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Stephen Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wold Side of North American Prehistory*

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Title

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Abstract *Review of Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory* (1991), by Stephen Williams.

Stephen Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991. xi + 407 pp., with index. \$14.95 (paperback), \$29.95 (hard cover).

Reviewed by Diane E. Wirth

Stephen Williams is Peabody Professor of American Archaeology and Ethnology and Curator of North American Archaeology for the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. The intent of his book, *Fantastic Archaeology*, is to expose certain North American finds as hoaxes, most of which were purportedly discovered in the nineteenth century. In line with his debunking of sensational finds, he is extremely critical of scholars who support the validity of artifacts which they claim contain characters of possible Old World origin. The author labels these scholars collectively "Rogue Professors," in that their actions are comparable to rogue elephants who do not go along with the main herd, ultimately defrauding the public.

Williams chooses to include the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith in his ax-wielding journalism, and it is for this reason a review of his chapter, "Archaeology and Religion: Where Angels Fear to Tread," is warranted for inclusion in volume 4 of *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*.

Relying on Fawn Brodie's book, *No Man Knows My History*, Williams retells the biased version of the treasure-seeking Joseph Smith, brings up the Mark Hofmann episode, and continues by describing events in the Book of Mormon from his in-hand copy. Typical of non-Latter-day Saint scholars who have preconceived ideas of what the Book of Mormon contains, he makes fallacious statements that are not supported in the text of the Book of Mormon. For example, he writes of the Nephites and the Lamanites. "These two factions became the Moundbuilders and the Indians; the Lamanites acquired a reddish skin color for their sins. . . . Moroni, the last leader of the Nephites, prepared their history . . . and buried the plates in A.D. 421 at Hill Cumorah." Latter-day Saint scholars would take issue with these few, but vital, statements. To wit, the Book of Mormon does not say that the Nephites and Lamanites became the Moundbuilders, that the Lamanites acquired a "reddish skin," or that Moroni buried the plates in the Hill Cumorah.

Turning to Book of Mormon geography theories of today, Williams explains that now most Latter-day Saint scholars support Mesoamerica as the land where these people lived, which, he claims, is not where Joseph Smith and other early members of the Church understood this history to have taken place. For the most part, this is true. Nevertheless, we do have an editorial in the *Times and Seasons*, from the pen of Joseph Smith:

Central America, or Guatemala [the whole of what we now call Central America was then known as Guatemala], is situated north of the Isthmus of Darien [Panama] and once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north to south. The city of Zarahemla, burnt at the crucifixion of the Savior, and rebuilt afterwards, stood upon this land.¹

The Book of Mormon does not give specific details as to the location of sites, and even if it did, all but a few pre-Classic names in Mesoamerica are unknown to scholars today. According to Michael D. Coe of Yale University, because it has only been in recent years that we could actually read most of the glyphs, nobody has yet named a site directly from its glyphic name in the Maya area.²

Williams then turns to the Kinderhook plates, which are now lost except for one. Apparently uninformed regarding the Church's more recent determination of these plates, he claims Joseph Smith translated the inscription and never refers to the 1981 *Ensign* article which explains the history of the Church's role concerning the plates.³ It was quite some time before it was positively acknowledged by scholars, through an electronic and chemical analysis, that the one remaining plate is a hoax. More important, contrary to popular articles written by anti-Mormon writers, Joseph Smith did not make a translation of the fraudulent plate. The translation attributed to him has proven to be an excerpt from a journal of William Clayton. In fact, after

¹ Joseph Smith, editorial, *Times and Seasons*, 3/23 (1 October 1842): 927.

² Correspondence from Coe to Wirth, 10 December 1990.

³ Stanley B. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to Be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax," *Ensign* 11 (August 1981): 66-74.

viewing the Kinderhook plate, Joseph Smith never showed any interest in it.

From this point, Williams moves on to the Newark Holy Stones, which he does not associate with the Church, and the Michigan Relics, also known as the Soper Frauds. Referring to the latter, he writes, "The Mormon Church became an interested party to the investigation of these ingenious artifacts" (p. 176). The Latter-day Saint scholar who examined the Michigan collection was James E. Talmage. Williams writes that Talmage stated in his report "that if the objects in these collections were authentic, much of the history in the Book of Mormon would be confirmed by external evidence. . . . Talmage states unequivocally that the relics are forgeries. Thus their confirmation of the Book of Mormon is not upheld and is false." Adding salt to the wound, Williams now brings up the involvement of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, referring to them as a "splinter group" (p. 183). One of their officials, Rudolph Etzenhouser, published a brochure in 1910, claiming the Michigan Relics were "pre-historic originals," and that the inscriptions would surely add to our knowledge of the history of the American continent. After detailing the hoax and remarking how similar enigmatic artifacts keep popping up, Williams writes, "There are remnant traces of some of these cases surviving even today: new translations of old hoaxes or new excavations in Middle America for the Mormon cause," and in the next breath once again reminds us of the Hofmann forgeries.

Williams closes this chapter with a few brief paragraphs pertaining to the revival of Creationism. He expresses his hope for the future that "the truth will keep the public from a regression into such religious conservatism and antiscientific prejudice" (p. 188).

All in all, the Williams book has merit. However, from a Latter-day Saint point of view, it is unfortunate that Williams chooses to include the Book of Mormon with spurious and fraudulent artifacts. His perception of what the Book of Mormon states and of what Joseph Smith believed on the subject of Book of Mormon geography, coupled with his pulling in Mark Hofmann's diabolical schemes, is unfair to the average reader who is not acquainted with the facts.