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Abstract Review of *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (1999), by Mark D. Thomas.

Speaking So That All May Be Edified

Grant Hardy

It often seems as if defenders and critics of the Book of Mormon talk past each other rather than to each other. Latter-day Saints complain that outsiders never take seriously wordprint studies, chiasmus, textual complexity, the testimony of eyewitnesses, or the historical/geographical work of John Sorenson. Nonmembers accuse apologists of either ignoring obvious nineteenth-century influences, as well as glaring textual and historical anachronisms, or resorting to contorted logic, obscure evidence, and implausible parallels to explain those influences away. In the competition for converts, both sides seem more interested in scoring rhetorical points than in learning from each other. They read each other's work, but only to identify potential weaknesses. And when acrimony, personal attacks, and charges of bad faith are added to the mix, the stalemate can be very depressing indeed.

The underlying problem here is that the issue of historicity leaves little common ground for discussion, and perhaps most nondevotional writing on the Book of Mormon is somehow connected to this question. In their readings of the text, Latter-day Saints look for two types of evidence to substantiate their claim that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient record: they either identify ancient patterns or

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details that Joseph Smith could not have known in 1830 (this was the path marked out by Hugh Nibley long ago), or they point to complexities in the narrative that would have been beyond the marginally educated twenty-four-year-old prophet (particularly given the documented speed and finality of the translation process). Critics, on the other hand, cite verses that do not comport well with standard archaeological models of New World history, or they identify possible nineteenth-century sources or influences, both strategies being intended to lend plausibility to the claim that Joseph Smith could have been the author of the book. A great deal is at stake in this debate, perhaps even eternal salvation, for if the Book of Mormon is a translation, the LDS Church has divine authority and all Christians should join it. If, on the other hand, the Book of Mormon is a work of fiction, then the church's claims are groundless.

This impasse seems, well, impassable, but there may be another way of talking, one based on the model of a university where people of widely divergent backgrounds and beliefs can nevertheless learn from each other. In a university setting (and I'm speaking ideally here), modes of discussion can transcend partisan quarrels. People put aside personal differences to engage in a conversation characterized by scrupulous attention to the evidence, generosity to those who interpret differently (with a personal responsibility to depict opposing viewpoints accurately and fairly), alertness for contrary evidence, and a willingness to rethink one's assumptions. Though open-mindedness does not preclude taking strong positions if the evidence warrants, changing one's mind should always be a possibility. This type of inquiry might work with regard to chemistry, Chaucer, or voting patterns in nineteenth-century Georgia, but can it be applied to a religious text, one intimately connected to matters of ultimate importance? The fact that Jews, Catholics, and Protestants can sometimes work together in studying the Bible is promising, but what of the Book of Mormon? What can knowledgeable, fair observers agree upon? Can they examine the text together, while respecting very real religious differences? Am I ready to change my mind about the Book of Mormon? (Actually, my understanding of much of the Book of

Mormon could change, and hopefully improve, but I am unlikely to be persuaded that it is not the work of ancient prophets, because my testimony of that fact is not based primarily on academic evidence or scholarly arguments.) And finally, would such a limited, secularized conversation be worth having?

Mark Thomas has written a very ambitious book that, in his words, was intended as "part of the foundation for a new tradition in Book of Mormon studies" (p. ix). What he has in mind seems to be the kind of conversation that I have just described. Many readers may be put off by his initial assumptions as well as by the press with whom he chose to publish his book, but it is important to view his work in proper perspective—*Digging in Cumorah* is Thomas's testimony of the Book of Mormon as a text of spiritual power and insight. His interpretations are often unorthodox, and he is skeptical of traditional claims, but I take at face value his insistence that his desire is to build faith: "But for more than anyone else, I have written this book for those who have lost—or are losing—all belief" (p. ix). Whether the approach he puts forward strengthens or weakens one's particular testimony depends, to a large extent, on what kind of testimony one has. For nonmembers, and perhaps for some Latter-day Saints as well, a book that forcibly argues that the Book of Mormon is worth reading even if one has doubts about its origins is a step in the right direction.

To facilitate a broad-based conversation, Thomas adopts three restrictions, each of which may make some readers nervous. First, he wants to separate the Book of Mormon from its claims of ancient origins, putting aside questions of historicity and authorship. Some may object that these are issues of paramount importance, and as I noted above, one's position on the religious authority of the Book of Mormon (a question perhaps inextricably connected to historicity) may be central to one's salvation. But Thomas is certainly correct in observing that much of the scholarship on the Book of Mormon is so concerned with Egyptian naming practices, Mesoamerican botany, and the reliability of witnesses that we may be distracted from the text itself.

Second, he tries to separate the 1830 Book of Mormon from its subsequent history, reading the book as if no church claimed it as its own. How would we understand the original text if we had no recourse to the interpretations of latter-day prophets and apostles, if we had no interest in reconciling its doctrines and practices with those of the current LDS Church? He is prepared to acknowledge "serious moral and textual shortcomings" in the Book of Mormon (p. ix), as well as considerable strengths, and he gives particular attention to how Americans in the 1830s would have understood the book.

Finally, he wants to employ the tools of modern biblical scholarship in his analysis of the Book of Mormon (and in the process introduce Mormons to these ways of reading texts):

> I know that the patient labor of really reading the text is worth the effort. My scholarly passion is rigorous Book of Mormon research. My methodology, molded by critical biblical scholarship, is eclectic and interpretive, combining various textual, historical, and literary-critical techniques. They help me listen carefully to the voice of the text and enter into dialogue with it. Approached in this way, the Book of Mormon becomes endlessly fascinating and provocative. (pp. viii–ix)

If you find this intriguing, read on. If, on the other hand, you're wondering why anyone would willingly trade the insights of prophets for those of scholars, by all means move on to other, more congenial books.

Thomas narrows his focus to a close reading of the 1830 text, using commonly accepted scholarly techniques, because he wants to start a new kind of conversation about the Book of Mormon. What, he asks, could readers from widely differing religious backgrounds agree on when they read this volume of modern scripture? What might they learn from each other? And he offers a parable (adapted from the New Testament scholar John Meier):

> Suppose that we take a Protestant, a Catholic, an atheist, and a Mormon, all of whom are committed to critical schol-

> arship. We lock them in the University of Chicago library on a spartan diet. They will not be allowed to leave until they have created a consensus method for interpreting Book of Mormon narratives. Naturally, due to their differing backgrounds, they all hold different opinions about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. But for the purposes of their assignment, they must concentrate on the stories in the book itself without appealing to Joseph's biography, the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, or archaeology. Instead, they must find a way of talking about what the book actually says. The methodology I use in this examination would be a way for these scholars to reach conclusions about the book without discussing their private convictions concerning authority. (p. 3)

The required commitment to critical scholarship may seem to stack the deck here, but remember that these approaches are valuable precisely because they have already proven useful in transcending sectarian differences.

A possible danger is that such a constricted discussion may defeat the Book of Mormon's real purpose—a scholarly, religiously impartial analysis might not bring souls to Christ—but in general I am sympathetic to Thomas's project. The Book of Mormon is a rich text that will repay many different approaches, and the more carefully we are able to read it, the better. I am always interested when non-Mormon scholars take the Book of Mormon seriously, trying to make sense of it in a nonfrivolous, nontendentious way. Outsiders can often point out details that we may have glossed over in our familiarity with the text. That a Mormon scholar should attempt something similar is also good news.

Critical reviewers, when faced with a challenging book like *Digging in Cumorah,* can focus their attention on the author's motives, his goals (or the assumptions on which they are based), or his performance. I am happy to acknowledge Thomas's faith and good intentions, and I think that the conversation he proposes is well worth having. This leads me to the last option—does Thomas fulfill the goals that he sets for himself? The answer, predictably, is yes and no.

I learned a great deal from (at least temporarily) accepting the limitations and ground rules that his notion of dialogue requires. This is not to say, however, that I always found him convincing, even when I was willing to take his arguments on their own terms. And within the guidelines he set forth in his introduction, there are still other fruitful avenues available to him that he chose not to explore.

He begins with a chapter on methodology (generally a good idea), and here we can identify the kinds of real contributions and unfortunate shortcomings that characterize the book as a whole. First, let me note that Thomas is indeed a careful reader and this chapter is full of useful insights. His cautions on why the "thus we see" narrator comments are significant but not final interpretations are well taken (pp. 6–7), and he is astute in his analysis of the functions of various narrative forms:

> Some narrative forms, such as wilderness narratives and Lehi's dream, are presented as literal history containing a secondary spiritual meaning. Others universalize a Nephite narrative so that the reader's history participates in universal history. Examples are conversion stories, piety/prosperity cycles, evil kings, secret combinations, and final national destruction. Still other narrative forms (for example, dying heretics) serve principally to defend or condemn a particular doctrine. (p. 15, with references omitted)

Thomas draws attention to crucial features of the text that need interpretive work—repetitions, biblical phrases, typology, narrative form—but as much as I liked particular details, I found this chapter ultimately frustrating, given Thomas's overall objectives, because he does not prepare readers adequately for his project. Possible weaknesses in this chapter are threefold.

First, Thomas does not really introduce biblical scholarship to an LDS audience. He mentions some key terms and concepts in passing, but his light treatment of the subject raises the question of the audience for whom this book was written. The number of Latter-day Saints who are both familiar with biblical scholarship and interested in reading the Book of Mormon carefully is probably minuscule, and

the non-Mormon population that meets those two requirements cannot be much larger. This chapter would have been more useful to more people had Thomas tried to build an audience by systematically outlining the major tools available—textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, narrative criticism, etc.—and explaining why these approaches are valuable to the study of the Book of Mormon. Thomas did this in his article "Scholarship and the Future of the Book of Mormon" (originally published about twenty years ago in *Sunstone* and republished in Dan Vogel's *The Word of God*),[1] but an expanded and updated treatment would have been very welcome here. At the very least, he could have directed interested readers to standard, mainstream sources— I'm thinking of Raymond F. Collins's *Introduction to the New Testament,* John B. Gabel's *The Bible As Literature,* Bart D. Ehrman's *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings,* and the articles in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* among many, many others. Instead, he relies rather heavily on John D. Crossan's *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story,* published by Polebridge Press of Sonoma, California, in 1988. Crossan is an important, if controversial, figure in current biblical studies, but this book is fairly inaccessible. (I study in a university library of 750,000 volumes, yet I would have to obtain Crossan's book through interlibrary loan.) I am all in favor of encouraging Latter-day Saints to become acquainted with biblical scholarship—it has certainly enriched my understanding of the scriptures—but I'm not sure that this chapter offers a useful entrance for those who are not already convinced.

Second, Thomas does not lay the theological groundwork necessary to bring all sides into conversation. I am not asking here for a full theology of inspiration and translation, but he at least needs to outline various possibilities, along with the implications of each. Thomas is quite keen on the nineteenth-century literary and social background for the Book of Mormon. To some this may sound a lot

1. Mark D. Thomas, "Scholarship and the Future of the Book of Mormon," in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture,* ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 63–79.

like naturalistic explanations of the text's origins, but Thomas observes that the Book of Mormon itself claims to be written for modern times, and any interpretation must take into account its 1830s audience. I have no problem with this—the Book of Mormon *is* a nineteenth-century text, written in English and first copyrighted on 11 June 1829 in New York State. All Latter-day Saints agree with those bare facts, but we believe that the Book of Mormon is this and more—an inspired translation of an ancient text written and edited over the course of a thousand years by prophets.

Mormon researchers have sometimes downplayed or shied away from nineteenth-century influences for fear of strengthening the hands of those who would see Joseph Smith as the sole author, but I believe that the better we know 1830s American culture, the better we will understand the text (just as increased knowledge of ancient Hebrew culture can also be useful). The difficulty lies in determining just what parts of the text are ancient and which are modern. This, perhaps, is a question that Thomas would like to skirt (like historicity), but it needs to be faced squarely if he hopes to establish some kind of common ground that includes Mormons as well as outsiders.

For instance, LDS readers will probably agree that Joseph Smith put the Book of Mormon into his own words as he translated, or that it was revealed to him in words he could understand (see D&C 9:7–9 and 2 Nephi 31:3). This means that it is reasonable to ask what Joseph Smith had in mind when he used a word like "wilderness" (Thomas takes up this topic in chapter 4). So far, so good. Even the Infobases CD-ROM includes an 1806 dictionary. And Thomas has some very insightful comments to offer about visionary language in the Book of Mormon, including phrases such as the biblical "seen and heard" and the nonbiblical but common "eye of faith" (pp. 48–62). But do Joseph Smith's contributions extend to the structure of the narratives themselves? Perhaps a case could be made—an inspired translation might include prophetic updating or modifications; Joseph Smith may have misunderstood some aspects of Nephite culture; Nephite authors may have prophetically embedded their accounts into future literary patterns; God himself may be responsible for the seeming anachronisms in the text—but the issue

needs to be raised directly in the first chapter when Thomas outlines how he intends to use nineteenth-century narrative conventions to interpret the Book of Mormon. Conservative possibilities remain in all of this. Thomas provides a good example of how the Book of Mormon, through borrowed language, can function as a commentary on the Bible (pp. 19–24), and the complexity of the relationship between those two volumes of scripture certainly lends credence to Thomas's observation that "the Book of Mormon is anything but a spontaneous recitation [of biblical phrasing]" (p. 23).

The third weakness in his chapter on methodology is that his explanations and writing are not always as clear as they could be. Thomas proposes what appear to be useful categories of "formula," "formulaic plot," and "narrative scene," but these are not carefully defined, and at the end of his discussion I still had questions. The terms are loosely adapted from Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (a fine source), but readers looking for the careful, nuanced analysis of Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* will be disappointed. And there is a certain awkwardness that detracts from a work of literary analysis. To my ear, a sentence like "Even for those who entertain no hope of hearing the voice of a buried God, these Nephite narratives may sound like a faint whisper from the ground of Being" (p. 19) clunks. "Ground of Being" is a technical theological term that seems completely out of context in this allusion to Isaiah 29:4 (2 Nephi 26:16), and "buried God" is simply puzzling. Another typical example of awkward writing occurs in a later chapter:

> Repetition in Book of Mormon narratives serves several functions. One reason is artistic and another is didactic. For example, repetition in the Psalm of Nephi (2 Ne. 4:16–35) adds aesthetic and spiritual appeal. The double set of three prayers offered by the brother of Jared before his people's transoceanic voyages reinforces lessons about the power in the prayer of faith. (p. 183)

And so on for a number of specific narratives. He is saying interesting things here, but I was not sure whether he was giving examples of "artistic" or "didactic" functions, or whether that intriguing distinction

was simply left undefined and unsubstantiated (so also with his reference to the Psalm of Nephi—I can imagine what "aesthetic appeal" might be, but I have no idea what he means by "spiritual appeal"). Too often I had to reread paragraphs, looking for definitions or trying to reconstruct his train of thought.

Digging in Cumorah continues with nine chapters that are basically an exercise in form criticism—Thomas identifies and analyzes various narrative patterns, roughly taking them in the order they appear in the text. This approach allows him to give detailed attention to a fair portion of the Book of Mormon, and his somewhat loose, deliberately eclectic use of scholarly tools provides him an opportunity to comment on a wide variety of issues. He has a keen eye for repetition, parallels, and subtle variation that makes it possible for him to find meaning not just in the stories, but also in the ways in which those stories are told. I found his discussions of the forms of warning prophets, migration narratives, captivity narratives, conversions, and dying heretics particularly valuable. In most cases he lists the major features of a typical story, compares it with biblical or nineteenth-century examples, and contrasts various occurrences in the Book of Mormon.

In the specifics of his arguments, he scores both hits and misses. A few examples of provocative insights and apparent misreadings follow:

Hits

The Ammonihah narrative "implies that those who most loudly deny the existence of evil create it" (p. 27).

"This [Sariah's complaints] and other subplots give voice to the readers' doubts through the 'murmurings' of skeptical characters, then provide both actions and explanations that constitute vindicating evidence" (p. 45). This is a nice example of reader-response criticism, and clearly the writers of the Book of Mormon were very concerned with how the book would be perceived by latter-day readers.

On Ether 2, "It is interesting that the narrator focuses on the destruction of the nation as the reader's primary lesson, even as the

Jaredites are about to arrive in the new world and found their new nation" (p. 76).

Thomas notes that editors deliberately shaped the narrative of Zeniff's colony to align the prophecies of Abinadi with the later fate of the group (see p. 88).

"Here is more evidence that the Book of Mormon is addressed to those without access to the main sources of power in society" (pp. 90–91).

With regard to Nephi's visions, "the main agent of deliverance prior to the coming of Christ (which is hardly mentioned) is the Book of Mormon and subsequent scriptures. Hence, the dominant figure of Lehi's and Nephi's millennialism is not a redeemer figure or a religious movement. It is a book" (p. 118).

The inclusion of the Jaredite record universalizes the experience of the Nephites (see pp. 155–56).

Misses

"In contrast to this [nineteenth-century] cultural norm, Book of Mormon visionaries are heroes. The Enlightenment figures are the villains" (p. 40; cf. 167–68). Actually the Book of Mormon has a very complicated relationship to enlightenment ideals of universality, reason, and evidence, and Thomas's categorization is too facile.

Thomas suggests that the phrase *he thought he saw* was nearly obsolete in Joseph Smith's day (p. 56), but he fails to note that it appears in Acts 12:9. Any phrase that occurs in the New Testament would have been familiar to Book of Mormon readers, and Thomas needs to take that context into account when he interprets this verbal formula.

Despite his insistence on reading the Book of Mormon from an 1830s perspective, Thomas is willing to bring in twenty-first century concerns (i.e., racism [see pp. 83–85], environmentalism [see pp. 94–95], and McCarthyism [see p. 207]) where it suits him.

I am not convinced by his suggestion that the best way to understand the "fountain of living waters" (1 Nephi 11:25) and the "fountain of filthy water" (1 Nephi 12:16) is to suppose that Nephi saw a single fountain that could represent opposite things (see pp. 106–8).

He asserts that Alma's question "Have ye received his image in your countenances?" is similar to nineteenth-century revival language without citing any evidence (see p. 134).

"Alma is struck dumb as a result of the vision (for two days, according to Mosiah 27:19–23, three, according to Alma 36:16" (p. 138). But the two-day period in Mosiah refers only to the time the priests fasted for Alma.

"Alma is compared to Simon the sorcerer" (p. 139). This refers to Alma's description of himself at Mosiah 27:29 as having been in "the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity," a phrase that indeed comes from Peter's characterization of Simon in Acts 8:23. But I doubt that this is a deliberate allusion, for the phrase seems to have been a favorite of Joseph Smith's, appearing again at Alma 41:11, Mormon 8:31, and Moroni 8:14.

We could tally up the score here or argue specifics in more detail, but the more important question is, overall, does Thomas succeed in providing the foundation for a new way of talking about the Book of Mormon? It seems to me that he is moving in the right direction. Some type of literary criticism is an obvious way to sidestep questions of religious authority and invite all readers to work together in finding meaning and value in the text. Yet I fear that Thomas's form criticism, as it stands in *Digging in Cumorah,* may not start the dialogue he wants. Despite his parable about scholars locked in the library, Thomas regularly reaches outside of the text itself to wander through the intricacies of nineteenth-century literary forms. Perhaps he feels this is justified because Latter-day Saints and nonmembers alike can agree that there is a nineteenth-century component to the Book of Mormon, but many Latter-day Saints may perceive his wandering as an unfair bias. Why analyze Alma 36 in terms of revival conversion prototypes and then rule its compelling chiastic structure as somehow off the table? And doesn't the constant citation of anachronistic literary forms somehow undermine Latter-day Saint claims? In bringing together outsiders and insiders, it appears that believers have to move farther.

Yet this may be appropriate, since we would be the hosts in any celebration of the Book of Mormon. Indeed, LDS scholars have al-

ready begun exploring literary approaches; studies using them may serve as the basis for a general recognition that the Book of Mormon is a complex work of aesthetic power that allows individuals to explain it or react to it as they may. Richard Dilworth Rust's *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*[2] strikes me as an attempt to bridge the same gap that worries Thomas, though starting from the opposite side. But more remains to be done if the process is to continue. Latter-day Saint scholars need to develop ways of identifying and making sense of nineteenth-century elements in the Book of Mormon within the context of faith. A promising place to begin is with a careful analysis of the King James language of the translation. How exactly could it have gotten there, and how does it contribute to the meaning of the text? Eventually, I would like to see head-to-head comparisons of ancient and modern elements without embarrassment and without fear that we will somehow be undermining our strong position that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text. Increased awareness of biblical scholarship could also make conversations with outsiders easier and might even help us better understand our uniquely Latter-day Saint scriptures. I am always impressed that Joseph Smith, a man with unparalleled access to prophetic inspiration, nevertheless felt it worth his time to study Hebrew.

But I am not letting Mark Thomas off easy, either. It was a mistake to focus so narrowly on nineteenth-century literary forms, particularly when another area of common ground was available (though this admittedly would have been more of a stretch for outsiders). He should have given considerable space to redaction criticism, that is, to the study of how editing shaped the narrative. The Book of Mormon differs from the Bible in that it offers a comprehensive editorial history of itself. A literary study that more fully captured the power and sweep of the Book of Mormon would have examined more carefully the personalities and theological agendas of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. This type of approach is related to

2. Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997).

what Thomas has offered. For instance, when he notes that the story of obtaining the brass plates is built on repetitions of three—"three attempts to obtain the plates, three commands to kill Laban, three mental responses by Nephi, three levels of appeal to Zoram, and three laments by Sariah" (p. 46), he is not necessarily implying that the whole story is fictional; it could be that this level of artfulness comes from the editor (remember that 1 Nephi, as we now have it, was Nephi's second draft). At times Thomas comments on editing, but he usually refers simply to "the narrator" without trying to construct a full mental image of what these men were like or what might have motivated their particular choices.

Could nonbelievers treat Mormon as a flesh-and-blood, historical figure when they read his book? I don't see why not. When evaluating a novel or a play, it is often appropriate to enter deeply into the world created by the text, speculating, for example, on whether Hamlet had adequate motivation for his treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or trying to figure out Elizabeth's state of mind when she refused Mr. Darcy. In the Book of Mormon, the main characters are also writers, and taking them seriously as such (even if it involves a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of some) could very well yield interesting insights. Let's talk about what kind of sense the Book of Mormon makes when we believe or imagine that it is the product of coherent, distinguishable, historically situated minds. (Indeed, this kind of endeavor is perhaps not that different from what scholars do when they hypothesize about the biblical authors of J, E, P, D, or Q).

As the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints becomes a world religion, the need for our traditional siege-mentality diminishes. When we speak with others about our beliefs, we can be confident that we have something to add to the diversity of human religious life—without necessarily having to be in full missionary mode—and we can take seriously differing points of view without feeling that we are somehow giving ground to the enemy. Some promising signs include President Hinckley's *Standing for Some-*

thing,[3] which argues for core LDS values in an ecumenical way, and a recent issue of the *FARMS Review of Books*, where space was given to authors who strenuously, but respectfully, disagree with basic Latter-day Saint doctrines.[4] We are at a point where bridges to the wider world will only make us more visible and attractive. And to those with faith in the ultimate destiny of our religion, reaching out to a wider community is not threatening. Our scriptures, our traditions, our doctrines, and the inspiration of our leaders are impressive and secure. We have nothing to fear, and much to gain, from stepping across the room and striking up a new conversation. Mark Thomas's *Digging in Cumorah* is an invitation to talk. We should take him up on it.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something: Ten Neglected Virtues That Will Heal Our Hearts and Homes* (New York: Times Books, 2000).

4. See the reviews of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *FARMS Review of Books* 11/2 (1999).