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Early Mormon Documents, Vol I Dan Vogel

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DAN VOGEL, comp. and ed. *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996. xvi; 708 pp. Map, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$34.95.

Reviewed by Craig L. Foster, research specialist, Family History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Dan Vogel, an independent researcher, writer, and author of works such as *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* and *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism*, is the editor of a collection of documents concerning early Mormon history. Vogel's book, the first of what promises to be a multivolume work involving over 450 documents, focuses on the Joseph Smith family and the emergence of Joseph Smith Jr. as a religious leader.

Early Mormon Documents gives "priority to documents produced either by Smith family members or by others recording their statements" (xi). Documents include official histories, diary entries, memoirs and reminiscences, personal letters, and newspaper reports as well as civil, business, and church records. The book is divided into two parts: (1) the Joseph Smith family and (2) Mormon origins in Vermont and New Hampshire. The Smith family section includes documents by and about Joseph Smith Jr. as well as his parents, siblings, spouse, and even extended family members. The documents relate Joseph Smith's early spiritual experiences and subsequent development as a prophet.

Unfortunately, the book's focus on original and contemporary documents causes it to bog down in some parts, particularly the 239-page section encompassing the widely available Lucy Mack Smith history. Vogel has done a good job of placing the 1845 manuscript and the 1853 published edition side by side for comparison and annotating the text with references and biographical background. Even so, this and several other sections of the book are long and tedious reading.

However, some of the documents are fascinating, insightful, indeed poignant. Along the lines of the Lord's statement that "a prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house" (Mark 6:4), Jesse Smith's letter to his nephew Hyrum Smith painfully demonstrates the ambivalence and even open tension experienced among members of the extended Smith family. Jesse was particularly vocal in his skepticism and anger over the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (551–54). In sharp contrast to Jesse Smith's rejection of his nephew's prophetic calling, John Smith studied the newly published scripture, listened to the teachings of his brother Joseph Smith Sr., and ultimately, along with several other members of the Smith family, was converted to Mormonism (555, 564).

These and other documents created by members of the Smith family and their acquaintances create an intimate picture of the Prophet Joseph

Smith, his family, and early background. Entries from the Smith family Bible, as well as civil, land, and census records, help round out this personal view of the Smith family that goes beyond the usual history and adds depth to our understanding.

Although not all the documents are complimentary of Joseph Smith, his mission, or his family, Vogel has made a noticeable attempt to produce a scholarly and unbiased work. Indeed, in several cases he rejects statements made by individuals and demonstrates their inaccuracy. A good example is the statement made by Daniel Woodward claiming that Joseph Smith Sr. had been involved in counterfeiting with a Jack Downing but had escaped punishment by turning state's evidence. Vogel showed that a Joseph Smith of Royalton, rather than being a fellow conspirator, was listed as a victim of accepting counterfeit money from a Beniah Woodward, a relative of Daniel Woodward. Moreover, Vogel searched for a Jack Downing and was unable to find any mention of one in the Vermont Supreme Court records for Windsor County (625).

The previous example demonstrates one of the stronger points of the book. As an editor of a volume of documents, Vogel has gone the extra mile by providing explanatory notes on statements made within the text, bibliographic citations, and biographical information on people mentioned in the documents. A significant percentage of Vogel's biographical and other information is the result of original research. However, one of the potential weaknesses of the book is the dependence upon a large amount of secondary sources for biographical information. This was particularly noticeable in the Joseph Smith Jr. and Lucy Mack Smith sections of the book.

Another potential problem is that while the book boasts an impressive 150 sources in its bibliography, there are some notable absences. For example, while Henry Caswall's *The City of the Mormons; or Three Days at Nauvoo in 1842* is quoted in the book (220–21), this document is not in the bibliography. What is more, biographical information for Caswall is not provided. At least one article, available in *BYU Studies* (1996), gives information on this influential anti-Mormon writer.

These and some other noticeable omissions should give the reader cause to carefully read and analyze the documents and information in the book, as one would with any other compiled source. Further research would in fact be in line with the author's hope that this book will "not only facilitate but accelerate the scholarly examination of Mormon origins" (xi).

Notwithstanding the weaknesses and problems mentioned, this volume offers a wonderful selection of documents as well as interesting background information. Indeed, the strengths and potential value of the work far outweigh the problems. This book should be a part of the collection of any serious Mormon scholar or any library with a Mormon Americana collection.