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Richard S. Van Wagoner. *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1805–1830*. Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016.

Reviewed by Mark Ashurst-McGee and Mark Lyman Staker

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AROUND THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, Signature Books planned a series of three volumes that would cover Joseph Smith's life in detail. Richard S. Van Wagoner was commissioned to write the first volume of the trilogy, treating the period from Smith's birth to his move to Ohio. Van Wagoner's *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1805–1830* engages Smith's family and cultural background, his childhood and formative years, his visionary claims, his translation of the Book of Mormon, and the organization of the Mormon church. Much of the work of Mormon history is done by amateur scholars who contribute significantly to our understanding of the Mormon past, and Van Wagoner has been a notable contributor in this realm. Now, several years after his untimely death in 2010, the Smith-Pettit Foundation has published the results of his research posthumously, making another contribution to Mormon studies. In fact, the publisher touts the hefty volume, over six hundred pages in length, as Van Wagoner's "masterwork" (p. 591).

Van Wagoner begins his book on Joseph Smith's early years and the origins of Mormonism by attempting to show his readers that Smith was a deliberate deceiver. A large part of the book's introduction looks ahead to incidents that occurred in Nauvoo—particularly the evasive and obfuscatory statements that Smith made to protect the still-secret practice of polygamy—with the intent to reveal Smith's dishonest

character. Fortunately, Van Wagoner's reading of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo is not carried through into *Glorious in Persecution*, the volume of the trilogy that covers the Nauvoo years.¹ But Van Wagoner does project his view of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo back onto the period in which Mormonism was born. He believes that his examples of deception "speak to the character of the man who was once the boy" (p. x). And so, instead of seeking to understand the context and meaning of Joseph Smith's early religious experiences, or how they were received by those who first followed him, Van Wagoner sets out to determine whether Smith really had the experiences he claimed: "First and foremost," he explains, "I am an investigative biographer, interested in both truth and falsehood and their ramifications, disinclined to move along a velvet rope with the crowd while keeping a respectful distance from Joseph Smith" (p. xvii).

The first few chapters of *Natural Born Seer* cover Joseph Smith's childhood in New England. Van Wagoner uses Lavina Fielding Anderson's monumental edition of Lucy Mack Smith's family memoir as the chronological backbone of his narrative of Joseph's earliest years.² Like Smith's other biographers, Van Wagoner works assiduously with the very small collection of relevant documents. To this scant evidence, he adds a truly impressive amount of historical context, especially in terms of historical geography and material culture. This is the primary contribution of the book. Drawing on memoirs, local histories, and a wide variety of sources, he presents rich descriptions of the towns and counties in which the Smiths lived. He describes the Smith homes and neighborhoods, sketches the physical and historical geography of hills and valleys, relates aspects of local agriculture and regional economy,

1. Martha Bradley-Evans, *Glorious in Persecution: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1839–1844* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016). Bradley-Evans acknowledges the "secrecy accompanying plurality" (p. xix) and admits Smith's public "denial" of plural marriage (p. 603), but also states that "what looks like subterfuge, intended to obscure one's vision, may have been embedded in ritual," which Smith and his followers held sacred and confidential (p. 601).

2. Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001).

and vividly reconstructs plausible routes of travel as the Smiths migrated from town to town. There are many helpful contributions toward understanding the early life of Joseph Smith.

At times, however, Van Wagoner's thick description becomes excessive, as when he lists over two dozen varieties of apple that were grown in Vermont—most not introduced until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (p. 58). In fact, anachronisms abound in Van Wagoner's reconstruction of the Smith family's material culture. To give one example, he describes Joseph Smith Sr.'s 1802 dry goods store in Randolph as an 1870s country shop "displaying an eclectic stock ranging from coal oil to calico to canned oysters" (p. 14). While Smith's store could offer anything available in Boston or New York City, oysters were not canned until 1812, and coal oil was not widely available in village stores until the 1850s (under the trade name *Kerosene*).

More concerning is when these errors lend themselves to a portrayal of the Smiths as indigent and incompetent. In the opening lines of the biography, Van Wagoner sets the stage for Joseph Smith as a country bumpkin when he writes that Smith was born "deep in the backwoods of New England's Vermont" (p. 1). He is probably accurate when he describes the first Smith home in Vermont as a "log cabin" (p. 5). However, he projects this temporary residence, which the Smiths occupied only through their first winter in Vermont, onto Joseph Smith Sr.'s Vermont experience generally. He states that the home Joseph and Lucy Smith lived in when they were first married was also a "cabin" (p. 17). This is apparently an assumption since there is no corroborating manuscript evidence. In fact, recent archaeological excavation at the site of the Smith residence in Tunbridge has uncovered a substantial foundation, a brick fireplace and hearth, and a root cellar—all of which strongly suggest that this was a log home (with square-hewn timbers). The high-end ceramics uncovered in archaeological excavation suggest a life of comfort, even elegance.³ Van Wagoner also writes that when the Smiths moved to Sharon, Joseph Smith Jr. was born in "the family's

3. Mark Lyman Staker and Donald L. Enders excavated the remains of the Smith home in Tunbridge during October 2016 and August 2017.

rustic log cabin” (p. 3). Actually, the Smith home in Sharon has long been known to have been a frame home with clapboard siding.⁴

Van Wagoner weaves this thread of a rough-hewn existence into their New York homes as well. He states that the floor of the Smith family’s log home in Palmyra was “puncheon—split logs with the flat sides up” (p. 95). However, there is no evidence for this. In fact, the archaeology conducted at the site suggests a sawn lumber floor.⁵ Van Wagoner apparently presumes the floor was puncheon because it seems more rustic. The thick descriptions in *Natural Born Seer* often include details derived from Van Wagoner’s ideas about what old-timey life was like, but with no documentary support.

While the dearth of sources about the Smiths in New England is the challenge of the first few chapters, there are many relevant sources for the New York period—and these are now easily accessible in Dan Vogel’s comprehensive collection *Early Mormon Documents*.⁶ Most of these sources, however, were created years or even decades after the fact and are almost always biased (either for or against Joseph Smith). Van Wagoner draws heavily on the statements collected in 1833 by Philastus Hurlbut and much later sources as well. He routinely presents late and antagonistic sources with little or no qualification.

Van Wagoner insists that it was in the mid-1820s, *after* Smith’s encounter with the angel Moroni, that Palmyra experienced the revivals Smith wrote about when he introduced the first vision. In presenting the context of the Methodist revivals that attracted young Joseph, he quotes heavily from Charles Chauncy, who described wildly enthusiastic meetings. Chauncy, whom Van Wagoner calls “an early observer of Methodist enthusiasm” (pp. 217–18), died in 1787—three decades before Joseph Smith moved to New York. Moreover, Van Wagoner

4. T. Michael Smith, Kirk B. Henriksen, and Donald L. Enders, “The Birthplace Home of Joseph Smith Jr.,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 6/2 (Fall 2005): 19–67.

5. The cellar found in the excavation of the site was not accessible from the side of the house, indicating that it was accessed through a trap door in the floor. This, in turn, most likely indicates a sawn lumber floor.

6. Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003).

seems oblivious to the notorious elitism of the Old-Light Boston Brahmin and his condescension toward the uncouth Christians of the provinces with their lust for emotional revivalism. Van Wagoner slights the evidence of earlier revivals in the Palmyra-Manchester area and ignores the possibility that Smith mistakenly conflated details of the earlier and later revivals. In terms of chronology, the one thing that *is* clear from Smith's narratives of his early visions is that the first vision occurred *prior* to the first visitation of Moroni in 1823. In any case, Van Wagoner holds that even if Smith did have a visionary experience, it probably wasn't real. He emphasizes that people have been claiming to have visions for thousands of years—and they cannot all be true. Rather than trying to understand what Smith and other visionaries experienced and how Smith may have understood his vision, Van Wagoner attacks its objective reality.

The narrative of *Natural Born Seer* is broken in Van Wagoner's chapter on the Book of Mormon, which is neither biography nor history but rather "an overview of critical issues regarding the ancient historicity of the Book of Mormon" (p. 384). The chapter is split into sections on language, genetics, archaeology, and other such topics that have been debated for decades. Instead of providing a helpful guide to the religious ideas found in the Book of Mormon—and what they might have meant to Smith and his followers—this lengthy chapter is devoted to refuting the book's antiquity. The end of this chapter—Van Wagoner's conclusion that the Book of Mormon is entirely modern—is the climax of the book, with the following chapter on the organization of the church little more than a denouement showing that the church Smith organized was built on the foundations of invented scripture. Van Wagoner does, however, recapitulate his narrative arc: that Joseph Smith, after enduring years of his father's incompetence and the family's resulting poverty, created the Book of Mormon and organized the church in order to ensure "the financial and social security of his extended family" (p. x).

Van Wagoner offers a skeptical interpretation of Joseph Smith that is fair enough yet limited. *Natural Born Seer* may be compared with the book *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New*

Spiritual Paths, by Ann Taves, a professor of religious studies. *Revelatory Events*, published the same year as *Natural Born Seer*, compares Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon with Helen Schucman's Course in Miracles and Bill Wilson's Twelve Steps manual for Alcoholics Anonymous. *Revelatory Events* is more rigorously skeptical, combining careful history and cognitive psychology, and yet more generous in its theory and methodology, acknowledging the reality and complexity of religious experiences in the lives of ordinary and extraordinary people.⁷ Van Wagoner, in contrast, seems preoccupied with a kind of objective reality that continually forecloses any significant insight into Joseph Smith's early religious experiences and their historical meaning. He draws on all of the most important sources and more but is woefully inadequate on source criticism. It is abundantly clear that much research and effort went into the book, but with insufficient rigor and care. Van Wagoner's *Natural Born Seer* should be used judiciously.

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7. Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).