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Exploding the Myth About Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet F. L. Stewart

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Book Reviews

F. L. STEWART. *Exploding the Myth About Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*. New York: House of Stewart Publications, 1967. 75 pp. \$2.50.

Fawn M. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* has seen eight American and at least one British printing in the twenty-one years since publication. Its present reputation is fairly stated in the recent Library of Congress bibliography:

Mrs. Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith is a work of intensive scholarship, widely praised as the best history of the prophet and seer upon whose revelations the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints was founded. The author has searched out and scrutinized carefully the evidence on all sides of the strange story, and her picture of her subject is impartial and in the main sympathetic.¹

Despite such encomiums, most LDS historians feel less than enthusiastic about the craftsmanship of Mrs. Brodie. A book explaining in detail the grounds for such professional skepticism is overdue, to say the least. F. L. Stewart (Lori Donegan) has educated herself in the sources of Mormon history simply through making a hobby of carefully checking Brodie's documentation. Such a project is less a question of ideology than a fairly objective determination of whether the footnote citations of *No Man Knows My History* really support its thesis. Because this double-checking may be done on a broader scale, Stewart's work is a valuable pilot study of the validity of Brodie's generalizations.

The essence of *Exploding the Myth* is a presentation of sixty-three violations of context or documentation in *No Man Knows My History*. A final chapter is added that contains an imaginary dialogue between Stewart and Brodie concerning the supposed transcript of an 1826 trial of Joseph Smith popularized by *No Man Knows My History*. It is questionable whether the literary device of a hypothetical conversation contributes to the accurate presentation of historical issues. In regard to the sub-

¹*A Guide to the Study of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1960), p. 772. All further page citations in this review refer to Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).

ject of this chapter, however, more evidential work needs to be done on what appears to be a fictitious transcript of a genuine trial. Although Stewart is skeptical of the reality of this early event, Oliver Cowdery's letter concerning the Susquehanna residence of Joseph Smith (*Messenger and Advocate*, Oct., 1835) seems plain on this point:

On the private character of our brother I need add nothing further, at present, previous to his obtaining the records of the Nephites, only that while in that county, some very officious person complained of him as a disorderly person, and brought him before the authorities of the county; but there being no cause of action he was honorably acquitted. From this time forward he continued to receive instructions . . . from the mouth of the heavenly messenger, until he was directed to visit again the place where the records was deposited.

Brodie disregards Cowdery's account and relies upon the supposed "court record" promulgated by Bishop Tuttle in 1883. Later additions have cited the reminiscence of "A.W.B.," published in 1831 in the *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, which Brodie maintains proves beyond doubt the authenticity of the Tuttle "transcript." Such a conclusion is too neatly reached, however, since Cowdery's account relates that Joseph was "honorably acquitted," a contradiction of both sources that Brodie relies upon. With numerous spectators then alive it is doubtful whether Cowdery would even have brought up the incident if it was not a vindication of the Prophet. Some detail on this issue is demanded here because Stewart attempts to equate this early trial with one mentioned by Lucy Smith in Wayne County in 1829. But this conclusion violates Cowdery's description both in location and chronology; the trial he mentions took place "previous to his obtaining the records of the Nephites." This much must be said in the interest of an accurate reading of the only Mormon source for the event. But it must also be recognized that Stewart's work moves beyond the pioneering efforts of Francis W. Kirkham on this issue. She stresses several important inconsistencies in the Tuttle "transcript," some of which are apparent anachronisms in details of local history. Such work is most valuable and deserves a fuller presentation, perhaps as a journal article.

To return to the alleged sixty-three inaccuracies, Stewart's corrections are generally valid. Simply counting a total is not

as important, however, as classifying them by pattern, which the reader must substantially do for himself. One trend shows an inconsistency in Brodie's historical theory. A simple illustration is the labeling of two different events as Joseph's "first major failure": the Kirtland conference of 1831 and Zion's Camp in 1834. Since Stewart points out other contradictions in analysis, the serious question is raised of how well Brodie assimilated and correlated her own research. Another major trend is adding exaggerated description or imaginary details to an incident. Although Stewart has presented but a portion of the episodes that are embellished in the retelling, those now collected disqualify Brodie as a careful historian and move her work in the direction of sensational historical fiction. A related trend in Brodie's methods is simply shoddy workmanship that inaccurately states basic dates and names, not to speak of incomplete and distorted quotations. But the trend that Stewart features by position as most serious has obvious parallels apart from Mormon historiography. It is said professionally of Gibbon on Rome's fall that his major failing is not so much an anti-Christian bias as an incapacity to understand religion at all. Stewart goes far toward showing that for the same reason Brodie might be incapable of describing, much less of evaluating, a major religionist.

The critical point of genuine religion (or respectable self-deception) for Brodie is Joseph Smith's success in inducing supernatural experiences among his followers from the 1829 vision of the Three Witnesses to the 1830 spirituality of the infant church. It was then that "he was rapidly acquiring the language and even the accent of sincere faith." (p. 80) Stewart grasps the central issue by highlighting Brodie's opinions of the religion of Joseph's family prior to that time. In what is perhaps her best chapter, Stewart analyzes the loaded terms and inadequate generalizations that are applied to the early Smith-Mack religious convictions. For instance, Brodie quotes Asael Smith to show that he is an unaffiliated Bible believer; consequently, she evaluates him as "basically irreligious." Such a *non sequitur* Stewart refutes by merely supplying the words deleted from Asael Smith's testament: he insists, upon the evidence of scripture and reason, "that religion is a necessary theme." In face, Stewart somewhat understates the issue, since the letter itself expresses a profound humility before the "great

Majesty" of God. Brodie portrays the Smith ancestors generally as caught in cultural and family disintegration. But such a picture is based on a dubious sociology of identifying Colonial dissent from orthodoxy as "irreligion," a concept extended environmentally to Joseph Smith, Sr. Actually the only historical portrait of the Prophet's father in this period is Lucy Smith's history, which reveals him plainly as a true pietist. Yet Brodie's linked inferences proceed to assert that Palmyra data "indicates that Joseph [Jr.] reflected the irreligion and cynicism of his father." (p. 16) It is questionable whether the biographer who so perceives the simple and devout Joseph Smith, Sr. has the requisite empathy to consider the possible sincerity of his son. This issue looms larger than many technical historical judgments, and Stewart deserves credit for underlining it.

Stewart focuses upon Brodie's youthful picture of Joseph for the obvious reason that the integrity of his religious claims rests on the reality of his pre-1830 experiences. Brodie's real evidence for this period amounts to the two above-discussed items (the "court-record" and environmental "irreligion") plus one: "the detailed affidavits of his neighbors would lead one to believe that the youth had been immune to religious influences of any sort," (pp. 23-4) However, Stewart's discussion of these affidavits does not specifically meet the Brodie thesis. The above quotation is part of Brodie's discussion of the First Vision, indicating that she thinks that at age fourteen Joseph Smith was basically irreligious. She then assumes that the court trial (supposedly March, 1826) furnished a crisis that turned him toward a more genuine appearance of religion. (p. 31) On the basis of the affidavits of neighbors and family tradition, Brodie admits, "it is clear that much of the story that he later wrote in his autobiography was known to his family and friends as early as 1827." (p. 40) Stewart spends much space showing that all sources agree that Joseph Smith claimed a religious motivation for his work. It is quite true, as Stewart maintains, that Brodie has deleted from the record many newspaper articles and portions of affidavits that substantiate Joseph Smith's religious claims. But technically the Brodie thesis asks for pre-1827 proof. Stewart's main contribution here is to show that the Hurlburt affidavits were not necessarily representative of Palmyra opinion, since she emphasized Lucy Smith's report, signed by sixty people, of a community testimonial of the business in-

tegrity of the Smiths. When the chronology of the Brodie thesis is firmed up, this first neighborhood statement in favor of the Smiths in 1826 has even more significance. Stewart quotes the opinion of the historian of New York revival, Whitney Cross: "Every circumstance seems to invalidate the obviously prejudiced testimonials of unsympathetic neighbors (collected by one hostile individual whose style of composition stereotypes the language of numerous witnesses). . . ." But with this observation the job is only half done. It has never been adequately stressed that Brodie has perhaps classically debunked the Hurlburt-Howe affidavits on the Spaulding story on the grounds of "uniformity" of style and content. (pp. 423-4) Then why should she enshrine as history the affidavits collected by the identical person on the issue of money digging, especially in the light of the fact that she declines to accept the negative character testimony of Hurlburt's major Palmyra affidavit? (p. 18)

A discussion of one historical incident in depth, as treated by Brodie and Stewart, will serve as an illustration of the performance of each. In December of 1842 Joseph Smith traveled from Nauvoo to Springfield to get firm legal and administrative support in resisting illegal arrest by Missouri deputies. Brodie's first mistake is her vivid description of a "retinue of forty of his best soldiers armed to the hilt with bright muskets and brighter bayonets." Stewart is completely justified in calling the account "over-dramatized," since on this point Joseph Smith's narrative names only nine that set out from Nauvoo and mentions no arms at all, the display of which would have been highly injudicious. Brodie's next blunder is transferring an earlier incident to this journey. In describing this Springfield trip in his (DHC., Vol. 5, p. 211), Smith records his resentment at Missouri wrongs and recalls that in virtual self-defense he had once threatened to use force on a night so cold that lives were imperiled. He begins the reminiscence by stating that it occurred in "Paris," at the time "when I was going up to Missouri, in company with Elder Rigdon and our families." Because Brodie describes this event as happening on the trip from Springfield to Nauvoo, Stewart is quite correct in calling Brodie to task for "misunderstanding" the reminiscence of 1838 and narrating it "erroneously" as an 1842 incident. The third error is one of location. Paris, Illinois, is in the east of the state, some 10 miles from the Indiana border. Because it is not an

intermediate point between Nauvoo and Springfield, Brodie clearly failed to check basic geography. Stewart's exact criticism here is, "the Paris in question is in Missouri, not in Illinois." In turn this is merely Stewart's assumption, for Joseph Smith in his 1838 flight from Kirtland took a route not only near Paris, Missouri, but also through Paris, Illinois. In fact, Joseph Smith's account of that journey shows that he and Sidney Rigdon were together in Paris, Illinois, but shortly thereafter separated, so they probably were not together in the vicinity of Paris, Missouri, as this incident requires. In summary, though incorrect in technical geography, Stewart's criticisms are quite correct on the main issue of accuracy with literary sources. If Brodie distorts simple narrative and cannot read a flashback of Joseph Smith in context, no careful historian can afford to rely upon her judgment without first examining the documentation for himself.

Some will no doubt dismiss Stewart's close analysis as trivial. But if many points are minute, they are not unimportant. History, to the extent that it is scientific, is an inductive study based on evidence. If particulars are misconceived, the interpretation based on them cannot be accurate. Upon the publication of Brodie's biography, Hugh Nibley summarized its chief methodological errors, in spite of his flippant manner. Professionally trained LDS General Authorities expressed similar objective criticisms. It is really unbelievable that a score of years have passed before a serious point-by-point study of Brodie's documentation has been attempted. That F. L. Stewart has recognized the need and published is of itself a major contribution. It is hoped that further analysis of *No Man Knows My History* will follow. One must conclude on the basis of the first results from Stewart that Brodie is grossly overrated as a historian of Joseph Smith on purely historical grounds.

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