

INTRODUCTION

For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the year 2020 holds sacred significance: it marks the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith Jr.'s First Vision near his boyhood home in upstate New York. This theophany will likely be remembered in songs and sermons as well as pageants and performances of various kinds throughout this year—a time of celebrations and commemorations. It is in this joyful spirit of remembering and reflecting upon that memorable event in the year 1820 that I have chosen to write this history. One major purpose of this work is to expand the stage of that visionary experience from merely a local Palmyra setting to a more global environment. If, as the late Latter-day Saint historian B. H. Roberts once insisted, there were “earlier lights in the morning than the outburst of the rising sun,” that is to say other cast members who “caught the spirit of the [incoming new] dispensation,” then this work also aims at identifying who some of those “earlier lights” may have been.¹ Their contributions to the age of 1820, of which many played a significant, if unwitting, role in the rise and early progress of the Church, will form the basis of this work.

When I began this work several years ago, I was of the naive opinion that writing about the year 1820 would be a fun, relatively straightforward project. A few events here and a few interesting stories there—that should just about do it. However, I learned very early on that

1. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 6:252.

the once-upon-a-time approach may work well for fairy tales and historical novels, but it poses several challenges for the writer of history. Most sane historians write about people, events, places, or even ideas that become understandable only with the passage of time. Where I once believed that 1820 could be captured by merely chronicling key events that occurred during that not-so-long-ago year, I soon realized that such an approach would be a lazy, grossly simplistic short circuiting of a vast, magisterial complexity. The fact is, the year of our Lord 1820 was but one of an age, as is every other year in time. It cannot be understood or explained in isolation from those nearby years before and after it; rather, it must be seen as part of a continuum, a portion of the relentlessly moving train of history. There are so many ongoing streams of human thought and expression developing simultaneously that to say “this is what happened in 1820” or “this is what’s most important” makes very little sense and can offend those with differing priorities and viewpoints. It is not fundamentally a question of what was happening but rather why, not merely a matter of what was developing but more a question of cause and effect that occurred in so many different fields of human endeavor.

There are even more serious challenges to writing a history of this sort. One surely is interpretation. In attempting to place the Restoration into a wider context, there is the temptation of some Latter-day Saint readers to see all of history pointing to Palmyra, that so many of those gifted in song were singing to a chorus of “Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning,” when in fact it just wasn’t so. A worldwide history cannot be artificially bent to fit a narrow, preconceived, faith-promoting paradigm of interpretation and self-fulfilling prophecy, that everyone and everything were somehow all part of a divine Latter-day Saint hymnbook. Seeing history through such a narrow prism would give lie to one of the essential purposes of this book, which is to place Joseph Smith’s First Vision story within a worldwide context, not the other way around. A world history cannot be made the captive of any one interpretation. Some of what was happening elsewhere did indeed impact the unfolding of the Restoration, and where that was the case, I have briefly made comments thereon. However, this was not always so. The astute reader will have to make his or her own connections and conclusions.

Yet another challenge is that of creating a justifiable historical context, or of placing the story line in its proper sequence of development. This may explain why each one of the following thirteen chapters has a historical on-ramp leading up to, and sometimes past, the year 1820. While some may take exception with how long each run-up may be, please be patient; it takes time to get up to speed with the fast traffic lanes of history. Thus, I have chosen to start the chapter on Napoléon with the French Revolution of 1789, the chapter on Henry Clay with the American Revolution of 1776, and the study of Joseph Smith as far back as the Puritans of 1620.

Another obstacle to writing a work of this kind is that of scope. David McCullough, in his prizewinning, highly acclaimed study of the year 1776, enjoyed the benefit of writing

about a single year in just one nation's colorful history—the beginnings of America.² He masterfully presented his characters and events primarily within a political and military context and, in the process, made sense of a specific year for the United States in particular. In contrast, the canvas upon which this book is painted is worldwide in scope, more akin to John E. Wills Jr.'s lesser-known attempt to capture an earlier age with his *1688: A Global History*.³ It is a daunting, if not Herculean, task to make sense of an entire world history in so short and so selective a work as this is. Nevertheless, this work promises to be an exciting journey in time as it moves primarily from east to west over lands and seas before ending in upstate New York.

Further to the challenge of breadth and scope, this tries to be an encyclopedic work, spread across many countries, climates, and fields of endeavor. It is almost out of fashion these days to be like George Bancroft in the sense of writing a sweeping, ten-volume comprehensive history of America. To do so requires a breadth of understanding that taxes the limits of any one person's knowledge. It is virtually impossible nowadays to be an expert generalist in an age of specialties, even in the writing of history. I can already hear the reviewers criticizing the efforts of one, who is fundamentally a church historian, to venture into unknown worlds and never-before-seen panoramas. Such audacity and bold ambitions certainly have their serious limitations. While comprehensive in design, what follows is highly restrictive in scope, size, and content. The publishers would have it no other way. Wide swaths of human history are inevitably missing from the pages that follow. For instance, so much more could have been written about the domestic, Asia and the Far East, medicine, and philosophy, to name but a few of many missing fields. A single volume of the age can at best be only selective. It would take a library of books to do it all justice. Still, this work will try to be more than representative of the time; its purpose is to capture the essence of its fundamental meaning.

It was also a formidable challenge to decide how to approach this kind of study and how to even come close to capturing an accurate understanding of the main currents of thought in a given age. There are so many ways of doing so—the subjective and the objective, the quantitative and the qualitative, the analytical and the statistical, the theoretical and the practical. This may explain why I have deliberately chosen to approach the study of this age through writing a series of somewhat interconnected biographies. Admittedly, biography may not be either the most complete, the most interpretive, or the most analytical approach to understanding the past. However, it certainly is the most intimate form of history and arguably the most compelling to read for the simple reason that it is people, individually and collectively, who make history what it so unforgettably is. I have chosen the historical biographical approach not because it is the most thorough but because it is the most manageable. Like viewing a sprawling construction site spread over several blocks, one sees and comprehends it more fully from different angles and viewpoints. Through the

2. McCullough, *1776*.

3. Wills, *1688*.

lens of biography, we will attempt to view the age of 1820 as if it were, if you will, under construction. The devilishly difficult challenge will be to create an interconnectedness of meaning, to bring seamlessness out of compartmentalization, to recognize the building rising from its foundation.

If, then, biography, the inevitable questions arise: why these particular biographies, and what is the thread that binds them together? There are, after all, so many to choose from, so many to investigate. After years of research and study, I carefully selected the actors to this play because they made stellar, unforgettable contributions to their fields of activity. Whether it be Beethoven in music, Coleridge in literature, or Hannah Moore in religion, these men and women exercised a degree of predominance in their respective spheres of influence and are, to this day, universally acclaimed for having done so. Furthermore, by reaching into their lives, we can also look upon many of their contemporaries and fellow sojourners in a way that gives a fuller appreciation of the age. As Thomas L. Hankins has so well argued, “Biography provides the cross-sectional view” and “gives us a way to tie together the parallel currents of history at the level where the events and ideas occur.” Such biography, he continued, well-crafted and carefully researched, “can be the ruin of all kinds of historical generalities.”⁴

As to their interconnectedness, I readily admit to a degree of subjectivity and bias on my part. However, in researching one chapter after another, I began to notice commonalities of thought, interest, and ambition among such notable figures as Bolívar and Napoléon, explorers such as Humboldt and Williams, and artists such as Gericault and Coleridge. Sometimes such figures crossed paths, as with Beethoven and Elizavita at the Congress of Vienna or with Napoléon and Champollion. And they often looked to one another for inspiration. Some made discoveries and contributions so pertinent to the rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that they begged inclusion in this work.

The danger in approaching history in this biographical manner is that it may come perilously close to hagiography, or the “great man theory,” of explaining history, a short-circuiting excuse to understanding the complexities of the past that is anathema to so many historians today. Those who are antibiographical rigorously resist the idea that any one man or woman, or even a small cluster of people, could make much of a difference when in fact there were so many other causal factors, so many trends and tides and peoples that led to this or that change or development. They insist that this heroic mode of writing history is but foam tossed upon the ocean’s surface as compared to the deeper currents of human history that transcend the personal and the biographical.

Robert J. Richards of the University of Chicago in his 2017 study on “The Role of Biography in Intellectual History” believes differently. He maintains that biography is critical to understanding the past. “The focus of an individual allows a coherent representation of science and of intellectual development at a moment in history.” Biography is the “meeting

4. Hankins, “In Defense of Biography,” 5–6.

place of psychological dispositions, political attitudes, religious beliefs and worries about theory and evidence. In such a mind,” he contends, “one encounters a complex of interacting causes that offers the basis for realistic explanation.”⁵ Those so critical of biography would be hard pressed to dismiss the enormously negative consequences of the character, viewpoints, and prejudices of an Adolph Hitler or a Joseph Stalin in more contemporary times. The deliberate choices they made mattered enormously to the lives—and deaths—of millions of people; likewise, the positive consequences of such personalities as Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln.

Biography can also introduce something far beyond the cold calculations of cause and effect. That something else is emotion. The Prussian scientist Alexander von Humboldt, one of the characters we will be studying later in this work, once stated that the task of the historian is “to execute the task of his craft, [and to] compose the given events so as to move the reader’s emotions in a way similar to that of reality itself.”⁶ Human beings are not always predictable or even reasonable in their actions. There are deep-seated psychological, spiritual, and emotional realities borne out of trials and difficulties, unique circumstances, and impressions that contribute to the decisions people make in their everyday lives. Capturing these conflicts and emotions, making them real to the reader who is subject to the same, creates not merely a believable tale but an unspoken truth. Thus, I maintain that some incredibly gifted men and women did indeed change the world and that a study of their lives, decisions, feelings, and emotions speaks to us today in powerful, very understandable ways.

If these individuals featured so prominently herein were, in one way or another, fore-runners to the Restoration. They were very much human. They were not always of noble character, perfect in every way. Each one had serious flaws, yet each made, or at least supervised, significant contributions to the age.

Last but certainly not least is the challenge of writing in such a way as to give a book on a specific time period the quality of timelessness, to transcend the barriers of time by making it interesting to you, the reader—in short, to make it a good read! Regardless of whether the contributions of the many men and women discussed later on can be directly tied to Palmyra, the life stories of those selected for study must be both fascinating and instructional. Readers deserve nothing less.

These many challenges notwithstanding, a book such as this promises much to the careful reader who seeks to understand the qualities and essential meanings of the age. The many stars in this work will cluster around the following four dominant constellations in the skies of early nineteenth-century history. These four cornerstones are first, revolution and reform; second, Romanticism in its many literary and artistic forms and expressions; third, emancipation and the rebirth of freedom and independence; and lastly, religious revivalism as expressed in many different ways on both sides of the Atlantic. If the specific

5. Richards, “Role of Biography in Intellectual History,” 2.

6. Humboldt, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:6; as cited in Richards, “Role of Biography,” 6.

year 1820 was one not known for revolution, the years leading up to it certainly were. The French, American, and Spanish American revolutions launched a series of independence movements that changed the world. Likewise, the impact of the industrial revolution, which began in England in the late eighteenth century, continued to be felt worldwide. With the shouts and slaughters of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars fading into history, 1820 was also a welcomed time of peace, a forward-looking time when many collectively sighed in hearty relief after the din of a war-torn world and in eager anticipation of the renewed forward march of progress. The age was a time of fledgling political independence and rising nationalism, with many a nation shaking off its long-held chains of colonial rule. It was also a time when artists were expressing themselves in nontraditional and less classical, rule-bound ways in what many scholars call the rise of Romanticism. Religious movements were defining anew what it meant to believe in God and in his word. With similar optimism that filled the air after the conclusion of the Second World War in the mid-twentieth century, “the year of our Lord 1820,” as every almanac spoke of it, broke upon a weary world that was cautiously seeking new hopes, new dreams, and bold new visions—including Joseph Smith’s.

The curtain will rise on Napoléon Bonaparte—“the dear corporal”—representing the spirit of the age. His star is once again on the ascendancy as scholars have begrudgingly reevaluated his efforts to spread the liberalizing and liberating reforms of the French Revolution. Hobbled by egotism and ultimately doomed by overarching ambition, Bonaparte nevertheless spread the spirit and the aims of the Revolution across countries and continents and in the process, changed the world. Despised by many yet adored by multitudes, Napoléon was more than a conqueror; he was a principle, and his life affected many others who follow in his train in this book.

Napoléon’s invasion of Egypt paid an unexpected but enduring dividend in the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1798 as well as other remarkable archaeological wonders along the Nile. Jean-François Champollion’s “Lettre a Monsieur Dacier,” in which he proved he had decoded the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, signaled a linguistic triumph unparalleled in modern history. In the process, “the man from Grenoble” ushered in a new age of biblical archaeology and the study of Egyptian and other Middle Eastern ancient civilizations and their many secrets. His pioneering work had an enormous and surprising impact on Latter-day Saint history.

From Russia came that enigmatic Tsar Alexander I, Napoléon’s worthy contender, who, while finally defeating Napoléon, admired his adversary almost as a god. Twisted in soul and spirit to his wandering end, Alexander Daniel’s “king of the north,” never escaped the haunting shadow of his father’s murder. The “morning star of freedom” stumbled in self-acrimony and squandered a splendid opportunity to reform a serf-bound and suspicious imperial Russia. Yet his Holy Alliance, forged in the furnace of the Congress of Vienna, redrew boundaries and established the foundations of a profound peace, a peace that if not universally enjoyed, would endure for a century.

In the constellation of the arts, a cadre of geniuses redefined the boundaries of music, literature, art, and dance by rebelling against the classical, more rigid forms of expression. All were expressing themselves with the guns of Napoléon still being heard in the background. The Romantics were rewriting all the old rules by insisting on capturing the emotions, feelings, inspirations, and the human in all their manifestations. Theirs was a majestic, liberating portrayal of both the devil and the divine in human nature, a movement that broke older, more static modes of presentations. Beethoven's stirring Ninth Symphony, Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and Géricault's enormous *Raft of the Medusa* are all enduring representations—embodiments might be the better word—of the transcendent artistic spirit of an age that produced masterpieces of music, literature, and art.

Meanwhile, Great Britain experienced a revolution of a different kind that was no less far-reaching in its consequences than the political eruptions that were then transforming Europe, South America, and the United States. Simultaneous with the courtly distractions of King George IV and the "tatterdamalion caravan" of his wife, Queen Caroline, was the Industrial Revolution. With the advent of the steam engine, the rise of factories, railroads, steamships, and the harnessing of hydro- and steam-generated power, this wrenching transformation not only profoundly altered how people worked, thought, traveled, and discovered, but it also, in the words of Paul Johnson—a master scholar of the age of 1820—marked the "birth of the modern": a tectonic economic shift away from an agricultural society to a new social and world order.

Napoléon also inspired Simón Bolívar. Bolívar's indomitable efforts led to a spirit of revolution that liberated much of South and Central America from the hated tyranny of Spanish rule that had corrupted itself seeking gold at enormous human cost. His daring marches across the Andes, his personal bravery and incredible victories on the battlefield, and his search for love are the stuff of legend and parallel the daring exploits of Napoléon. He may have fallen short in his dream to galvanize South America into a single, unified nation, but he did much to ensure the independence of many new nations from Spain.

The time also witnessed a new age of scientific inquiry as captured by that Prussian prince Alexander von Humboldt. In so many ways the father of modern science, Humboldt traveled the world, climbing mountains and volcanoes, navigating torturous rivers and endless streams, and describing ancient civilizations with such colorful detail and captivating descriptions that the whole world wondered in awe. In the process, Humboldt inspired and supported whole new constellations of scientists in their endless pursuit of truth, from Faraday to Darwin. He was indeed the great illuminator, one of the finest naturalists this world has ever known.

Meanwhile, the United States of America, after fighting a successful revolutionary war of its own against Great Britain, declared its independence and through the efforts of many gifted men, established a fitting and lasting constitution. America's remarkable westward expansion resulted from Napoléon's sale of the Louisiana Purchase and the stalemate with

Great Britain in the War of 1812, a conflict that emboldened the new republic while giving rise to Canada, America's northern neighbor. Yet had it not been for the brilliant skills of that great compromiser Henry Clay, the United States probably may well have dismembered itself in 1820 in a bitter sectional conflict between the North and the South over the matter of slavery.

Another main current of thought coursing through much of this study will be the religious spirit of the age. I am, after all, a church historian, and this book is written primarily to a believing audience. It will pursue the rise of religious revivalism, beginning with Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and the Methodist revivals in Great Britain that challenged the supremacy of the established Church of England and inspired the conversions of Reverend John Newton and his protégé William Wilberforce. With "amazing grace"⁷ and persistent tact and political pressure, Wilberforce, Hannah Moore, and the Clapham Sect finally succeeded in persuading the British Parliament to abolish the slave trade in 1807. Additionally, the remarkable conversion of Coleridge, that "archangel a little damaged," and the rise of the Broad Church Movement show a religious theme that resisted any narrow prescriptions of Christian thought. This religious impulse also gave rise to the British Foreign Bible Society, the American Bible Society, and the remarkable, worldwide dissemination of the Holy Bible from Polynesia to Palmyra. This religious tenor of the time also led me to study the life of Reverend John Williams and others of similar sterling faith in the London Missionary Society, with its relentless efforts to spread the Christian gospel in the South Pacific, Asia, and Africa.

That same spirit of revivalism and revelation prompted the likes of Jonathan Edwards, in the American colonies, to initiate the Great Awakening. Later came the Methodist camp meetings and a Second Great Awakening that began in Kentucky and quickly reached northward. Spreading across upstate New York like Halley's Comet in the midnight sky was a spirit of religious revivalism so dramatic and intense that scholars still refer to it as the burned-over district, a place and time of unparalleled religious enthusiasm and devotion.

Inheriting this atmosphere of religious inquiry and excitement was young Joseph Smith Jr., who retired to his own sacred grove near Rochester, New York, in the spring of 1820 in a determination to ask his God which of all the many faiths he should join. While the answer to his prayer led to the sunrise of a new world religion, his quest must also be seen as part of a time that was changing old ways, mannerisms, and streams of thought in a wide range of human endeavor. It was a time that fostered new revolutions in politics, economics, the arts, science, and religion.



We will commence our study with a lonely little man living out his life on a remote island of the South Atlantic Ocean—an enormous personality that time will never let us forget.

7. Newton, "Amazing Grace."