The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor

Glen M. Leonard

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol38/iss1/20

Reviewed by Glen M. Leonard, director, Museum of Church History and Art.

When Lucy Mack Smith stood before a congregation of the Saints in Nauvoo, Illinois, in October 1845 at the invitation of Brigham Young, she presented three related messages, all of them centered around family—especially her own. Mother Smith, as she was lovingly known, counseled parents to raise their children in love and kindness, reflected on her own children and her extended family, and talked to the attentive congregation about the life of her prophet son, including a recitation of her family’s “hardships, trials, privations, persecutions, sufferings, etc.; some parts of which melted those who heard her to tears.”

Though the aging Lucy Smith stayed behind in the removal from Nauvoo, her family story remained of great interest to the Saints. Many times before that final public commentary, Lucy had responded to invitations to speak of her son Joseph’s early religious experiences. To save her lungs, she said, and at the invitation of the Twelve, she invited Martha Jane Knowlton Coray to record her memoirs. Lucy’s dictations during the winter of 1844–45 resulted what is now called the preliminary manuscript of her history. From this 214-page manuscript, Coray and her husband, Howard, one of the Prophet’s former scribes, trimmed perhaps 10 percent and added material from Joseph’s own history published not long before in the Times and Seasons. The product was a revised manuscript, “History of Mother Smith, by Herself.” In securing a copyright on the work, Lucy identified it as “The History of Lucy Smith. . . .”

The Twelve compensated the Corays for their efforts late in 1845. One copy of the revised manuscript remained with Mother Smith. The Twelve carried a second, leather-bound copy west. Lucy Smith’s copy was entrusted to her son William and found its way to Isaac Sheen, a former Latter-day Saint living in Wisconsin. Orson Pratt purchased the copy from Sheen while en route to England and published it in Liverpool in 1853 under the title Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations.

Copies of the book were welcomed in Salt Lake City, but not without reservations. Some readers doubted the accuracy of some of Lucy’s recollections; others looked askance at her favorable views of William, a lukewarm supporter of the Twelve’s leadership. Church historians George A. Smith and Wilford Woodruff began checking the book for accuracy. In
1865, Brigham Young invited Church members to turn in their copies of the 1853 volume so that they could be destroyed and replaced with a forthcoming corrected edition. His revision committee, George A. Smith and Elias Smith, found the 1853 volume generally reliable (and more recent reviewers have agreed). The new edition did not find a publisher until Joseph F. Smith made the manuscript available to the Improvement Era. It was issued first in installments, then in 1902 as a book. A generation later, in 1945, Stevens and Wallis issued another edition, with minor editorial work by Preston Nibley.

One or another of the published versions of Lucy’s biography has been available over most of the past century. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints published Biographical Sketches in 1880, with another edition in 1908, reprinted four years later. The 1853 volume was issued in a photomechanical edition by Grandin Book of Orem, Utah, in 1995. Bookcraft has kept Preston Nibley’s version of the Improvement Era edition in print since its publication in 1945.

In the Revised and Enhanced History, the Proctors promise a first look for most readers at the information in the copy of the preliminary manuscript preserved in the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. That promise is kept, but not always in a way to satisfy specialists in Latter-day Saint history.

The editors, part-time institute teachers, are known to Latter-day Saint readers for their trilogy—the “light” series on Church history, the lands of the Book of Mormon, and the Holy Land—and their recent pioneer sesquicentennial offering, The Gathering: Mormon Pioneers on the Trail to Zion. Their version of Lucy Mack Smith’s history is handsomely illustrated. Scot Proctor created most of the nearly one hundred photographs, including many useful images of locations specific to the narrative. The hand-drawn maps imitate familiar sources in recently published atlases. An old-style table of contents summarizes the key points of each chapter and specifies the dates covered. Chapter endnotes add clarifying explanations. The Proctors include the family genealogy from the 1902 edition, improved by their own corrections. A second appendix presents a simplified one-page four-generation chart beginning with the Prophet’s grandparents. Appendix 3 consists of a seven-page chronology focused on Joseph Smith’s life. For the first time, an index makes searching for names and events possible, and it is a thorough offering.

All of these aids assist the reader. In addition, a twenty-page introduction reviews the process by which Lucy’s history was created, edited, and published. The editors introduce and comment on their amalgamated text by drawing upon the analytical work of Howard Searle and Richard Anderson (xxii, xxvi, xxix). An occasional chapter endnote draws attention to differences between the preliminary manuscript and other editions. More
complete comparisons appear in the introduction as examples. These glimpses may satisfy readers interested only in the digested enhancement, but only by examining the preliminary manuscript itself can a reader learn exactly what the Proctors have done editorially. A convenient place to begin is the first volume of Dan Vogel’s *Early Mormon Documents*, where about half of the original 1845 manuscript is presented in parallel columns with the 1853 edition.  

A comparison soon reveals that, using the preliminary manuscript as a foundation, the Proctors have deleted selected words, phrases, and sentences and added other words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. The additions are often from the 1853 and 1945 editions but also include their own words. This editorial procedure preserves most of the information added by the Corays but eliminates some material not previously published. Many choices seem based on readability. The following example from chapter 8 illustrates the evolution of the manuscript:

Preliminary manuscript (1845):

I remained with my b<r>other 1 <more> year after which I made a visit to my Parents in Gilsum and My Uncles and Aunts e[t] in Marlow then my brother came and upon his urgent request I went again to tunbridge and was with him until the ensuing January when I was married by Colon[el] Austin esquire—

Biographical Sketches (1853) and History of Joseph Smith (1945):

I continued with my brother one year, then went home. I was at home but a short time, when my brother came after me again, and insisted so hard upon my returning with him, that I concluded to do so. And this time I remained with him until I was married, which took place the next January.

Revised and Enhanced History (1996):

I remained with my brother one year, then went home to visit my parents in Gilsum and my uncles and aunts in Marlow. After a short time, my brother came, and upon his urgent request I went again to Tunbridge, and was with him until the ensuing January when I was married. (42)

The product of the Proctors’s editorial effort is a readable narrative that preserves much of the flavor of the dictated manuscript, along with the additional information, chapter divisions, and transitions borrowed from the revised manuscript and 1853 edition. The Proctors rightly assert that in their *Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith*, “Lucy’s voice is heard more clearly, her sentiments and perceptions explored more openly than ever before” (xxx). Their amalgamation will suffice for many readers, but the scholar who wishes to understand all of the nuances of the preliminary manuscript will turn to Vogel’s more exact transcription or to the preliminary manuscript itself. Only in that earliest version does the
History of Joseph Smith by His Mother become “The History of Mother Smith, by Herself.”


2. Richard L. Anderson posits that Coray first collected information in a notebook as loose sheets (preserved at Brigham Young University) and then expanded it into the preliminary manuscript. Anderson, “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences,” BYU Studies 9, no. 3 (1969): 388. The Proctors accept Lucy Smith’s statements that Coray served only as an amanuensis and do not attempt an alternative explanation for Coray’s notebook (xx–xxi). Could it have been used for collecting information during the revision process? Dan Vogel follows Anderson’s interpretation. Dan Vogel, ed., Early Mormon Documents (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:227. None of the commentators explain how the preliminary manuscript got into the LDS Church Archives. The Proctors only say it was discovered there in the 1960s (xxi).


8. Vogel, Early Mormon Documents, 1:231–450. Vogel does not include chapters 1–7 (the ancestry section), nor anything beyond the New York period.
