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Joseph Smith: The First Mormon Donna Hill

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HILL, DONNA. *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1977. xviii + 527 pp. \$12.50.

Reviewed by Davis Bitton, professor of history at the University of Utah and assistant Church historian.

When the great biography of Joseph Smith appears, wrote Daryl Chase several years ago, its author will be "a first-rate scholar in the field of Christian church history and a specialist in the heretical religious movements which have originated in New England," . . . "an authority in American history down to the Civil War, and know the important part the Christian churches played in that period." He will have access to all the manuscript materials pertinent to the subject, Chase added, and will be "a good sociologist, psychologist, and student of the Bible." Although she possesses several of these qualifications, Donna Hill is not this imaginary ideal biographer, and the "definitive" biography of Joseph Smith remains unwritten. It may of course always remain that elusive ideal that is never attained but is worth pursuing; but major strides are resulting from the analytical essays of Marvin Hill, the careful work of Dean Jessee with the Prophet's holograph writings, and the forthcoming volume by Richard Bushman, supported by a Guggenheim Foundation grant, that will carry the life of Joseph Smith to 1830. In any case, the publisher's blurb that *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* is "definitive" may be a bit premature.

This is an important book and a "fair" book. It also contains disappointments. To first consider some of its inadequacies, one can start with such a simple matter as the evidences of the publisher's haste, the typographical errors, the minor flaws. David Brion Davis is rechristened David Briton Davis. *Mormonism Unveiled*, Eber D. Howe's 1834 blast against incipient Mormonism, is fastened as a title onto the later works by Parley P. Pratt and John D. Lee, although both of them did manage to spell the second word properly. The *Western Humanities Review*, whose lack of receptivity to scholarly articles on Mormonism has been a disappointment to readers familiar with its flair under the editorship of William Mulder, is listed as one of the journals publishing on Joseph Smith and his followers "with almost bewildering frequency." Martha Cragun Cox, author of one of the most vivid Mormon journals, is identified as Cragun Cox, robbing a grand old lady of her femininity, while Andrew Jenson is identified as "a former Church Historian," a belated promotion he would have welcomed during his lifetime.

The bibliography and notes indicate a strong effort and are full of valuable references. It would be a mistake, however, to see this as a "complete" bibliography for the subject. On the controversy over the First Vision, James B. Allen's valuable article in the *Improvement Era* is unmentioned. Under dissertations and theses one looks in vain for Michael Quinn's "The Mormon Hierarchy, 1832-1932: An American Elite" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1976), which may have been completed too late for inclusion, but the same excuse can hardly justify omission of Quinn's "Organizational Development and Social Origins of the Mormon Hierarchy, 1832-1932: A Prosopographical Study" (Master's thesis, University of Utah, 1973). There are other surprising omissions. Readers will be well advised to consult the superior bibliography in James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Deseret Book, 1976).

But enough of such nit-picking. Although the style is uninspired, it is workmanlike. And clearly, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* is an important book, a fact best appreciated by considering how the author deals with certain strategic questions. This, after all, should be the test, for the main external facts are well enough known and can be quickly discovered by going over a chronology such as Hill herself has provided at the front of the book. On the First Vision she shows an awareness of the scholarly controversy and the different versions of the experience but concludes, after considering the visions of others at the time, that "he spoke the truth when he said that in his youth he had the religious experience which was as meaningful to him as he maintained." She examines the evidence of Smith's money-digging activities. One is left with the impression that there was far more to these reports (and those of divining rods) than the traditional versions usually allow. And she seems to accept the 1826 trial, although in fact the reader is left with unresolved contradictions. Yet she does not feel compelled to jump to conclusions about the validity of the basic religious claims, which she treats with due seriousness.

The troubles of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio and Missouri are given rather full treatment. The whole experience of the Kirtland Bank is treated frankly and the Prophet does not emerge "covered with glory." The persecutions in Missouri are explained with balance, showing that zealous Mormons provoked some of the opposition. Sidney Rigdon's Independence Day oration is quoted, omitting some of the most damning passages but with enough intact to make

plausible the anti-Mormonism of the Missourians. Yet somehow Hill's presentation of this work avoids the tone of the anti-Mormon accounts, for the faith of the Saints is evident throughout.

Of particular interest in any life of the Mormon prophet is the subject of plural marriage. Two chapters convey much of the complexity of this subject and the turmoil it caused within the Smith family and among the inner circle of Church leaders. It is not a treatment that will be consoling to members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, for the practice of plural marriage clearly originated with Joseph Smith. Nor will it be inspiring to those Utah Mormons who are not fond of dwelling on this aspect of their history. Yet Hill has done what any responsible biographer must do—examine the evidence and follow it where it leads her.

I do not wish to undervalue what this book offers: a basically favorable reexamination of Joseph Smith that is forthright in confronting the evidence. If it is not psychologically searching (the author disavows "psychological analysis"), it addresses most of the knotty problems. In general, she has done her homework. Readers should come away with confidence that nothing has been swept under the rug. For the most part they should also come away with an impression of Joseph Smith that is not hero-worship in any simple sense but one of respect and sympathy. "With my view of him as an inspired spiritual leader who had ordinary human failings, I think he would have been entirely in accord," she writes. "He himself saw the danger to his followers of holding illusions that he was sanctified, and he repeatedly insisted that he had a man's passions and weaknesses. He was entirely convinced of his mission on earth but thought that the Lord had chosen a weak thing through which to accomplish His work." (p. ix).

In a sense the Hill biography owes its importance to its placement on a spectrum. On the one side are the unfriendly accounts, including the skillful presentation of a slanted interpretation by Fawn Brodie. On the other side are the various appreciations or faith-promoting accounts. (Are there other biographical accounts—perhaps of Gandhi or St. Francis or Mohammed—which tend to slide off into either the one side or the other?) Now Ms. Hill has come along with a work which, though with some disappointments, offers something close to a satisfactory middle ground. It is a favorable interpretation by and large, but one that shows awareness of all the evidence. Those Mormon readers who prefer to close their eyes to

some of the unedifying scenes or the difficulties of interpreting conflicting testimony do not really want biography; they want hagiography, and there are other works that will provide it for them. Some general readers who want a lively story well told and who can swallow an unconvincing major premise (that Joseph Smith lied but convinced himself that he was telling the truth) may still prefer Brodie. For most readers, it would seem that Donna Hill has provided the treatment that can be recommended: middle-of-the-road, sympathetic, thoroughly researched.