

A Grandson's Reminiscence

HUGH B. BROWN IN HIS
FINAL YEARS

By Edwin B. Firmage

PRESIDENT DAVID O. MCKAY DIED ON 18 JANUARY 1970. My grandfather Hugh B. Brown and President McKay had become loving, intimate friends during the course of Grandfather's service as a General Authority, especially during his time as counselor to President McKay.

This was not always true, at least to that degree. While I know of no antagonism between them in earlier years, both had similar strengths which, of course, had their dark side. Both were tall, patrician, startlingly handsome men; both were gifted orators of the old school; both were in demand as speakers virtually from early manhood; both could be proud men as well as humble. I believe an understandable sense of competition had existed in earlier years.

But during his years as a third counselor to President McKay during President J. Reuben Clark's failing health, and then as second and first counselor, a very warm and intimate bond of love formed between the two men, of that quality that can only happen when people finally move beyond self-seeking.

During those years of good health for President McKay, he told Grandfather on a number of occasions that he was happier and

more satisfied with the loving unity of the First Presidency than at any time in his presidency. This period lasted from the time when Henry Moyle and Grandfather served as first and second counselors through Moyle's death and the early years of Grandfather's service with President N. Eldon Tanner.



CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The period of President McKay's declining health was another matter. This was a troubled time in Church government, but it also marked one of Grandfather's greatest periods of service, albeit negative service, in a sense.

As President McKay became increasingly impaired by age, some Church functionaries attempted to influence the president in ways that Grandfather, President Tanner and Elder Harold B. Lee thought to be unwise and improper. These attempts came from the radical political right, not from sources within either of the two major parties. These three

men—Grandfather in particular—sought with high but not complete success to block those efforts to influence Church policy. This effort took a fearful toll on Grandfather as well as his personal relationships.

On the theological side, for years Grandfather had strenuously sought to effect a change in the Mormon policy that denied the priesthood to blacks. He had never believed that this Church policy had the slightest doctrinal justification. Rather, he thought the policy had been set before the Civil War to protect the

EDWIN B. FIRMAGE, a grandson of Hugh B. Brown, is a professor of law at the University of Utah Law School. This article is a version of the concluding chapter from a forthcoming book of the memoirs of Hugh B. Brown, of which Firmage is the editor.

abolitionist Mormons who had moved from the Northeast to Missouri, a slave state, against allegations by slave owners that Mormons were preaching abolition to slaves. Since then, he believed, a rather disreputable theology of sorts had grown up around a policy that had lost any justifiable reason for its continuance.

Grandfather had initiated a number of administrative changes to mitigate this policy which he felt was thoroughly unchristian and indefensible. He had accomplished a change in the presumption of racial heritage that in effect removed any possibility of preventing priesthood ordination for thousands of people, particularly in nations such as Brazil. With President McKay's support he attempted to change the policy regarding a new African mission. This plan ultimately failed.

Grandfather eventually succeeded in getting a proposal allowing full priesthood for blacks approved by the Quorum of the Twelve. However, Elder Harold B. Lee, who was not present when the proposal had been approved, was successful in killing it. (During this time, while Joseph Fielding Smith was president of the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder Lee was the dominant senior voice due to President Smith's advanced age.)

Elder Lee then sought to memorialize his belief in the doctrinal basis for the denial of priesthood to blacks by drafting a statement on the matter for the First Presidency's consideration. At this time, President McKay was declining in health and did not sign such documents. While Grandfather successfully added language to the statement that endorsed full civil rights for all citizens, the statement also asserted that the disallowance of the priesthood to blacks was doctrinally based. Initially, and for some time, Grandfather refused to sign the statement because of such language. By this time he was also suffering physically from advanced age and from the late stages of Parkinson's disease. In addition, he was very ill with the Asian flu. In this condition, Brother Lee brought enormous pressure to bear upon Grandfather, arguing that he was obliged to join the consensus within the Quorum of the Twelve since President McKay's incapacity affected the relative power and legitimacy of the First Presidency *vis-a-vis* the Twelve. Grandfather, deeply ill, wept as he related this story to me just before he signed the statement that bore his name and President Tanner's.

Grandfather was dropped from the First Presidency when it was reorganized under President Joseph Fielding Smith.

Although he had contracted Parkinson's disease and was in declining health, he did not believe that this was the reason for his return to the Twelve. I believe without the slightest doubt that his position on blacks and the priesthood was the matter that led to Grandfather's removal from the new First Presidency. This policy change, so vital in freeing all our souls, would come several years later during the presidency of Spencer W. Kimball, a man Grandfather loved dearly. By then, all the major protagonists had died: President Lee, President Smith, and Grandfather.

Revelation, it would seem, doesn't always or even usually come as a bolt out of the blue, but rather as good people give of themselves with all their hearts. Seeds are planted, consciences pricked, sensitivities increased and consciousness raised until conversion occurs.

Grandfather came to believe strongly that the Church had not come to terms with the problem of age and infirmity in the Church leadership. In an attempt to meet this need, after his return to the Twelve following President McKay's death, he proposed an emeritus status for all General Authorities, including members of the Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency. This would have affected the line of succession to the presidency of the Church. His proposal deliberately set the age for emeritus status so that he would have



been rendered emeritus by the adoption of his plan. He told me, only half in jest, that perhaps getting rid of him would sweeten the proposal for some quorum members. His proposal was rejected, although under President Kimball a truncated version was adopted for authorities at less important levels of Church government.

Grandfather's return to his beloved Quorum of the Twelve was a sweet time of final service. He toured missions, visited stakes, and preached with the profound eloquence that was his great gift. He touched souls as few people in any secular or church position have been able to.

Of course, he was deeply wounded by his release from the First Presidency. Whatever might have motivated others in this act, once again the Gardener was pruning. I believe that the Church was the poorer without Brother Brown and his sensitivity on social and moral issues in the First Presidency, but there is no doubt that he grew from the blow and ended his life yet more sensitive, humane and humble.

Happily, there was reconciliation with President Lee before Grandfather's death, since these men had been dear friends and

brothers long before they were General Authorities. At one point, after his return to the Quorum, Grandfather became gravely ill and was not expected to live through the night. His daughters Zina and Mary, and myself, were summoned that night by the doctor. President Lee came to join with the family and we prepared a press release announcing his death. We blessed and anointed Grandfather, and President Lee spoke words of reconciliation in the blessing that brought Grandfather momentarily out of his coma into tearful consciousness. The next morning he awoke, looked the doctor in the eye, and said, characteristically, "I fooled you, didn't I!" He lived for several more years, although President Lee died soon thereafter.

FAMILY LIFE

During this last decade, grandmother Zina suffered several strokes which left her an invalid, unable to leave her bed or to talk except for an occasional sound. Grandfather tended her daily with a touching tenderness. She faded visibly when he was away and bloomed on his return. Often he brought her a flower from their garden as he came home from a First Presidency assignment. Grandmother was stricken in August of 1966. At that time I lived almost next door to them, on Douglas

Street. Grandfather, his legs beginning to fail although his mind was as alert as ever, would exercise as best he could. With a cane, his upper body seeming to move dangerously faster than his legs, he would pass our window, wave, go to the end of the street and return to Grandmother's side.

For them, these final years of life together were bittersweet. Grandmother lived through a massive stroke and then continuing smaller strokes incapacitated her, finally completely. Grandfather suffered increasingly the effects of Parkinson's syndrome. As I watched him then, I remembered a poignant moment in the early 1960s, when Grandfather had taken me to meet J. Reuben Clark just prior to his death. I was a young law student between school years at the University of Chicago. President Clark was infirm,

with one part of his body after another in swift decline. As we left, Grandfather said tenderly, "Is there anything we can do for you, Reuben?" Brother Clark started to cry. He said, "Pray for me, Hugh, that I can endure to the end." They embraced and we left. Now, it was Grandfather's and Grandmother's turn.

Grandmother lay in bed for nearly eight years, fully conscious most of the time and completely unable to serve herself in any way. Grandfather, with his children and wonderful nurses, tenderly served her every day. For decades Grandmother had served him quietly and, as far as the world was concerned, invisibly.

Now he had the chance to serve her. He did so joyously. So far as I saw and heard, there wasn't any complaint from either of them to God or to anyone.

Whenever he returned from a church assignment he approached what had been the dining room—now converted to Grandmother's use—an airy, light, windowed room at the front of the house. Always, with a flower, he would tap on her window and say, with an accent learned from over a decade of church service in his beloved England, "Toot, toot, Mama! I'm here! Your sweetheart is home." Then he would hobble in with a cane in one hand and the arm of a son or daughter or grandchild



in the other and greet his mate of over sixty years.

They had begun courting almost seventy years before, while he was in England in 1904, he a young missionary from Canada and she a very young teenager in Logan. They had corresponded in beautiful letters addressed to "Dear Sister Zina" and "Dear Brother Hugh."

Grandfather was the only one, doctors and children not excepted, who could bring Grandmother instantly out of the deepest coma. On several occasions I saw him stand over her bed and simply say, "Zina." She immediately awoke, opened her eyes, and smiled.

He asked her not to die before he did, and she made a valiant effort to comply. Grandmother died in December 1974, and

Grandfather followed almost exactly one year later.

ZEAL FOR LIFE

Grandfather was an infinitely curious man. He had a wanderlust that took him to almost every part of the globe. In his nineties and suffering severely by that time from a crippling disease, he was planning a trip to China or Russia for the two of us, the only places he hadn't visited. He read voraciously, primarily history, biography, politics, philosophy and religion. As a young boy and until his death, I was drawn to his huge library, borrowing books we both knew I would likely never return. Once near the end he called me and said, "Eddie, I haven't received the last issue of *Dialogue*. Do you think they've cut me off from the Church?" I assured him that they wouldn't do that. He asked that I call to make sure his subscription hadn't lapsed. I'm not sure how diligently he read the *Ensign*, but he read *Dialogue* cover to cover.

He approached death with the same curiosity with which he approached life. He instructed us that no heroic measures were to be used to prolong his life and particularly that he be given no drugs that would dull his sensory experience of death. He told me that he was likely to enjoy this only once and he didn't want to miss a thing. Never once did he ever speak fearfully or regretfully or disparagingly of death. He loved life and enjoyed it enormously, to the full. But he also anticipated death with what I can only describe as a very positive zest. He was not preoccupied by death, but he was enormously curious. He talked to me often about death in his last years, always with enthusiasm but never in a morbid way. We speculated together about the nature of life after death. He had absolutely no doubt about our continuing life. In fact, he promised only half jokingly to come back and tell me what it was like. He has not done that yet, and I still hold him to the promise. (He did return, however, to a young great-granddaughter, a namesake of his wife Zina, during a cardiac arrest.)



Near the end, Grandfather dreamed of dear friends who had preceded him in death: Stayner Richards, Marvin O. Ashton, Harold B. Lee. One night he dreamed he was in the Savior's presence. No words were exchanged, and he said none were necessary. "His love enriched me and I felt his understanding acceptance of me despite all my imperfect ways." He cried as he related the dream.

As he approached death, confined to bed or at best a wheelchair, he endured the humiliation of incontinence with a wistful humor. He had to be fed as well. Even then, when his powerful

magnifying glass would no longer allow him to read, he asked that we read to him. The morning following a mild stroke that caused a slurring of his speech, he nevertheless asked that we read him the morning paper. He frowned at the dourness of the news of the day. Then he indicated that we should read the obituary page. He asked if his name was there and when assured that it was not, he slurred the words, "son of obituary!"

Even though quite infirm, he wanted desperately to attend the dedication of the Washington Temple. He had been instrumental in selecting the temple's site, conducted its ground breaking ceremony, and was involved in seeing it through to completion.

Friends made solicitous arrangements for Grandfather to be flown to Washington and to have Dr. Russell Nelson in the room next to him.

Although an office was maintained for him at Church headquarters, in the last period, Grandfather conducted almost all of his business at home. His daughter Zina devoted almost her full time to assisting her parents during those final years. Grandfather died with Zina holding his hand.

POLITICS AND RELIGION

Grandfather believed devoutly in the gospel of Jesus Christ and possessed a profound testimony of the Restoration through Joseph Smith. Yet he possessed an outgoing, accepting spirit that

refused to take seriously the lines by which we divide ourselves from each other, whether within religion or politics. He had broad and loving contact, as did Presidents Grant and McKay before him, with many religious leaders of other faiths. By his very nature, by his own resonant psychology and spirituality, Grandfather possessed an ecumenical spirit.

In politics Grandfather was an ardent Democrat. As a young boy growing up in a Republican family and somewhat vaguely aware that most Church leaders were Republicans, I asked Grandfather why he was a Democrat. He simply said, "Eddie, I'm a Democrat because I believe that party is more sensitive to the poor." His answer seemed to me simplistic at the time. But since then, it has impressed me as a pretty good criterion by which to judge both politics and religion. Many years before, when Grandfather came to this country from Canada as a young man, ignorant of our party politics, he had asked his friend and older mentor, President Heber J. Grant, for advice on party affiliation. President Grant said, "Hugh, if you want to join a party of special privilege and wealth, be a Republican. If you want to join the party of the people, be a Democrat." Grandfather maintained this view through a lifetime of political activity.

Grandfather left a rich legacy to his family and to the Church. Perhaps his most important gift is impossible to quantify. He touched thousands of lives intimately in the way that one can only do in personal interviews. Scores of thousands of people, many of them young people, sought him out. Whether as a member of a bishopric, as one of the Church's youngest stake presidents, as coordinator of all LDS servicemen in Europe during World War II, as professor of religion at BYU, or as a General Authority, he gave of himself in counseling without restraint.

Next, he was the Church's greatest orator of his time. No speaker of his generation approached his eloquence, his fervor in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. He will not be remembered as a great expositor or interpreter of theology. But anyone who heard his voice or saw and felt his commanding presence was moved by what they experienced. He had the capacity to help us

change our lives.

He gave us the example of one possessed of great spiritual and intellectual honesty, who refused to be limited by those who read others out of orthodoxy. Grandfather felt we were forbidden to exercise this judgment against ourselves or others. He gloried in intellectual and spiritual freedom, consistent, he said, with the Mormon teaching of agency and the uncreatedness of the human intelligence:

"When I consult my own inner self I find a deep-seated, perhaps instinctive feeling of immeasurable oldness, an echo of

time immemorial, as well as a feeling of necessary endlessness. No adverse logic or reason can dispel these feelings. I did not put them there, I found them there. When I grew old enough to introspect my mind, and in spite of recurrent doubts and criticism, this innate knowledge remains unimpaired."

He appreciated fully the refusal of Joseph Smith to adopt rigid creeds by which we presumed to define God or our relationship to Him.

He defined the gospel as encompassing all knowledge and refused to assign more truth to scripture or to any other prophetic teaching than the traces of God's finger, which he saw in the stones of the earth, the stars of the cosmos, and the center of our own souls. He recognized obe-

dience to authority as a virtue, but he placed more value on fidelity to God, discipleship to Jesus, and a loving relationship to others. He realized that his responsibility for his own acts could never be borne by another, leader or no.

Truly he possessed a universal, Pauline spirit that pushed to the widest possible limits the thirteenth Article of Faith.

We miss him.

