

“We the People of the Kingdom of God”:

Panel Introduction

University of Virginia, September 8, 2016

by Richard Bushman

It is my pleasure to welcome you this evening to a panel on the Council of Fifty minutes sponsored by the Mormon Studies program at the University of Virginia. It is one of a pair of events this week. The second will occur tomorrow evening when Professor Alan Taylor will deliver the second annual Joseph Smith Lecture on religious liberty.

Tonight you will hear a lot about the Council of Fifty minutes. For some this will be entirely new information. Others will have heard about this shadowy document but not known exactly what to make of it. This month these minutes will come out of the shadows and into the light. They will be published as part of the Joseph Smith Papers. The purpose of the panel tonight is to explore the history and contents of this intriguing set of records.

The Council of Fifty minutes recorded the deliberations of a Council that gathered in Nauvoo from March 1844 to February 1846. The Council was organized by Joseph Smith to prepare for migration from Illinois and the United States at a time when the Saints foresaw that they would soon have to leave their homes to escape persecution. The Council was also conceived as an embryonic governing body for the Kingdom of God which was to be established in anticipation of Christ's Second Coming.

The existence of the minutes has been known for a long time, but they have not been open for examination. Now they will be. Our panel tonight will give us a preview what to expect. How did the minutes come to be? What is in them? And what are the implications for our understanding of Mormonism and for American religion and politics?

Our panelists include two members of the Joseph Smith paper team that edited the minutes and two scholars with a deep interest in their contents.

Richard Turley until recently was assistant church historian and recorder. This past month he took on new responsibilities as Director of Church Public Affairs. Rick has been largely responsible for leading the Church History Department into the new era of transparency. He was the lead author for the volume on the Mountain Meadows Massacre which signaled the willingness of the Church to publish open, candid accounts of every event in its history including the most shameful and discouraging. He authored a book on the infamous Hofmann forgeries which many of you will remember. Rick has an admirable desire to reach readers of all ages and degrees of knowledge. He has published accounts of Joseph Smith for young readers and books about Mormon scripture. While immensely well informed himself, he has a democratic authorial temperament. He wants history to be for everyone. Tonight he will tell us about how the Council of Fifty minutes came to be published, a process in which he was deeply involved.

Matthew Grow is Director of Publications in the Church History Department. He supervises the Joseph Smith Papers along with the Department's other publishing projects. As much as anyone, he is responsible for guiding these massive ventures through the editorial process. Matt is one of a group of Latter-day Saints who received their degrees at Notre Dame under the tutelage of George Marsden. The book that came out of his work at Notre Dame was 'Liberty to the Downtrodden: Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer.' Which received the Mormon History Association best book award. Subsequently, he authored with Terryl Givens, "Parley P. Pratt, the Saint Paul of Mormonism." He and Ronald Walker have also edited the letters of Brigham Young and Thomas Kane. Matt was in charge when the Council of Fifty Minutes were being prepared for publication and I want to thank him and the editorial team for their splendid work.

Nathan Oman, is a graduate of Harvard Law School, associate professor of law at William and Mary and Robert and Elizabeth Scott Research Professor. He is one of those scholars who has a life of scholarship in his professional field while contributing frequently to Mormon Studies. He has written a variety of articles about contract law and morality, and this year published "The Dignity of Commerce; The Moral Foundations of Contract Law" with the University of Chicago Press. On the church side, he has produced essays like "Jurisprudence and the Problem of Church Doctrine," and "The Living Oracles: Legal Interpretation and Mormon

Thought.” He is one of the most astute of the Mormon bloggers—always worth pausing to read. I can guarantee you that he will offer a big picture take on the Council of Fifty minutes.

Kathleen Flake is the first occupant of the Mormon Studies chair at the University of Virginia. She came here from Vanderbilt where she taught American religion in the Divinity School. She began professional life as an attorney in Washington D.C. but moved into scholarship via an M.A. degree at Georgetown University in ritual studies. She received her Ph.D. in American religion from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Her dissertation was published as “The Politics of Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot Mormon Apostle.” She has published on Mormonism in *Sunstone*, the *Journal of Religion*, *Religion and American Culture*, *Church History*, and *Christian Century*. Her current work is on nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy. Her Arrington Lecture at Utah State University was published as “[*The Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage*](#).” I think we can rely on Kathleen for an illuminating insight into Mormon thinking in 1840s Nauvoo.