

January, 1971



A boast of Latter-day Saints is that they have never been afflicted with a professional clergy. To this day, what most impresses outside observers is the fact that almost everything the Mormons do is undertaken on a nonprofessional basis—and it is done pretty well at that. Only when they have brought in professional help have they come to grief.

Professionalism is the child of the universities. Its modern rule began with the Sophists of old. Preceding the Sophists were those wise men called Sophoi, ancient traveling teachers who gave the modern world its moral and intellectual foundations. They were, to a man, amateurs.

They had to be amateurs, for the same reason that the greatest athletes in the world, the Olympic victors, ancient and modern, were required to be amateurs; and for the same reason that the people who wrote and directed and acted and danced in the greatest dramas the world has ever seen were required by law to be amateurs: because what they were doing was holy business and not to be contaminated by ulterior motives and ambitions.

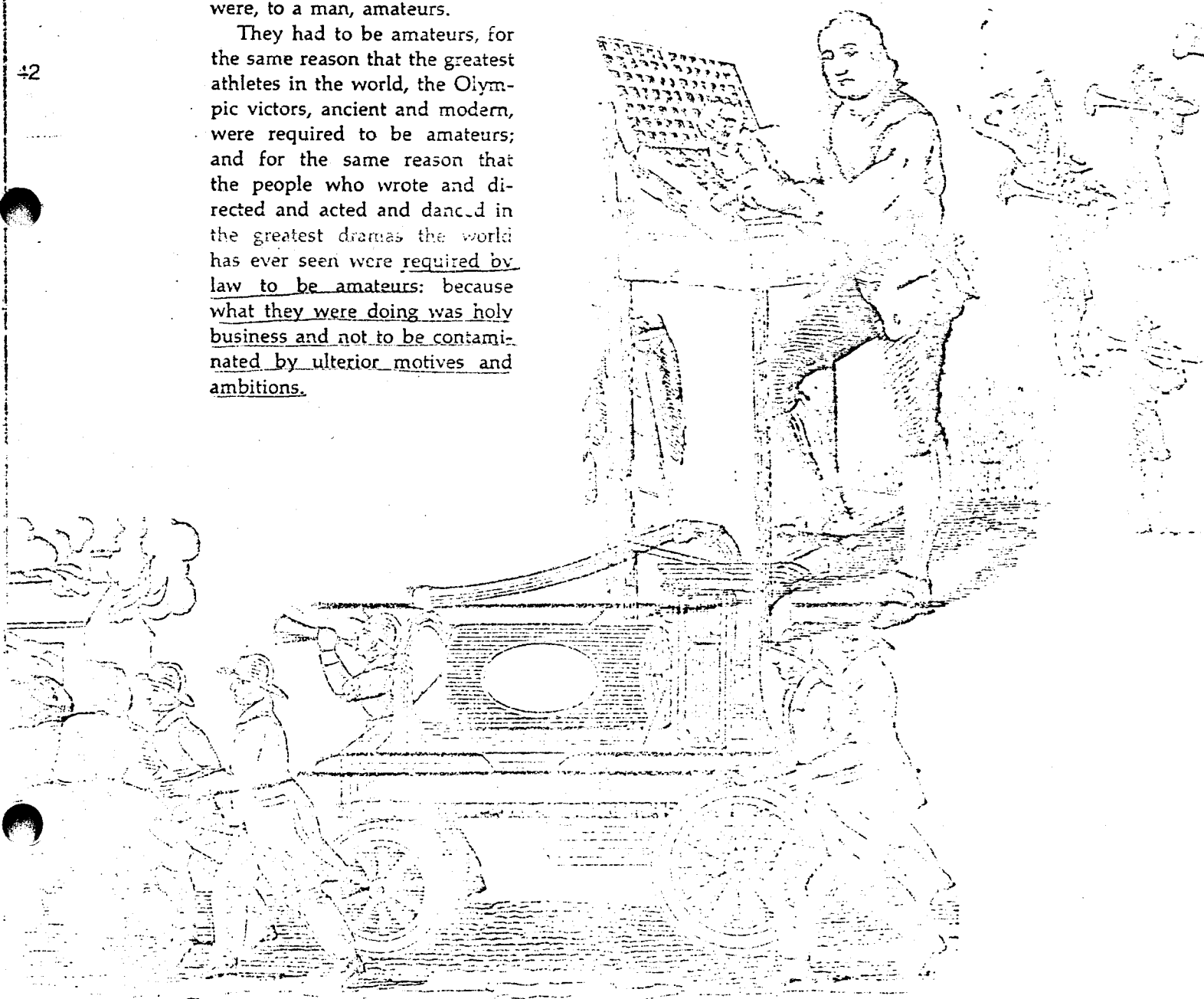
Then the Sophists, imitation Sophoi, took over and professionalized everything to the highest degree. They were the great professors, and since they professed publicly and for a fee, Socrates, the champion of the independent mind and not one of the Sophists, advised students to examine every prospective teacher's credentials very carefully and critically before enrolling with him. That indiscretion cost Socrates his life, for the whole

point of professionalism is that one's credentials should never be challenged.

Rashdall has shown how the medieval universities, beginning with wild élan and spontaneity in the days when anyone could get into the act, "quickly hardened into the mold of the university system" as administration took over.

Official credentials, a fool-proof shield against criticism and scrutiny, were naturally coveted

42



most by those who needed them most: it was the poorly qualified who clamored for the status symbol of the degree. As in the days of the Sophist schools, the great demand for this valuable commodity caused factories to spring up everywhere, competing for degree-seeking customers by making their product ever easier and cheaper to get. At the same time the degree became the object—the sole object—of “education.” And when it

reached that point, it was, of course, worth nothing.

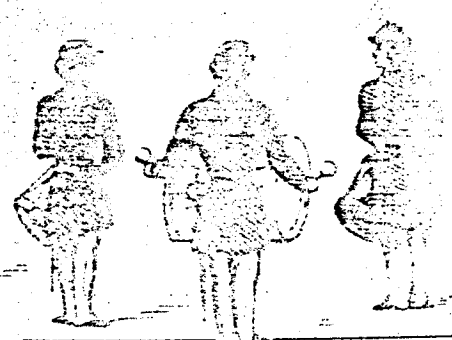
Learning, forgotten in the universities, was revived in academies, salons, societies, courts and coffee houses where amateurs came together to revel in things of the spirit and make the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the high point of western civilization. It was the Age of the Amateur.

Beginning around the mid-nineteenth century, the university



The Day of the Amateur

by Hugh Nibley

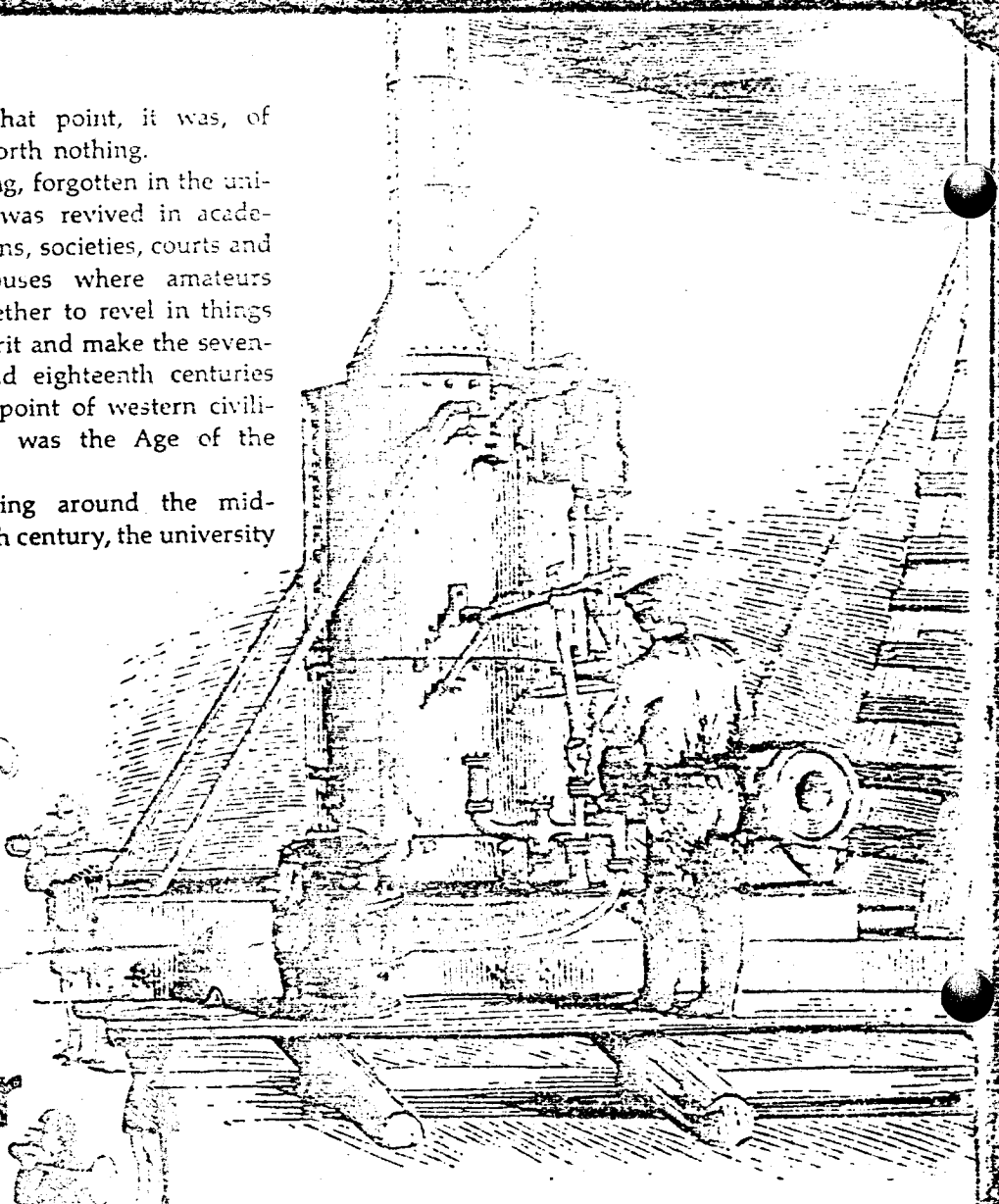


About the Author

“What this world needs is a return of the age of the amateur!” exclaimed Hugh Nibley as he chatted in one of his frequent visits to the office. “All right,” said the managing editor, “you’re the biggest amateur we have in the Church—you do an article on the topic. Let readers know that it is amateurs who have made the world go ‘round.”

Indeed, Dr. Hugh Nibley is a true amateur. He has some knowledge on almost everything. His insatiable curiosity is constantly leading him into areas far removed from his specialty of history.

A year ago he spent several weeks reading science fiction—“to catch up on things, to see what’s ahead, now that we’ve landed on the moon.” As a person he is loved for his kindness and sensitivity and is a legend in the classroom because of his wit and unorthodox teaching methods. At the end of a stimulating lecture, however, he’ll like as not close it with, “Just remember—these things we’ve talked about here today aren’t really that important. What is important is that you keep the commandments and pray for the Lord’s guidance.”



staged a comeback, culminating in elephantine growth as twentieth century technology sends everyone to school. During the first half of, the present century, college teaching offered a safe birth for mild and mediocre souls who in time, by the sacred rule of seniority, ended up ruling their institutions.

Here they jealously perpetuated their own kind in office and shut out those talented students who might threaten their own supremacy in any way. The more intelligent students had always seen through professorial sham, but as the university population soared into the millions, the tension between the two mounted

dangerously. It is no paradox that some of the most intelligent students at the best schools have been causing the most trouble. In fact, most students have been galled by the artificial restraint of professional status.

If the only way to get a professional certificate was to deserve one, there would be little trouble. But there have always been many ways of winning a prize for which the incompetent are willing to pay almost any price. The time-honored devices for beating the game are legion, but the most reliable one, since the days of the emperors, has always been appointment.

Someone (this writer, in fact) has said that anyone can become a dean, a professor, a department head, a chancellor, or a custodian by appointment—it has happened thousands of times; but since the world began, no one has ever become an artist, a scientist, or a scholar by appointment. The professional may be a dud, but to get any recognition, the amateur has to be good. To maintain his amateur status, moreover, he has to be dedicated, honest, and incorruptible—from which irksome necessity the professional, unless he cares otherwise, is freed by an official certificate.

Do Americans have to apologize for generations of ingenious amateurs from Franklin to Ford

who fathered their modern technology? Or for Ives and Carpenter, their best composers? Or for Parkman, Motley, Prescott, H. C. Lea, and the rest of their excellent historians? Is science ashamed of Descartes or Priestley, or Sir William Herschel or Father Mendel? Arts, science, and scholarship would be in a sorry way today were it not for patrons who were also first-class practitioners in their own right, e.g., von Bissing, H. Carter, and A. Gardiner in Egyptology.

Of course there has always been protest from the professional side: the greatest discoveries in classical scholarship were made by a German merchant and a young English architect, each of whom in his time was ridiculed by the professors. Emerson, "the wisest American," was banned from the campus of Harvard for his famous "American Scholar" address, which proclaimed that one did not have to be a professional to be a true thinker and scholar.

Not long ago one of the world's greatest violinists was

barred from the music faculty of a west-coast university solely because he did not have a degree, while the head of the department gave whole seasons of concerts and got away with it, because he did have a degree.

If we have no professional clergy in the Church, it is not because the Church cannot use expert knowledge, but because all members should be experts where the gospel is concerned, and as such they should make their contribution. All the same contribution? Not at all! The Church is structured for eternal progression, and that takes place as we all feel our way forward along a broad front. Seeking and searching are among the most common words in our scriptures; we are all supposed to be seeking all the time. Just as missionaries go forth as an amateur army, searching out the honest in heart in the most scattered and unlikely places, on the widest possible front, so the rest of us increase in knowledge, here a little and there a little, not by trusting a few experts to come up with the answers, but by all of us searching all along the line, finding out a fact here and a document there, and reporting the discovery to the whole body.

When he was editor of the *Times and Seasons*, the Prophet Joseph invited all to contribute.]

And the New Era does the same—Editors.

