



2017

William B. Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet

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Recommended Citation

Holzapfel, Richard Neitzel (2017) "William B. Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 56 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss2/12>

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Kyle R. Walker. *William B. Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet*.

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015.

Reviewed By Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

Kyle R. Walker is a faculty member at BYU–Idaho and is the editor of *United by Faith: The Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family* (2005) and the author of *The Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family: A Family Process Analysis of a Nineteenth-Century Household* (2002), part of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute and BYU Studies Dissertations in Latter-day Saint History series. Additionally, Walker is the author a *BYU Studies* article, “Katharine Smith Salisbury’s Recollections of Joseph’s Meetings with Moroni” (41, no. 3:4–17).

With Walker’s interest in the Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith family, it is not surprising that he has turned his attention to William B. Smith, one of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s younger brothers, in his latest book project.

Ironically, given his importance in the story of the Latter-day Saints, William is often no more than a footnote in most LDS history narratives and virtually forgotten among LDS lay members. If he is remembered, William is usually remembered for his struggle with Church leaders, including with the Prophet himself.

Walker seeks here to challenge the status quo, so he has provided a comprehensive biography of William, useful for historians but intended primarily for nonspecialists.

Walker argues that William deserves a nearly 640-page biography, not only because William was the Prophet’s younger brother, but also because he was one of his earliest supporters and a witness to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the founding of the Church of Christ (1830); an active and successful missionary (1832–45); a member of the original quorum of the Twelve Apostles (1835); a member of the “Quorum of the Anointed,” the small circle of endowed Church leaders

that met together regularly before the Nauvoo Temple was completed (1843); and the Church's presiding patriarch (1845).

Following the Prophet's death in 1844, tensions between William and his fellow Apostles led to his excommunication in 1845. For the next three decades, William supported a number of individuals who attempted to take control of the Church. Eventually, in 1878, William accepted his nephew, Joseph Smith III, as the legal successor to his older brother. Sadly, William died in a small, obscure farm hamlet in north-eastern Iowa in 1893 without realizing his ambitions of leadership and influence in a movement begun by his older brother.

Walker is a careful researcher, and his command of the primary and secondary literature is impressive. The footnotes highlight his research skills and efforts. The bibliography (595–628) will provide anyone interested in studying early Mormonism (1820–45) and the turbulent years following Joseph Smith's death (1844–65) a place to begin.

Unfortunately, the publisher created an inadequate index (629–39). Indexes are an important part of a finished publication, and this one is more often than not insufficient to help researchers find specific details or even to provide a reasonable idea of what is to be found in the biography itself.

One of the appendixes, "Wives and Children of William B. Smith" (565–81) is particularly helpful in providing a more complete view of William's life as readers consider his wives and children. Thankfully, this appendix is footnoted—full of important information and references to pertinent sources.

In another appendix, "'The Elders' Pocket Companion' By William Smith," Walker reconstructs a booklet that once belonged to William (583–93). William's original "pocket companion" has not survived, but much of it was preserved in a book published in 1889. Similar pocket companions were kept by other members of the Twelve, including Willard Richards. These pocket companions are important sources that often contain Joseph Smith's teachings. In this case, William's pocket companion is an early source for plural marriage teachings—providing a clearer lens on William's understanding and defense of plural marriage in the 1840s and 1850s.

In writing the biography, Walker seeks to "probe the depths of [William's] complex personality" (xii) while avoiding the "pitfalls in attempting to 'diagnose the dead'" (xii). Additionally, Walker wants to "sort out the complexities of his enigmatic personality. Despite the abrupt discontinuities, reversals, disappearances, and spectacular public comeback, this biography bridges those gaps in the life of William B. Smith" (xii).

Unlike a traditional biographer, Walker also sets out to provide a perspective on William and the Smith family informed by his own work as a mental health specialist. Reading the preface is essential to understand Walker's purpose and contributions in this regard (see especially xiii). Walker notes, "Due to my clinical training, I began to pick up on something that previous historians had missed as they attempted to capture [William's] personality—his emotional instability as a critical factor in understanding his personality and behavior" (xiii).

Whereas some reviews have questioned the value of chapter 1, "Uncle Jesse" (1–20), which establishes a connection between William and his father's unyielding brother, Walker believes this chapter is critical in helping us to understand William. Mental health issues run in families, and even though Jesse and William never met, Walker argues, "the similarities between the two were rather remarkable, and the course of their lives would closely parallel one another" (20).

Walker's biography makes several other significant contributions:

First, the book helps answer more fully the question of why the Smith family remained in the Midwest instead of going to Utah under Brigham Young's leadership.

Second, the book demonstrates persuasively that William was the single most important person in laying the theological foundation for the Smith family claim to leadership in the movement begun by Joseph Smith. This theological idea of lineal descent became a major tenet of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (known today as the Community of Christ). Throughout Illinois, William articulated the Smith family claim to leadership within the Church, and his arguments kept this idea alive during the 1840s and 1850s. He most likely influenced Lucy Mack Smith's ideas on the subject as well.

Third, William's recollections of early Mormonism are a gold mine for historians. Even though caution must be taken when using reminiscence—memories recorded many years after an event are often shaped by the current issues and challenges in which they were recorded—William's recollections add significant details to the early Church narrative about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the persecutions suffered by the Smith family and the young church. He provides another source beyond Joseph Smith's and Lucy Mack Smith's reconstruction of these events.

Finally, the fact that William (1811–93) lived a long time—only his sister Katharine (1813–1900) lived longer—gave him an opportunity to produce a vast array of material, including written editorials and a large

number of letters, as well as being the subject of numerous interviews. These documents are sure to give readers new insights into the Mormon experience during its first four decades.

Walker's biography is an important addition to the growing literature on the rise of Mormonism in the nineteenth century and the Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith family. Walker opines, "William remains for me one of the most fascinating characters in nineteenth-century Mormon history" (xiii). This biography goes a long way in supporting that view.

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel received his PhD at the University of California at Irvine and is Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. His professional work includes studies on the New Testament as well as Christian and Latter-day Saint art depicting biblical stories, especially images of Christ.