

Chapter 17

Poor-Man's Plato and Paterfamilias, 1950-59

In February 1951, Ernest L. Wilkinson became President of Brigham Young University.³ Wilkinson was outspoken, ultraconservative, and confrontational. Right from the start, Wilkinson offended most of the faculty with his “paternalistic, dictatorial, and inconsiderate” leadership style.⁴ Most notably, he violated university tradition by making decisions himself which had been customarily made after consulting with faculty. During the first weeks of Wilkinson’s tenure, tension mounted to the point where a petition was circulated among faculty protesting this autocratic management style. Unfortunately, Wilkinson intercepted it before it could be delivered formally. At an emergency faculty meeting, Wilkinson blustered in and demanded, “Who is responsible for this?” Although Hugh had not drafted the petition, he had signed it and promptly stood up; no one else followed him. He recalls that his colleagues’ eyes were all on him, and some whispered, “Goodbye, Hugh.”

Deflecting some of the tension to himself, Brigham Madsen, a professor in the History Department, asked Wilkinson what role faculty would play in formulating policy under his leadership. “None whatsoever,” was Wilkinson’s curt reply. Wilkinson then denounced the petition’s signers as cowards for going behind his back and ordered Hugh to come to his office after the meeting.⁵

³After bitter disputes with the BYU Board of Trustees over funding issues, President Howard S. McDonald accepted a position as president of the combined schools of Los Angeles State College and Los Angeles City College in October 1949. Professor emeritus Christen Jensen served as acting president during the interim between McDonald’s departure and Wilkinson’s inauguration. Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1985), 21-22.

⁴*Ibid.*, 24.

⁵Hugh Nibley, Conversation with Boyd Petersen, 1 July 1996. Brigham D. Madsen, *Against the Grain: Memoirs of a*