

The Crisis in Europe and Hugh B. Brown's First Mission Presidency

Richard L. Bushman

MARY FIRMAGE, DAUGHTER OF PRESIDENT HUGH B. BROWN, has recently deposited a large collection of her father's personal letters in the Church Archives. President Brown wrote part of this correspondence while he was mission president in England before World War II, from 1937 to 1940, and after the war from 1944 to 1946. These letters, mainly to his family, combined with the public record in the *Millennial Star*, enable us to see more clearly than before into the mind and heart of this admirable man while he watched Europe descend into general war. He took up the work of supervising the Church in Great Britain in the shadow of what he called, in a 5 December 1939 letter to his wife, "historic events and critical times." Eventually after war broke out he evacuated the missionaries and organized an interim mission presidency made up of local members to carry on until he returned following the armistice. Before all that happened, however, he used the pages of the *Star* to explain how he believed Christian nations should treat their enemies, leaving on record editorials which are still pertinent today.¹

President Brown left for England in the summer of 1937 in a hopeful but sober mood. During the previous ten years he had undergone a number of dispiriting experiences. After he had moved from Lethbridge to Salt Lake City in 1927 to practice law, he had become active in the Democratic party and in 1934 was elected state chairman. To his dismay, the party rank and file did not welcome him as warmly as the leadership. He made a bid for the party's nomination to the U.S. Senate in 1934 and lost, in what was for him a crushing defeat. The next year, he accepted the nomination of Governor Henry H. Blood to the chairmanship of the State Liquor Control Commission. Since he was president of the Granite Stake at the time, he had consulted with the General Authorities before accepting the position, and yet within a year

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN is *H. Rodney Sharp Professor of History at the University of Delaware* and author of *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*.

¹ It is difficult to add anything significant to the insightful biography by Eugene E. Campbell and Richard D. Poll (1975).

he was released as stake president because of the perceived contradictions between administration of the liquor laws and his Church calling. To add to his sorrows, in January 1937 the state senate voted not to reconfirm him as chairman of the commission. "The nightmare is over," he wrote in both despair and relief (Campbell and Poll 1975, 118). That was April 30. He and his wife Zina planned to move to Glendale, California, and even purchased a house there. But the call to the British Mission presidency intervened, and by June of 1937 Hugh Brown was on his way to Britain, traveling in President Heber J. Grant's compartment on the train and enjoying first class accommodations with the president on shipboard (Brown to Mrs. E. R. Firmage, 20 June 1937).

An undertone of despondency sounded through some of his writings in the months following. In his journal, he meditated on the lives of his parents who had recently died. Why must real saints "be subjected to so many indignities, be deprived of most of the material blessings which are showered with almost reckless prodigality on the wicked and the ungodly? Why must God-fearing men suffer contumely and abuse and be deprived of comforts, be lied about and made to suffer what only sensitive souls can suffer?" (Campbell and Poll 1975, 122) He might have been talking about himself; but that was not his characteristic tone. He more commonly saw disappointments as a chance to grow and hardships as an occasion for heroism. "History shows that great character does not come from coddled lives," he wrote to Mary on



HUGH B. BROWN, CA. 1937, LONDON.

8 August soon after arriving in London, “but is forged where men have had to dare to struggle and achieve and temper their souls in fire.” His son Hugh, who had accepted a mission call to Scotland at the time of his parents’ call to the presidency, had his own disappointment, a classic case of the girl back home marrying another man. That gave the father an occasion for advice useful to both of them. “Keep your face resolutely toward the future,” he wrote on 2 March, “The past is past, and there is nothing in the past but husks; the whole ripe ears are in the future.”

Hugh Brown spoke often about destiny: “Believe in yourself and your destiny,” he told young Hugh in a 3 January letter. That hope of a designated mission was the glint of sunshine through the clouds. Belief in destiny and in growth through challenges sustained him through defeat and sorrow. Even more he took comfort in his family whom he abundantly loved. To Mary, living in Provo with her husband and a new grandson, he wrote on 8 August 1937, “Through all the years, my dear, you have been a joy to us, a help and a lifter and a ray of sunshine and we thank God for you.” He seemed to draw strength when he needed it from his girls and his wife especially. His son Hugh, he thought, might in time vindicate his father. “I am looking for big things from you and expect that you will do better than your Dad has ever done. You should start from my shoulders,” he wrote on 20 October 1937.

The mission call did not end Hugh Brown’s personal troubles by any means. Complications with the Glendale house drained away cash. Usually he sent four pounds to Hugh, but one month he could afford only one. On the family’s first Christmas in London, he invited Hugh, laboring in Glasgow, to come down for the holidays and then had to withdraw the invitation because Zina convinced him they could not afford the train fare. The letters make clear that his inability to meet the expense hurt President Brown. He wistfully suggested on 14 December 1937 that young Hugh look into weekend rates in hopes of a cheaper fare.

While coping with private sorrows behind the scenes, President Brown was caught up in mission business and stirring events on the public stage. President Grant visited England in the summer of 1937 to celebrate the centennial of the opening of the British Mission. Initially the mission planned its celebration to coincide with the inauguration of George VI in London in May but moved the event to July, closer to the date of the first baptisms by Mormon missionaries, when they heard that President Grant would visit England at that time. More than sixty Utah Church members came to England for the occasion, among them a number of auxiliary presidents and, at the last minute, President J. Reuben Clark.

The centennial celebration overlay the regular annual mission auxiliary conference with its various contests and meetings which included a speaking contest for the M Men, a Gleaner chorus, a poetry and essay contest on the centennial theme, and sporting events. Indicative of a simpler age, the grand prizes for the poetry and essay contests were free board and lodging at the conference. On top of these standard events, President Grant’s visit and a number of special ceremonies added excitement to the weekend. Nearly 200

Church members met President Grant at London's Liverpool station and made the walls ring with "We Thank Thee O God for a Prophet." The grand event of the conference was a two-hour meeting at the River Ribble in Preston marking the site where two young men raced to the water for the honor of being the first in Britain to be baptized. There President Grant drew aside British and American flags to unveil a bronze plaque commemorating the first baptisms. Later British Saints presented a classic Mormon pageant, "The Everlasting Doors," with ten tableaux and 250 costumed participants, which borrowed its sections on earlier dispensations from Bertha Kleinman's "Message of the Ages," adding a second act on the gospel in Britain (*Millennial Star*, 22 July, 19 Aug. 1937).² At the Sunday meeting President Grant received three bouquets of roses, twenty-five white ones for his age when he became an apostle, thirty-seven red ones for the years he served on the Council of the Twelve, and eighteen yellow for his years as president. On Monday he was presented with a silk Union Jack as a token of friendship between the MIA members of Britain and their president.³

Mormon Britain quieted down after the departure of the dignitaries, and President Brown took up the responsibilities of his office. But the excitement of the grand occasion recurred frequently. Because of his military background, his magisterial appearance, and his stirring speaking manner, outside groups frequently called upon President Brown to speak. On 7 November 1939 he wrote to Mary of an invitation to a swanky London restaurant where he welcomed the opportunity to meet with wealthy businessmen and "show them that the Mormons from the west are not a strange species of half wits as some have thought." On 6 January of that same year he had written to her about a full dress ball where there were "fashionable Lords and Ladies" and boasted that Zina "was the 'Ladyest' of them all." He doubtless was an effective ambassador for the Church. As C. K. Jamieson wrote of him: "Mr. Brown has all the qualifications necessary to represent any organization in any company and under any circumstances. Of good appearance, careful speech, dignified and thoughtful manner, and moderate and tolerant views towards others, he will soon dispel by his demeanour and manner of living any doubts which strangers might entertain toward the faith which he has always followed" (*Millennial Star*, 12 Aug. 1937).

Traveling with President Grant in Germany before the centennial celebration, Hugh Brown was naturally curious about that country's condition under Hitler. "We of course wonder at home just how the people here feel about the new order of things," he wrote to Mary and her husband on 12 July 1937. He could detect no overt tension. "There seems to be general satisfaction and the cities and country seem progressive and prosperous." The international situation was another matter. He knew that Germany's peaceful demeanor at home did not prevent the Fuehrer from pursuing an aggressively

² "The Message of the Ages" was performed in Salt Lake City in 1930 as part of the Church's centennial celebration.

³ The story of the celebration can be followed in the pages of the *Millennial Star*, 11, 18, 25 February; 20 May; 22, 29 July; 19 August 1937.



HUGH B. BROWN IN LONDON MISSION OFFICE, 1937.

expansionist policy in Europe. Already by the summer of 1937 Germany had renounced the disarmament clauses in the Versailles Treaty, reoccupied the Rhineland, backed the fascists in the Civil War in Spain, and in March of that year annexed Austria. All the world was anxious to know what Hitler would do next.

In the fall of 1937, the *Millennial Star* ran two editorials by President Brown, "The Seeds of War" (4 Nov.) and "The Seeds of Peace" (16 Dec.), discussing the gospel as a solution to the world's problems. He wrote "The Seeds of War" on the nineteenth anniversary of the World War I armistice. He had commanded a squadron of mounted rifles in the Canadian forces during that war and at one time entertained ambitions for a military career, but he was not one to make a brief for the glories of military heroism. On the contrary, he began with the assertion that "in the light of intellectual values, war is seen to be sheer madness" (p. 711). He had in mind the "ten million dead, the twenty million wounded, the nine million orphans, the five million widows," and the fact that "war has never settled anything satisfactorily" (p. 712). But writing from the perspective of the gospel, he was still more concerned with the moral effects on the participants — the combatants themselves and the civilian population behind the lines. He was disturbed that in wartime, "both sides seem to find it necessary to overcome the kindly and humane attitudes which should characterize our civilization, to invite hatred and passion and to justify on a wholesale scale the very things which we condemn

in the individual" (p. 711). In other words, war brought out people's worst qualities. "War sows seeds of distrust, suspicion and hatred; breaks down the moral fibre of millions of our citizens; and starts habits of lawlessness which continue long after the conflict ends." War "feeds on bestial passions and is a regression to the primitive. It breeds lawlessness, immorality and spiritual poverty" (p. 711). That was its horror and its madness.

Like others of his generation, President Brown had hopes that the "permanent court of international justice" could successfully apply rules of law to international problems (p. 716). He saw a role for other international organizations like the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, and the Chamber of Commerce Clubs in enhancing good will. But for him the only lasting solution was the gospel. "Permanent security cannot be built on revenge, greed, avarice, selfishness, envy and hate, but rather on cooperation, goodwill and neighbourliness. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,' must someday apply to nations. . . . In the soil of love the seeds of war must die" (p. 716).

The theme of love in public affairs lay at the heart of President Brown's editorial, "The Seeds of Peace," published in the *Star* a month later to coincide with Christmas. In that essay he broached a most vexing question about the gospel: Do the teachings given to individuals apply to nations? More specifically, should the state comply with the commandment in Luke 6:27–28 to "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, pray for them that spitefully use you?" His answer was direct and unhesitating. "Certainly the state has a duty to protect its law-abiding subjects against external as well as internal wrongs. But the state is not exempt from the 'Love Thy Neighbour' rule. The state, being a group of individuals, is under the same code of character and conduct as the individual himself" (p. 802). Presumably that did not outlaw war entirely any more than it prevented an individual from defending himself. But it meant that the law of love should guide policy. The state should advocate "restraint, patience, reverence, peacemaking and love" on the principle that Jesus intended "that His doctrines should apply to the social quarrels of nations" (p. 802).

President Brown had a specific passage of scripture in mind when he insisted on using the gospel to settle world problems. The eighteenth chapter of Matthew told the Christian who was engaged in a dispute to go first to his brother alone to seek an understanding, then to call in one or two others to help reach a settlement, then go to the congregation, and finally to the law. President Brown saw a direct application to international disputes. First there should be individual efforts to reach an agreement, then the use of arbitrators, and finally an international court of justice. The means of reaching peaceful agreements are laid out, it seemed to him, if only the right attitude could be accepted. And that attitude had to be grounded in the Christian principle of brotherly love. "We must get away from the idea," he wrote in "The Seeds of Peace," "that any one group of individuals are the favoured children of the Lord, or that any other group is entitled to His displeasure as a group" (p. 803). "'God has made of one blood all nations of men,'" the scriptures say, "and we must, in realizing this fact, come to realize that nations are but groups

of men who are our brothers; we must realize that sometime, somewhere, we will be charged with the responsibility in some measure of being our brother's keeper" (p. 804). Resorting to war was diametrically opposed to Christ's teaching on love.

Those were daring words in the international atmosphere of late 1937, for circumstances would soon bring them to a test. In the ensuing year Hitler turned his attention to Czechoslovakia and especially the Sudetenland, the portion inhabited by German-speaking citizens. Through the spring and summer German leaders in Czechoslovakia demanded that the Sudetenland be given a large measure of autonomy within the Czech state, and Hitler massed armies along the border to back up their demands. Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, intervened to arbitrate the dispute and found Hitler threatening war if the German areas were not permitted self-determination. Chamberlain and the French leaders recommended Czech acceptance of the German demands, and then in a tension-filled week, Hitler stepped up his requirements. Chamberlain and the French at first found the new demands unacceptable, but finally at Munich on 29 September 1938, under extreme pressure from Hitler, gave way and recommended compliance. Germany took over a large portion of critical Czech territory and six months later the whole of Czechoslovakia.

Despite reservations here and there, the British cheered Chamberlain when he arrived home with the Munich Pact. What did President Brown think? In fact, he was overjoyed. Chamberlain had complied exactly with the procedures outlined in "The Seeds of Peace" editorial: he had sought peaceful arbitration, and he had avoided war. In a 6 October editorial in the *Millennial Star*, "An Armistice Without a War," President Brown wrote: "We are deeply grateful as we celebrate the victory of peace; that all who worked for it, all who prayed for it, all who fought for it are alive to enjoy its fruits. There will be no monuments erected to the memories of heroic dead; there are no songs of battle or of triumph over foe — rather do we honour the heroic living who dared to grapple with the ghosts of war and bind them with the silken ropes of reason." Rather than the crosses of the dead, it seemed to President Brown that the cross of the Prince of Peace hovered over the proceedings. He recognized the criticism that might be leveled at Chamberlain: "Some may accuse us of truckling to tricksters and forsaking the weak, still we thank God that we had stout-hearted men at the helm who knew what value the world was getting for the price they had to pay."

That hope for peace, of course, was soon shattered. In the following year Hitler turned on Poland with similar demands for territory. Efforts at negotiation proved futile. Hitler, it became clear, was bent on war, the only means by which he could fulfill his passion to dominate Europe. Britain promised aid to Poland should she suffer invasion, and when Hitler attacked on 1 September 1939, England and France, in keeping with the earlier agreement, declared war. The long delayed conflagration began.

War did not take the Browns completely by surprise. During the Czech crisis in September 1938, President Brown began to take precautionary mea-

tures. He made ship reservations for his family at the same time the government was fitting everyone for gas masks and making plans to evacuate children from London (Brown to Zola, LaJune, and Mary, 27 Sept. 1938). The following March, as Hitler turned on Poland, Zina wrote home that war seemed inevitable. In late August, as tension mounted, President Brown received directions from the First Presidency to send home his family and the female missionaries. On the day war was declared, 3 September, he called the remaining missionaries and soon had them all aboard ship, leaving behind only himself and a skeleton crew office staff. He thought he might remain through the war but was soon told to organize the British Saints to survive on their own (Campbell and Poll 1975, 138–40).

By October it seemed to President Brown that the war was more words than deeds. Britain wisely exercised restraint, and he wrote to Mary and Hugh on the thirty-first that “there may arise in Germany some responsible leaders who will forsake the policy of force and make peace.” By December hostilities had increased, and President Brown wrote to Mary on the sixth that the Russians were proving as aggressive as the Germans in taking over borderland territories. By the first of January 1940, he felt some of the effects personally. An order of coal failed to arrive, and he sat shivering in an upstairs bedroom with a quilt around his shoulders while he wrote home to Zina. London was blacked out, and the mission staff had to read to each other in the evenings rather than teach investigators. President Brown had planned to stay until March, but directives from Church headquarters instructed him to leave sooner. On 12 January he flew to Paris and took the train to Genoa, Italy, where he embarked by ship for New York. On 29 January his family and the British missionary millennial chorus met him at the train station in Salt Lake City. President Brown’s first term as mission president was at an end.

We cannot end the story there, however. For the implications of his words about the gospel and national policy are with us still. What are we to make of “The Seeds of War” and “The Seeds of Peace”? Did events entirely discredit his principles? His daring assertion that the gospel should rule the nations seems to have fallen to the earth at Munich. Doubtless President Brown was caught up in the general enthusiasm that greeted Chamberlain, and that may account for the approving editorial, but is it not likewise true that believing in love for our enemies made Hugh B. Brown especially susceptible to the doctrine of appeasement? Chamberlain appeared to have fulfilled the principles of love for enemies in both letter and spirit. Does the sequence of events then force us to conclude that nations dare not love their enemies and that patient negotiation, long-suffering, and compromise lead us into error?

I am not prepared to evaluate the consequences of the Munich Pact of 1938 in world affairs, or to pass judgment on Chamberlain’s policies. He obviously was sorely misled in believing that compromise would stop Hitler and wrong in sacrificing parts of Czechoslovakia to the Fuehrer. On the other hand, I do not think it certain that a stronger stand at Munich would have halted Hitler in his mad course. He was determined to wage war, and the firm stand taken a year later in Poland did not stop German aggression any more

effectively than appeasement at Munich had. We cannot blame the principle of love among nations for the war. Nor is it entirely clear that the Allies were the losers for their long-suffering attitude toward Hitler in 1938. War depends heavily on a prevailing sense of moral rectitude. We have seen all too dramatically in recent years the consequence of waging war when our people have doubted the goodness of our cause. Whatever was lost by compromise in 1938 was regained many times over after war broke out by our virtually unanimous sense that we had done all in our power to prevent hostilities and that fault lay with our opponents. Our moral unity during the war was partly a result of the Allies' long-suffering before the war. Those who turn to arms as the first resort, rather than the last, risk the loss of potential allies and of friends who are slower to anger. The partisans of Christian love, though slow to fight back, are more likely to enjoy the strength of moral unity when they come at last to battle.

But neither of these observations is fully in keeping with President Brown's own views. What concerned him most about war was the hardening of the spirit in an atmosphere of hate. When he returned to Britain as mission president after the war, he spoke to the Saints about the strength to be gained through wartime hardship. But he also warned them of the dangers to the spirit. "If in the process [of fighting a war] the inner man also becomes hardened," he wrote, "the mind cynical, and the soul flinty, then indeed has the enemy won a victory, and the victim, so far as he personally is concerned, has lost the war regardless of the outcome of the struggle between the nations" (Brown 1956, 368).

That principle rings true still. I believe that President Brown would feel even today that the aggressors had won if the lesson we take from World War II is to become cynical, hardened, and flinty in our dealing with other nations. Whatever else is to be learned from Munich, it is not that we should rely on force, not that we should grow more fierce and warlike, not that we should never compromise. Had he seen all that has transpired, I believe he would say even today that we must love our enemies and treat them as our brothers and sisters, no matter how they threaten us or try our patience. We may indeed suffer from applying love to the nations, but is not our true strength in our principles rather than our arms? Surely he would counsel us not to despair when goodness seems to fail. As he wrote to the British Saints in the midst of war at the end of 1939: "The ways of force are more precipitate than are the ways of love, but love is more enduring" (*Millennial Star*, 21 Dec. 1939).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

All correspondence referred to in the text is found in the Hugh B. Brown Papers, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Brown, Hugh B. *Eternal Quest*. Edited by Charles Manley Brown. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956.

Campbell, Eugene E., and Richard D. Poll. *Hugh B. Brown: His Life and Thought*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975.