

Book Reviews

RICHARD LYMAN BUSHMAN, *Joseph Smith: Rough Rolling Stone, A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder*. (New York: Knopf, 2005. Notes, Bibliography, Photographs, Maps, Index. \$35.00 hardback.)

Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander, who is the Lemuel Hardison Redd Jr. Professor Emeritus of Western American History at Brigham Young University.

The Gouverneur Morris Professor of History, Emeritus, at Columbia University, Richard Bushman, previously published *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (1984) and such works in colonial and early national American history as *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1795* (1967); *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (1985); and *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (1992). Now we have his long-awaited, full-length biography of Joseph Smith.

Scholars and lay persons alike have waited for years for a biography of Joseph Smith that treated him as a believing religious leader, considered the extensive primary and secondary sources available, and did not shy from addressing controversial topics. Bushman offers all of those things, thus eclipsing previous works such as George Q. Cannon's laudatory and uncritical *Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor, 1888); John Henry Evans's topically organized *Joseph Smith, An American Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Fawn M. Brodie's naturalistically interpreted *No Man Knows My History, The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1945, 1971); and Donna Hill's admirable effort, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977).

The careful reader is struck by a number of significant features of this

book. Bushman ranges widely in the sources, writes essays in comparative analysis, places Joseph Smith in the culture of his own time, and recognizes his power as a religious leader. At the same time, Bushman understands and explains the points of view of Joseph's critics.

Born in December 1805 in Vermont, Joseph grew up as his family struggled to eke out a living in rural New England and western New York. Growing up during the Second Great Awakening, Joseph sought the authentic gospel of Christ and at the same time participated in folkways such as magical practices and money digging.

Key spiritual experiences in his young life helped to lead him into the life of a religious leader. Although most Latter-day Saints tend to believe in the uniqueness of Joseph's vision of Christ and God the Father, as Bushman and others point out, a number of such personal theophanies took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Moreover, these events occurred more frequently than most late twentieth and early twenty-first century observers have recognized.

A series of further spiritual experiences with the angel Moroni led to Joseph's acquisition of the plates of the Book of Mormon. Contrary to the story often told by Latter-day Saints, by turning to contemporary documents, Bushman concludes that during the translation, "The plates lay covered on the table, while Joseph's head was in a hat looking at the seerstone, which by this time [after Oliver Cowdery joined him as scribe] had replaced the interpreters" (pp. 72–73). As with other topics in the biography, Bushman presents the various explanations that previous scholars, observers, and critics have suggested for the authorship of the book. Significantly, Bushman does not shrink from examining the various theories and arguments on the source of the Book of Mormon. As he points out, virtually the entire academic community today has abandoned the nineteenth-century efforts to attribute the manuscript to someone other than Joseph, such as Sidney Rigdon or Solomon Spaulding.

Instead, current interpretation generally ranges around the problem of whether Joseph composed the book or transcribed it. Although Bushman does not seem explicitly to say which of the two theories he accepts, it seems clear that he favors the transcription theory, largely because contemporary documents from those closest to Joseph support that point of view. The compositionists rely on naturalistic interpretations because historians generally discount extranaturalistic phenomena. Under the circumstances, they believe they must find another interpretation.

Transcriptionists, however, have made a strong case for an extranaturalistic interpretation. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

they often cited pre-Columbian civilizations. As Bushman points out, recent supporters of transcription theory have moved to more sophisticated techniques by turning to internal analysis and showing the existence of Hebraisms and other literary features of the book, such as chiasmus, which presumably would not have formed part of the cultural or educational experience of a young, poorly educated northeastern bucolic.

Bushman cites other aspects of Joseph's life and the history of the Church during the 1830s and 40s that help us to understand him better. As Bushman points out, Joseph thought at various "points in his life, he . . . had finished [his work], then a new revelation would drive him on" (p. 122). Thus, from a very simple organization, revelations elaborated the Church into a hierarchical priesthood and a series of councils. Early on, the Church's missionaries "taught a gospel almost exactly like Walter Scott's Campbellite doctrine that had converted hundreds in northeast Ohio . . . [by stressing] a basic Christian message of faith in Christ, repentance, and baptism with promises of spiritual blessings" (p. 153).

Later, new revelations elaborated a theology that departed markedly from traditional Christianity. A number of features stand out. For instance, gathering the Saints together in covenant communities as a refuge from the coming apocalypse and as a tool for community improvement changed the Church's character but also served as the occasion for inflaming violent opposition. In Kirtland, revelation elaborated a theology of multiple degrees of salvation open to virtually all people and to a minutely small realm of no salvation for sons of perdition. A theology of human apotheosis taught in Nauvoo in connection with the elaboration of the temple ceremony reified biblical statements heretofore interpreted figuratively about humans as sons and daughters of God.

Moreover, in an insight that many who do not understand Mormon authoritarian theocracy cannot fathom, Bushman uncovers its central uniqueness. "In an inexplicable contradiction, Joseph was designated as the Lord's prophet, and yet every man was to voice scripture, everyone to see God. . . . The amplification of authority at the center was meant to increase the authority of everyone, as if the injection of power at the core energized the whole system. Although the Prophet's ability to speak for God put his supreme authority beyond dispute, power was simultaneously distributed to every holder of the priesthood and ultimately to every member. From the outside, Mormonism looked like despotism, if not chaos. On the inside, subservience to the Prophet's authority was believed to empower every member. Though he was Moses and they were Israel, all the Lord's people were prophets" (p. 175).

In wrestling with the difficult issues, Bushman confronts the question of the Book of Abraham. Addressing the problem that the papyri Joseph Smith purchased, which have been recently rediscovered, cannot be translated by conventional means into the Book of Abraham, Bushman argues that “it seems likely that the papyri had been an occasion for receiving a revelation rather than a word for word interpretation of the hieroglyphs as in ordinary translations. . . . Whether Joseph knew of alternate accounts of Abraham or not, he created an original narrative that echoed apocryphal stories without imitating them” (p. 292).

Another issue with which Bushman wrestled was that of polygamy. Here, again, he does not shrink from confronting the hard questions. That Joseph married multiple women and that Emma disapproved of these marriages seem unassailable. Moreover, at least ten of these women were married to other men, and six of these men were active Latter-day Saints.

Bushman is less sure in considering the violence in Missouri. He understands that the old story that the Mormons were entirely pacifistic simply will not wash. He understands also that Joseph had some connection with the Danites. He is less clear, however, about Joseph’s involvement in the retaliatory violence initiated by the Latter-day Saints and about the extent to which such violence met with his approval. Perhaps this is understandable in large part because the evidence is almost unfathomably contradictory.

Joseph’s greatest triumph and most enduring tragedy occurred in Nauvoo. In this western Illinois city, Joseph presided over the creation of a powerful covenant community. Unfortunately, the power and solidarity of the people of Nauvoo led to the murder of Joseph and his brother Hyrum. Nevertheless, to the consternation of his enemies, Joseph’s creation of councils facilitated the continued life of the organization he had created and nurtured the realization of his dreams and revelations.

Any work of this scope is bound to include some mistakes. Perhaps the one that leaped most forcefully to my mind was the identification of the party affiliation of the potential presidential candidates to whom Joseph wrote letters of inquiry. Instead of being fairly evenly split between Democrats and Whigs as Bushman thinks, Henry Clay was the only Whig on the list. Richard Johnson was Van Buren’s vice president, and Lewis Cass was the Democratic Party’s nominee for the presidency in 1848 (p. 512).

These are small matters. More importantly, in summing up Joseph’s life, Bushman points both to his contradictions and his legacy. For “probably all the Saints in Kirtland, [and afterward] Joseph’s work was not

about democracy but about knowledge, power, visions, and blessings. . . . The ideal of this social order [a Zion society] was peace and righteousness, but every year of his fourteen years as head of the Church, he faced opposition from within and without. Instead of the unity and peace he desired there was conflict and anxiety. . . . Only a person of powerful conviction could have remained productive and hopeful through the discouragements. . . . Perhaps his signal trait was trust in his own inspiration.”

Bushman’s biography stands as a monumental achievement. He has clearly mastered the sources of Joseph’s extraordinary life. His understanding of a wide range of literature on religion and literary criticism has helped him play his subject against a background of well-informed insights. One hesitates to call any work “definitive,” but this biography will undoubtedly stand as the premier work on the life of an extraordinary religious leader.

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CHAD M. ORTON and WILLIAM W. SLAUGHTER. *Joseph Smith’s America: His Life and Times*. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2005. 234 pp., illustrations, chart, selected bibliography, \$32.95, hardback.)

Reviewed by Brian Q. Cannon, associate professor of History, Brigham Young University.

In this handsome, richly illustrated volume, Chad Orton and William Slaughter, archivists in the LDS Church History Department, celebrate Joseph Smith’s achievements as well as the cultural milieu of America during his lifetime: they commemorate “his life, his times, and his place in America” (17). Clear, scintillating photographs, daguerreotypes, paintings, engravings, prints, and other illustrations adorn well over half of this book’s pages, making the book a visual feast. The book’s format invites casual reading and leisurely perusal.

The primary text of the book, printed on a glossy white background and divided into five chapters, traces the life of Joseph Smith. As a narrative history, it possesses strengths and weaknesses. The crisp, concise narrative quotes from vivid primary documents such as Millen Atwood’s recollection of the Prophet’s answer to a query about why he did not hold his head high as some people did. “Br. Joseph said to him haven’t you past by a field of wheat when it was ripe and seen some heads stand strait as

yours does and others down as mine does[?] Yes sire said Br. Pierce. Well says Br. Joseph the full heads lop, the empty or blasted head with not much in them stand strait up like yours does” (190). The narrative lacks endnotes and an index—signals that the intended audience is a broad-based, popular one. Although some controversial elements of Joseph Smith’s career, such as the ill-fated Kirtland Safety Society and the destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor, are mentioned, plural marriage is not discussed at all, aside from a reference to Doctrine and Covenants 132 in a timeline. Joseph Smith’s oft-quoted matrimonial proposal to Nancy Rigdon regarding happiness being “the object and design of our existence” is presented without any reference to the context surrounding it and is interpreted instead as evidence that the Prophet “loved life and lived it exuberantly”(189). In neglecting to discuss this enormously consequential facet of the Prophet’s life and teachings, the authors sacrifice transparency and accuracy in deference to the sensibilities and expectations of either their publisher or their primary intended audience.

Occasionally, the authors’ stylistically engaging narrative notes gaps and discrepancies in the record, such as the Prophet’s conflicting recollections regarding the location of the Church’s organizational meeting. The authors largely rely upon standard, familiar sources, such as the canonized account of the First Vision, although they do introduce and reprint a less-familiar 1844 recounting by Joseph Smith of his experiences. The narrative sparkles with lively anecdotes and quips such as one attributed to Joseph Denison, the country doctor who recalled being present when Joseph Smith was born: “If I had known how he was going to turn out I’d have smothered the little cuss,” Denison irreverently intoned (p. 26a).

The underlying rationale for this book is that we cannot understand Joseph Smith without understanding his era and that “Joseph Smith’s America was uniquely situated to accommodate this prophet” (1). To promote understanding of young America, the authors have produced scores of vignettes from American history, which are interspersed as separate blocks of text with the chronological narrative of Joseph Smith’s life. The first chapter contains over a dozen of these vignettes on topics including the American sense of mission, the American dream, the origin of Sunday Schools, the history of the phrase “I’m stumped,” and the diet of Americans in the early republic. Each commentary offers an entertaining glimpse of a facet of American life. Although all the vignettes are entertaining and interesting, those that are explicitly linked by the authors to Joseph Smith’s life are most effective. For instance, a discussion of nineteenth-century medical care is linked to Joseph Smith’s

teachings regarding doctors and medicine and his own encounter with bout with bone disease and typhoid fever. On the other hand, brief biographies of each of the men who served as United States presidents between 1801 and 1844 are not explicitly tied to Joseph Smith's experiences of Latter-day Saint history.

The authors' purpose was not to advance and defend a sophisticated revisionist argument or historical interpretation in their book. In passing, though, they do portray Joseph Smith as unique; "his teachings were not a difference of degree from the other religionists but rather a complete break with the organized religions of the day," they write (11). In elaborating this position, the authors suggest that Joseph differed from his contemporaries in teaching that Jesus Christ was divine, whereas others viewed him as "only an important historical figure"(14). Careful readers will observe, though, that many ministers of the Second Great Awakening shared this belief in Jesus's divine sonship, including the renowned Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright, whose conversion is detailed in a subsequent chapter of the book.

Although this book is problematic as interpretive, scholarly history, it never claims to be a scholarly work pitched to an academic audience. As a popular work of history that invites general readers and casual learners to explore Joseph Smith's life and times, the book works well; it is interesting, visually appealing, and readily accessible. It is an educational book that families could profitably explore together.

