

TEACHING LEGACY

**An Educator with a Moral Compass:
Paul H. Peterson, 1941–2007**

by Alexander L. Baugh

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THE FACULTY AND FRIENDS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION lost a dear and cherished colleague, Paul H. Peterson, following a battle with cancer on September 3, 2007.

In 1966, Paul married Roberta Rae ZoBell (known by all as Bobbie), in the Salt Lake Temple. That same year he graduated from BYU with an undergraduate degree in English. Upon graduation he received an appointment in the Church Educational System and began teaching at Bountiful Viewmont Seminary, where he taught for six years. During this time he also completed his master's degree in western American history at BYU. His thesis,

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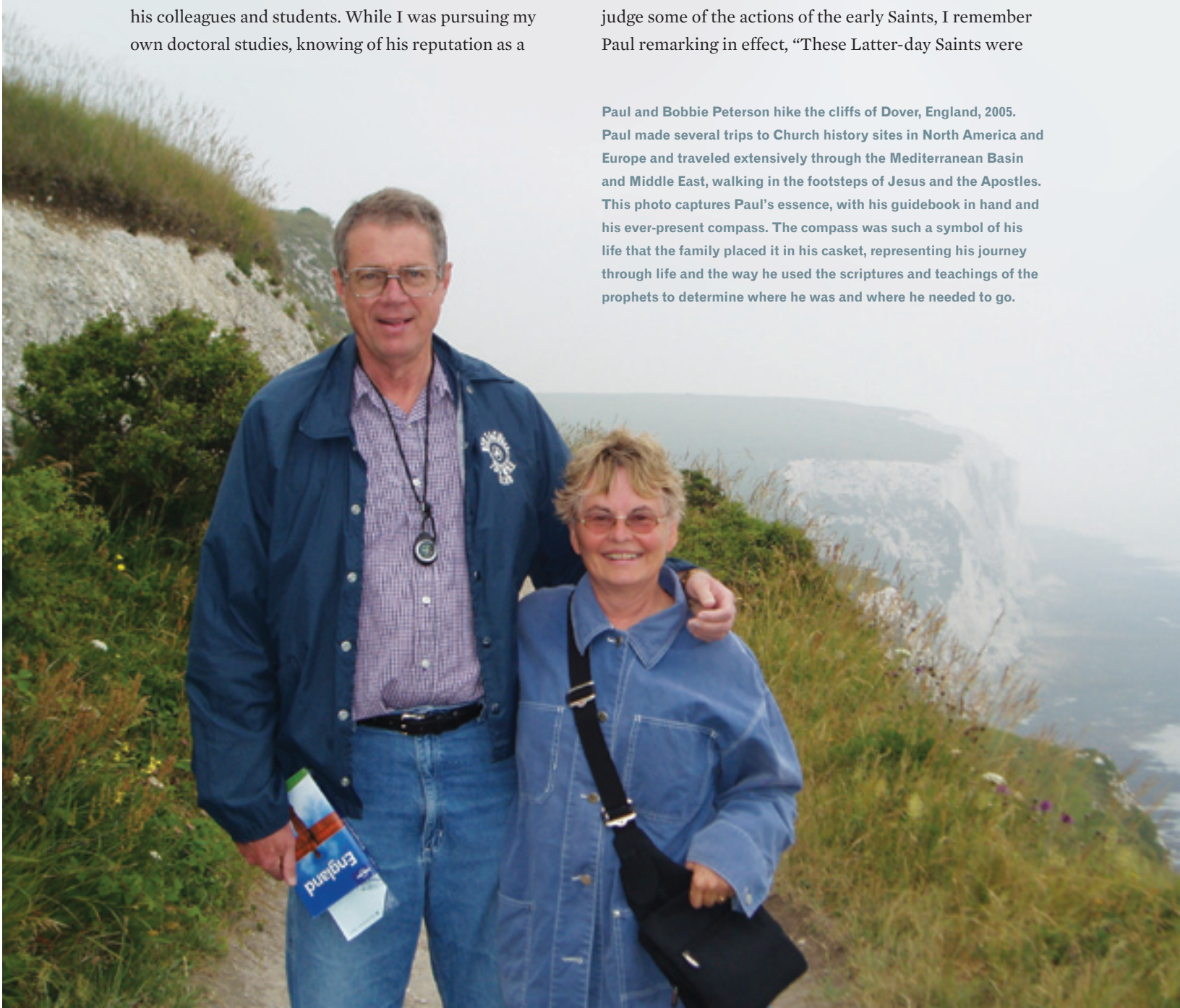
“An Historical Analysis of the Word of Wisdom,” launched his scholarly career. From 1972 to 1975, he taught part time at BYU while doing his doctoral course work. He then

returned to Viewmont Seminary, where he was principal from 1975 to 1981. In 1981 he was awarded his PhD in American history from BYU with completion of his landmark dissertation titled “The Mormon Reformation.” He spent the next three years as a college curriculum writer in the Church Educational System before his appointment in 1984 to the BYU Religious Education faculty.

During his twenty-two years as a professor of Church history and doctrine, Paul endeared himself to his colleagues and students. While I was pursuing my own doctoral studies, knowing of his reputation as a

teacher, I asked Paul if I could sit in on his Religion 342 class (Church history, 1844–present). I still have my notes from the class. His presentations were informative, well constructed, and always spiced with wit and humor. His instruction was the epitome of what religious education should be: intellectually enlarging and spiritually enlightening. I was particularly impressed with how he carefully handled tough issues and episodes in early Utah and Mormon history. Speaking of those who might be quick to judge some of the actions of the early Saints, I remember Paul remarking in effect, “These Latter-day Saints were

Paul and Bobbie Peterson hike the cliffs of Dover, England, 2005. Paul made several trips to Church history sites in North America and Europe and traveled extensively through the Mediterranean Basin and Middle East, walking in the footsteps of Jesus and the Apostles. This photo captures Paul's essence, with his guidebook in hand and his ever-present compass. The compass was such a symbol of his life that the family placed it in his casket, representing his journey through life and the way he used the scriptures and teachings of the prophets to determine where he was and where he needed to go.





good, God-fearing, righteous people, trying to live the gospel and do the best they could under trying circumstances. We should never be too hasty in our judgments or condemnations. We might have done worse.” I am certain that Paul was the favorite teacher of hundreds, if not thousands, of students.

Paul was a first-rate scholar and thinker. But when it came to putting pen to paper, writing was not an easy task for him because he held himself to such a high standard. He was meticulous, even fussy, when it came to using the right words or expressions. Every sentence had to be carefully crafted to say exactly what he wanted it to say. In short, he was a real wordsmith. “It takes a long time for me to write something of real meaning and substance,” he said on more than one occasion, but anyone familiar with his published writings will attest to the fact that the end product always demonstrated genuine, first-rate scholarship. As evidence of this, on two separate occasions (1989 and 2003) Paul was presented with the Best Article award from the Mormon History Association.

Genuine academics are also bibliophiles, and Paul certainly was. His library shelves contained hundreds of books, the majority on early Christian, Middle East, American, and Mormon history titles. No doubt his collection reflected the areas of his historical interest. Anyone who engaged in historical or doctrinal conversations with Paul could easily discern that he was well read and informed.

⌘ Although a superb administrator, he shined the most in the classroom, but even more when leading the field trips. Donning casual clothes and hat with field notes, map, and his ever-present compass in hand, Paul turned into the Mormon equivalent of Indiana Jones.

It was clear that reading was his passion and his pastime. The five years he served as book review editor for BYU Studies (1987–92) were particularly enriching and stimulating. “I had to read a lot of books during those years,” he once remarked, “because I wanted to know which books were deserving of reviews.” Being a book review editor also had its perks. During those years, publishers would send Paul complimentary books, which he in turn would give to the person asked to write the review. But if the book was not reviewed, he was able to keep it for his library. “I acquired a lot of wonderful books during those years,” he said.

Although Paul’s professional training was in American and Mormon history, he would probably confess that he loved the history of the Holy Land the most. His extensive knowledge and understanding of the region’s religious traditions, culture, and people were evident to all who knew him. He taught at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies in 1987 and again in 1993, before serving as the center’s director from 1996 to 1998. Jerusalem became the Petersons’ second home. He loved going there, teaching there, and living there. Paul’s term as director of the center is legendary primarily because of the genuine love and concern he continually expressed and exemplified in behalf of the students, staff, and the faculty and their families. Although a superb administrator, he shined the most in the classroom, but even more when leading the field trips. Donning casual clothes and hat with field notes, map, and his ever-present compass in hand, Paul turned into the Mormon equivalent of Indiana Jones. To this day, his “Pete Notes” are used by the visiting faculty to facilitate their on-site lectures and presentations.

Paul’s sense of humor was one-of-a-kind. He was the master of spontaneous one-liners. I wish now that I would

have written them down because they were such great gut-wrenchers. His Solomon-like wisdom matched his wit. “I entered my forties as a young man,” he said, “and I left my forties as an old man.” As one who just recently passed the midcentury mark, I am beginning to realize how true that statement really is.

In 2000 Paul was appointed chair of the Department of Church History and Doctrine, serving until just before his retirement in 2006. It was in this capacity where most of the faculty observed his understanding of the leadership style taught by the Master, “He that is the greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 20:13). Paul was always the gentleman, caring, pleasant, personal, unpretentious, kind, solicitous, supportive, quick to praise, deeply appreciative, and sincere. During this time, Paul also experienced his first bout with cancer. Yet, even while struggling with personal health challenges, he continued

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on as chair, remaining upbeat and optimistic, carrying on without the slightest complaint or need for sympathy even though we all offered it from time to time. “I’m fine,” he would say and then add, “there are a lot of people who are hurting a lot more than I am.”

The faculty have fond, pleasant, and loving memories of Paul that include visits and discussions in our offices, faculty and department meetings, lunches and dinners, Regional Studies tours, field trips and bus rides, wedding receptions, historical conferences, and, for some, times with Paul and Bobbie in their lovely home. We all consider Paul an eternal friend. How grateful we are for the wonderful promise, “That same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy” (D&C 130:2). We look forward to that day. God bless you and your memory, Paul! ✕

