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Maxwell Institute Summer Seminar: “The Gold Plates as Cultural Artifact”

by Richard Lyman Bushman



The 2012 summer seminar was hosted by the Maxwell Institute, which is committed to supporting young scholars who are pursuing advanced studies in fields related to the work of the Institute. The seminar provides the next generation of scholars the opportunity of being mentored by leading Mormon scholars who publish in the field of Mormon studies. The papers were presented at a BYU symposium on June 23, 25, and 26, 2012.

For six weeks this past summer, eight scholars from all over the United States and from Europe met daily in the Maxwell Institute library to discuss and research the topic “The Cultural History of the Gold Plates.” They were the latest rendition of a seminar that has met every summer since 1997 under the direction of Richard Bushman, with the aid of Terryl Givens and Claudia Bushman, to explore aspects of Mormon culture.

This year’s seminar continued a tradition of taking up a subject that the seminar’s leader is working on. The first seminar in 1997 explored the cultural context of the Restoration while I was writing *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. Claudia Bushman’s seminar investigated women and Mormon history, and the seminars under Terryl Givens have contributed to his study of the history of Mormon

theology. The 2012 seminar was the second on the gold plates.

On first sight, it does not seem that there is much to say about the gold plates. They disappeared a long time ago and now can only be imagined. But if gone, the gold plates are not forgotten. There are a few ingenious Latter-day Saints who still are uncovering plates, and many more who put them on tie tacks and shape birthday cakes in the form of plates. In the Spokane Exposition of 1974, the Church built its pavilion on piers in the Spokane River to look like gold plates. The plates still turn up in popular culture, including in Broadway shows such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angels in America* and in popular novels such as James Rollins’s *The Devil Colony*, in which gold plates inscribed by ancient Jews are found in a cave in Utah. (Gold and caves often go together, we discovered.) The story of the plates has become a cultural resource that writers and artists of all sorts call upon to talk about human experience.

As a cultural icon, the plates lead off in many directions. In the Book of Mormon they were part of an assemblage of holy objects that accompanied them down through time: the Liahona, the sword of Laban, the 24 gold plates of Ether, and the interpreters. This collection prompted the seminar to look into the subject of holy relics. How have sacred material objects been understood in other traditions? They also fall into the category of lost and recovered histories, of which there are many extant in the world today. How do the plates fit into that tradition? They have provoked a Latter-day Saint interest in writing on metal plates everywhere in the world.

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Paul Cheesman was only the most zealous of the searchers for parallel plates. They are of interest to modern feminists because Emma Smith played a prominent role in recovering and translating the plates, and they are of interest to scholars who study literary hoaxes.

The problematic of the seminar (and of my book) is, why this inextinguishable interest? Considering that the plates are no longer accessible and for many are beyond belief, why do they still arouse the imagination? The idea of a gold book recovered from a stone box buried in a hill, inscribed with ancient characters describing a lost civilization, and cared for by an angel seems to hold endless fascination. The plates' story is often ridiculed or used as evidence of Joseph Smith's imagination and cunning—but ridiculed or not, the plates survive. Mormons have not wavered in their belief, and artists and writers of all stripes deploy the plates for their own purposes. Even our seminar this past summer attests to their enduring interest.

The seminar culminated with a public presentation of the participants' papers: Richard Bushman, "The Gold Plates in Mormon and American Culture"; Ruth Eldredge, "Sacred Materiality and the Holy Past: the Gold Plates and Christian Relics"; Austin Walters, "Hisses from the Dust: The Gold Plates and the Recovery of Sacred Records"; Craig Rossell, "Gold Plates and the Cave Myths"; Jeremy Walker, "Hoaxes, Gold Plates, and the Discourse of Authenticity"; Michelle Mueller, "Women and the Plates: Emma Smith and Gender in Mormonism"; Jeremy Talmage, "The Other Plates: Déjà vu or Something New?"; Bryan Cottle, "The Moroni Principle: The Mormon Quest for Metal Plates in the Paul Cheesman Years"; and Saskia Tielens, "The Gold Plates in the Contemporary Popular Imagination."

For those interested in learning more, papers from the seminar will soon be available on the Maxwell Institute website.

Richard Bushman, Gouverneur Morris Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University, held the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies in the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University from 2008 to 2011.

Gerrit Bos Lecture Series

The Maxwell Institute is proud to sponsor a lecture series at Brigham Young University by Dr. Gerrit Bos, editor and translator of the *Medical Works of Moses Maimonides* and chair of the Martin-Buber-Institut at Cologne University.

Monday, 1 Oct., 1:00–2:00 p.m., 3716 HBLL (entry through the south doors): Synonym literature in Hebrew manuscripts and the innovation of a Hebrew medical terminology by Shem Tov Ben Isaac of Tortosa (fl. 13th century) in his translation of al-Zahrawi's *K. al-Tasrif*.

Tuesday, 2 Oct., 12:00–1:20 p.m., 3714 HBLL (south doors): Moses Maimonides, *Medical Doctor and Author: Some aspects of his work, medical training, theory and practice*.

Wednesday, 3 Oct., 12:00–1:00 p.m., 3716 HBLL (south doors): Medieval stone lore in a Hebrew garb: Berekhiah Ben Natronai ha-Nakdan and the *Sefer Ko'ach ha-Avanim* (On the Virtues of Stones).

INSIGHTS

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