strategy, Hinckley practi-

cally invented the earliest incarnation of the Church public relations department. He shepherded the public image of the Latter-day Saints into the twenty-first century. When he became Church President in 1995, Hinckley startled reporters by holding an impromptu press conference. The journalists in attendance were so used to the closed-off nature of Church leadership that they found themselves scrambling for questions to ask the new president. Under Hinckley's leadership, an aggressive public relations campaign involving a multitude of different kinds of media was launched.¹³ One study found that in the 1990s, under Hinckley's tenure, the number of national periodical articles concerning Latter-day Saints nearly quadrupled those of the previous four decades. Generally, the articles also presented a more positive view of the faith.¹⁴ Continued innovation in media was a hallmark of Hinckley's presidency and has continued beyond his death. The media approach of the Church in our times found its genesis in the confines of the European Mission Office, where Merrill, Hinckley, and their associates worked to turn the tide of public opinion in prewar Great Britain.

The legacy of Merrill's teachings is more conflicted. *The Truth-Seeker and Mormonism* never became a fixture of Latter-day Saint intellectualism the way that other works by Merrill's contemporaries did. With the death of Merrill in 1952 and John A. Widtsoe the same year, the remarkable collection of scientists brought into the Church hierarchy during the 1920s and '30s passed away. Only two years after Merrill's death, a controversy erupted during summer training for seminary and institute teachers when Joseph Fielding Smith's *Man: His Origin and Destiny*, was used as a course textbook. Even if he had still been alive, Merrill is unlikely to have engaged in the conflict. The book was primarily designed to refute theories of organic evolution—waters that Merrill consistently refused to wade into.

Once the controversy died down, most of the religious education programs of the Church began a more conservative trajectory, in a movement eminent scholar Armand Mauss labeled "retrenchment."¹⁵ Mauss argues that "a struggle ensued within [Church education] between the original philosophy of reconciliation with outside learning and the emergent philosophy of particularistic indoctrination."¹⁶ Even

during his lifetime, Merrill found himself on both sides of this dynamic. By recruiting young scholars to train at the University of Chicago Divinity School, he participated in a new era of Latter-day Saint studies and theological interactions with other denominations. But he also supported J. Reuben Clark and other Church authorities who became alarmed that too much divinity school theology was polluting the purity of Church doctrine. One thing is clear: Merrill loved learning passionately and felt that the culture and beliefs of his faith could not just stand next to the teachings of other religions but also shine among them.

Therein may lie Joseph F. Merrill's final and most enduring legacy. As mentioned previously, both the conservative and the liberal branches of Latter-day Saint thought can trace themselves back to Merrill and his crucial years as the Church commissioner of education. Sidney B. Sperry and the men who became the ardent defenders of the faith, the founders of scholarly Latter-day Saint apologetics, owe their origins to Merrill's willingness to sponsor scholars in their graduate education. Likewise, many of the liberal thinkers in Latter-day Saint studies can trace themselves to Heber C. Snell by way of Sterling McMurrin. It seems strange that these warring parties, like the biblical Isaac and Ishmael, may trace themselves back to the same intellectual father. Perhaps this paradox explains the basic faith of Joseph F. Merrill. He believed in faith *and* in science with the whole of his being, and he did not fear the consequences of a full exploration of either. His close friend, Richard R. Lyman, noted, "I have known some of his ideas and suggestions to be greeted in the beginning with violent opposition by those who later saw the wisdom in them and later advocated their adoption."¹⁷ The wisdom in Merrill's ideas may be seen by their gradual adoption throughout the Latter-day Saint religion today. Over the course of time, the usefulness of a flexible educational program to work in concert with public schools, and a competent collection of religious scholars, fluent in the language of faith and reason, came to embody the vision of the beloved faith Merrill so tirelessly worked towards. Well after Merrill's death, Lyman added one last, fitting tribute to his faithful friend: "Joseph F. Merrill was a dynamic searcher of truth. He aimed to

impress those teaching that the essence of true religion is based upon intelligence as well as faith.”¹⁸ A worthy legacy of a truth seeker indeed.

Notes

1. Joseph F. Merrill funeral, audio recording, courtesy of Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
2. “High Tribute Accorded Dr. Merrill,” *Deseret News*, 7 February 1952, 2A.
3. “High Tribute Accorded Dr. Merrill.”
4. “High Tribute Accorded Dr. Merrill.”
5. “First Presidency Pays Tribute to Elder Joseph F. Merrill,” *Improvement Era*, March 1952, 144.
6. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Church Mourns the Passing of Elder Joseph F. Merrill,” *Improvement Era*, March 1952, 205.
7. Dietrich K. Gehhmlich, *A History of the College of Engineering, University of Utah* (2003), 42, <http://www.coe.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/history.pdf>.
8. Ward Magleby, “1926—Another Beginning. Moscow, Idaho,” *Impact*, Winter 1968, 31.
9. *Deseret News*, 20 December 1930, 31.
10. Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Report for 2013, 2.
11. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 51.
12. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 60.
13. J. B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 158–69.
14. Casey W. Olsen, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in National Periodicals, 1991–2000” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2007), 129, 132.
15. Armand Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 95.
16. Mauss, *Angel and the Beehive*, 97.
17. Quoted in *Descendants of Joseph F. Merrill and Annie Laura Hyde Merrill*, 3.
18. Quoted in *Descendants of Joseph F. Merrill and Annie Laura Hyde Merrill*, 3.