



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

---

Volume 4 | Number 1

Article 66

---

1992

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

John L. Sorenson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Sorenson, John L. (1992) "Stephen Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wold Side of North American Prehistory*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 66.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol4/iss1/66>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title**

**Author(s)** John L. Sorenson

**Reference** *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4/1 (1992): 254-57.

**ISSN** 1050-7930 (print), 2168-3719 (online)

**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 John L. Sorenson

A Harvard University chairholder in American archaeology has here published his own textbook for an undergraduate class entitled "Fantastic Archaeology." This is an undeniably interesting read which unintentionally provides an illuminating look into less-than-desirable aspects of establishment archaeological thought. The cover blurb says Williams considers that the nineteenth-century intellectual landscape was "dotted with fakes, frauds, and humbugs," and he "takes them all on with gusto—illuminating, debunking, and instructing." "Fantastic Archaeology" consists of "alternative views of the past that use data and interpretations that will not stand close scrutiny" (p. 12). The Book of Mormon is one of his cases.

He feels "a responsibility to condemn nonsense" (p. 8). While he discusses a number of amateur enthusiasts in this light, he comes down particularly hard on "Rogue Professors" (after "rogue" elephants), who "have abandoned the appropriate standards of scholarly enterprise and can no longer make crucial judgments about the evidence." They should, he avers, employ "reasoned use of curiosity, testing, and veracity" "where data will be critically evaluated, and evidence will be sought from every side" (p. 285). Just how this is done is neither explained nor exemplified. I get the impression that he means no more than "think the way I do." In the acknowledgments he suggests what this meant to two of his mentors: "never to speak authoritatively on a subject without having read the original sources" and "very thorough consideration of all the facts in the case" (p. 350). But in this volume he fails on both standards.

Latter-day Saints will be startled with his concept that the gold plates were obtained by "discovery and excavation" (p. 161) and that the Latter-day Saint faith "has deep roots in what must be called the 'archaeological discoveries' in 1827 by Joseph Smith in New York State" (p. 25)! The primary discussion of the subject (pp. 158-67), however, is prosaic enough, though selective—Joseph Smith's early history, a titillating sketch of the Hofmann forgeries and murders,

Professor Anthon, the Kinderhook plates, a precis of Nephite and Jaredite history, and a short comparison with archaeological findings in North America.

Williams makes reference to his own reading of the Book of Mormon and speaks of his sensitivity to the fact that "dealing with revealed faith is a difficult subject." He ends the section with "the hope that I have been able to treat the matter of Joseph Smith and the golden plates from Hill Cumorah in a responsible fashion. I will admit that I am skeptical of the original discovery; the absence of the actual ancient documents makes detailed analysis impossible today" (p. 166).

His discussion relies on just three sources: Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* ("one of the most accessible," and "very well researched"), Robert Silverberg's popular volume, *Moundbuilders of Ancient America* ("a more than credible job in researching the Moundbuilder myth and its connections to Joseph Smith"), and the "very useful" *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* by Dan Vogel (p. 159). His explicit reliance on such biased works hardly reassures us that he has sought out "all the facts" or "the original sources." Nor can we expect that his students will know that he has hand-fed them only a tiny slice of the data and that his "critical evaluation" is narrowly performed. For example, he depends completely on Silverberg and Vogel in stating that the Book of Mormon's content "bears a strong similarity to (then) current notions about the Moundbuilders" (p. 164) and that "the Ohio Valley sites of the Moundbuilders" were "the supposed forts of the Nephites" (p. 166). Hardly any writers on the Book of Mormon but the pair Williams chooses see any such thing. Then, noting that recent Mormon apologetic literature concentrates on South America and Mesoamerica, he says, "That is certainly a far cry from the locations Joseph Smith espoused" (p. 166), a view Vogel offered but which the original sources do not support.

Obviously Williams has no grasp of the variety and range of Latter-day Saint publications on this topic these days (note his enigmatic comment on p. 185 about "new excavations in Middle America for the Mormon cause" linked with the idea of hoaxes). It looks as though he has been trapped by limited reading into premature speaking without examining the key sources or even sampling the secondary literature. This failure does not owe to bad intention, for in the discussion of the Kinderhook plates he is careful to caution that his information comes from anti-Mormon sources. His biggest problem, rather, seems to be a



Cambridge chutzpah which overwhelms the modesty that ought to temper such a grand sweep across exotic intellectual terrain.

Incidentally, the Mormons enter the story of strange doings at another point, too. In the discussion of inscribed clay artifacts that began appearing in Michigan beginning in 1890, he credits "James E. Talmage of Salt Lake City, Utah," who "had a Ph.D. in geology" (but whose position as a Latter-day Saint apostle goes unrecognized), as having examined the situation carefully during two visits to the scene. Talmage is praised for adroitly demonstrating the objects' fraudulence, despite support for their authenticity expressed by "an official of the Reorganized Church of the Latter-Day Saints" (pp. 181-83).

Williams's establishmentarian partiality is demonstrated most clearly in chapters 10 and 11 which discuss Barry Fell, George F. Carter, and Harold Gladwin. Fell's brash claims to have translated many inscriptions in North America as Old World writing have indeed deserved a certain critical comeuppance (I contributed my own through a review in *BYU Studies*).<sup>1</sup> But Williams is not the one to do it substantively. His claim to be qualified as a critic on the basis of having taken "basic courses" in linguistics as a graduate student is as ludicrous as Fell's linguistic pretensions. (David H. Kelley of the University of Calgary, who is eminently qualified for the task, has examined many of "the original sources," and finds much merit in Fell's work despite its follies).<sup>2</sup> Regarding Carter, Gladwin, and the possibility of transoceanic contacts, Williams gives us opinion instead of analysis, as well as typical professional ignorance of the relevant information.<sup>3</sup> The tone of this chapter illustrates, unfortunately, the accuracy of Sir Mortimer Wheeler's remark that archaeology is not so much a science as a vendetta.<sup>4</sup>

The long "Epilogue: North American Prehistory" (pp. 305-45) is, on the contrary, a competent, up-to-date survey of that subject, for the author is dealing with his specialty.

<sup>1</sup> John L. Sorenson, review of Barry Fell, *America B.C.*, in *Brigham Young University Studies* 17 (1977): 373-75.

<sup>2</sup> See David H. Kelley, "Proto-Tifnagh and Proto-Ogham in the Americas," *Review of Archaeology* 11/1 (Spring 1990): 1-10.

<sup>3</sup> Surveyed in John L. Sorenson and Martin Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Ocean: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Provo: Research Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Sir Mortimer Wheeler, cited in H. O. Thompson, *Biblical Archaeology* (NY: Paragon House, 1987), 424.

*Fantastic Archaeology* will sell to the public despite its faults because the topic is hip and the writing is good. But this is questionable praise, like saying that a film has "good production values" despite lack of a credible plot. Williams might have served the profession and the public better had he written another book entirely under this title, one in which he exposed the worst "nonsense"—and there is a lot of it—to be found on the shady side of conventional archaeology.