1996

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ISSN  1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)


Reviewed by Louis Midgley

F. M. Brodie—“The Fasting Hermit and Very Saint of Ignorance”: A Biographer and Her Legend

Oh, I had always wanted to write fiction.

F. M. Brodie

In any case, I started out not to write a biography of Joseph Smith but to write a short article on the sources of the Book of Mormon.

F. M. Brodie

I am quietly tearing my hair over the Book of Mormon again. Those chapters are the ones I have worked over the most and [they] are still the least satisfactory.

F. M. Brodie


1 Fawn M. Brodie, “Fawn McKay Brodie: An Oral History Interview,” Dialogue 14/2 (1981): 104. Hereafter cited as “An Oral History Interview.” This is a truncated, modified, and partially garbled version of Shirley E. Stephenson’s transcription of an interview, which is entitled “Biography of Fawn McKay Brodie,” California State University, Fullerton, 30 November 1975. In a later interview Brodie’s story had shifted somewhat; she granted that she “had always wanted to write fiction,” but then she claimed that she had “discovered after writing numerous short stories that this was not [her] forte.” Then she indicated that her husband had urged her “find out the roots and sources of what Joseph Smith’s ideas were.” That endeavor led to her writing her biography of Joseph Smith.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
I was convinced before I ever began writing the book that Joseph Smith was not a true prophet.

F. M. Brodie

The historical magazines have not been too kind to me.

F. M. Brodie

Fawn McKay Brodie’s adroitly fashioned biography of Joseph Smith was released to the public on 22 November 1945—over fifty years ago. No Man Knows My History was republished as a paperback in 1995. This most recent appearance of Brodie’s book provides an occasion for a close look at the history of the controversy her work engendered. There are, I believe, important lessons to be learned from the debate, scholarly and otherwise, that has subsequently taken place over the soundness of her book. I will not examine in detail criticisms made by faithful Latter-day Saints, but will focus on the commentary about and subsequent debate over Brodie’s biography.

Launching the Legend

No Man Knows had, it seems, everything going for it: it was well written, it was the work of someone with roots in Mormonism (which always counts for much with the gentile audience), and it gave the appearance of having been written by one of genuine competence. It should be no surprise that it was met with instant and sustained praise from an array of literary gentlemen who reviewed it for newspapers and magazines. Alfred A. Knopf, the original publisher of No Man Knows, enthusiastically promoted it, even describing it as the “definitive” biography of Joseph Smith. Within months of its publication, the legend of

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3 Fawn M. Brodie to Dale L. Morgan, 26 April 1944, Dale L. Morgan Papers microfilm of the Bancroft holdings, manuscript roll 10, frame 62, Manuscript Division, University of Utah Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. Hereafter cited, by roll and frame, as Morgan Papers. I wish to thank Gary F. Novak for drawing my attention to this and other related items in the Morgan Papers.


5 Brodie to Morgan, 12 May 1946, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 117.

6 Hereafter No Man Knows.
Brodie as biographer had been set in place. This myth has subsequently been kept alive on the fringes of the Mormon academic community, where it remains a key element of the unfaith of cultural Mormons and both secular and sectarian anti-Mormons. It is also alive and well with a gentile audience who seem to be uninformed, uncritical, and anxious for a plausible naturalistic explanation of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms.

Brodie’s book was effectively marketed. When its respected national publisher sent prepublication copies to newspapers and news and literary magazines, it ensured that favorable reviews would begin appearing the day after its official release. By the end of 1945 at least eighteen reviews heaped praise on No Man Knows. These favorable reviews appeared in newspapers and magazines before the somewhat less enthusiastic comments of professional historians began appearing in academic journals. Latter-day Saints had virtually no way of reaching either the gentile or the academic audiences with their criticisms of Brodie’s book.

Early in January 1946, an interview with John Hutchens, a reporter for the New York Times, indicated that Brodie was annoyed that in the six weeks after its official release no newspaper in Salt Lake City had reviewed her book (however, no copies of No Man Knows were sent by its publisher to newspapers in Salt Lake City). At the same time she seemed pleased to report that No Man Knows had been described by RLDS President Israel Smith as “The Brodie Atrocity.”7 Brodie seems to have been anxious for similar reactions from leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Such criticism would have fueled controversy and thereby drawn additional lurid attention to her book, helping its sales among gentiles curious about Mormon things, and perhaps also among the Saints.

Brodie enjoyed the praise lavished on her even when it came from those who were clearly confused and uninformed. Those who lauded No Man Knows were eager to promote a nicely crafted

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book that seemingly put Joseph Smith in his place. But it took months for the Saints to fashion their own substantive assessments of her work. Why? The Saints actually had to read and ponder the contents of her book and they also had to consult at least some of her sources.

The host of celebratory reviews by gentile literati and cultural Mormons may have contributed to the commercial success of Brodie’s book. The first printing of *No Man Knows* consisted of 5,000 copies and was exhausted six weeks after publication. A second printing, containing corrections, as all subsequent printings did, was published in March 1945. The book has remained in print for over fifty years. The first edition sold over 1,200 copies a year, and was reprinted six times. It was eventually published in the United Kingdom. But a growing body of competent scholarship on the issues she raised, as well as forceful criticisms of her book, eventually obliged Brodie to issue a somewhat revised edition in 1971. The 1995 paperback version of *No Man Knows* reprints the 1971 revised edition without additional updating, and without mentioning the dated, problematic, or controversial claims it contains.

The quickly ensconced Brodie legend easily survived both the eventual appearance of a few reviews in academic journals that

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8 Brodie received a $1250 advance on her book, and earned an additional $100 on the sales from the first printing. Much to her annoyance, she had $350 deducted from her earnings to pay for changes in the galleys. See Brodie to Morgan, 7 February 1946, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 143.

9 By October 1967, 28,843 copies of *No Man Knows* had been sold. See Ashby Green, managing editor at Knopf, to F. M. Brodie, 17 October 1969, Papers of Fawn McKay Brodie, roll 360, box 6, folder 1, Manuscripts Division, University of Utah Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. Hereafter cited as Brodie Papers. In 1977, Brodie told Judy Hallet, in an interview for KUTV of Salt Lake City, that *No Man Knows* “sells a modest amount every year, about 1,000 copies... It never sold a great many copies in any single year. But it has had a steady sale from the beginning.” Brodie thought that “about a half of the sales are in Utah and the rest scattered,” with many being sold in southern California (rough transcript of Judy Hallet interview with F. M. Brodie, tape 2, page 3, Brodie Papers, box 1, folder 5). I suspect that many copies of *No Man Knows* are peddled by anti-Mormon zealots through their so-called “ministries,” especially in Utah and southern California.

turned out to be less than fully laudatory or even critical of her work. Demonstrations by Latter-day Saints that her book was flawed seem to have done little to dislodge the legend from the minds of cultural Mormons, or in the eyes of sectarian and secular anti-Mormon critics of the Church.12

But No Man Knows was not universally well received, and criticism of her book annoyed Brodie. After three critical reviews by historians appeared in scholarly journals, Brodie wrote a letter in which she complained that "the historical magazines," as she called them, "have not been too kind to me."13 Her chief consolation for the failure of historians to embrace her book was that her close friend, Dale L. Morgan, an articulate cultural


12 For example, through their Utah Lighthouse Ministry, Sandra and Jerald Tanner, those sectarian anti-Mormon shadows of reality, regularly sell No Man Knows as part of their efforts to discredit Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

13 Brodie to Morgan, 12 May 1946, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 117.
Mormon archivist and student of Western Americana, lavished praise on her work.\textsuperscript{14} Given Morgan’s carefully crafted reputation as the leading “expert” on Mormon history, his endorsement of Brodie’s book seems to have been crucial.

When a prepublication copy of \textit{No Man Knows} turned up at the \textit{Saturday Review of Literature}, Morgan was asked to review it.\textsuperscript{15} His was the second review to appear in print. With glowing and appreciative language, Morgan thus introduced Brodie’s biography of Joseph Smith to the gentile world. Yet he hinted that someone else would eventually do a better job of accounting for Joseph Smith in naturalistic terms, which was exactly what he intended but failed to do.\textsuperscript{16}

From 1943, when Brodie first met Morgan, until about 1951, when her interests turned in other directions, their relationship can best be described as symbiotic. An indication of Brodie’s dependence upon Morgan can be seen in her acknowledgments to \textit{No Man Knows}. There she indicated that she had been particularly fortunate in having the friendly assistance of Mr. Dale L. Morgan, whose indefatigable scholarship in Mormon history has been an added spur to my own. He not only shared freely with me his superb library and manuscript files, but also went through the manuscript with painstaking care. He has been an exacting historian and a penetrating critic. (p. xiii.)

Morgan helped Brodie fashion \textit{No Man Knows}.\textsuperscript{17} His influential review launched the Brodie legend.\textsuperscript{18} On 10 December 1945

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{14}] See Dale L. Morgan, “A Prophet and His Legend,” \textit{Saturday Review of Literature}, 24 November 1945, 7–8.
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] This happened on 22 October 1945, one month before its official release.
\item[\textsuperscript{16}] Morgan had managed to persuade those on the fringes of the Church that he would eventually write the definitive history of Mormonism. On Morgan’s long and ultimately aborted effort to produce what he claimed would be that history, see Gary F. Novak, “‘The Most Convenient Form of Error’: Dale Morgan on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon,” \textit{FARMS Review of Books} 8/1 (1996): 133–37.
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Ibid., 124–26.
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] The pages of the \textit{Saturday Review of Literature} containing Morgan’s review in the Harold B. Lee Library (HBLL) at Brigham Young University are
\end{itemize}
Brodie wrote the following to Morgan: "I sent away for a dozen copies of the [Saturday Review of Literature] (which should tell you how proud I am of the review), and they arrived yesterday."\(^{19}\)

Brodie was elated and thrilled by Morgan’s glowing review of her book, even though she probably suspected that there might be a policy against having those she had thanked in the acknowledgments actually review her book. Morgan claimed that her book was splendid—both sympathetic and, of course, objective—even though she pictured Joseph Smith as a conscious fraud who later came to believe what she insisted were his constant lies and fabrications. Morgan was confident that Brodie had struck a powerful blow at the crucial historical sources, and consequently at the faith, of Latter-day Saints.

**Living and Loving the Legend**

Brodie does not seem to have given serious attention to criticisms of *No Man Knows*, whether they were published or provided to her in correspondence. Instead, she brushed all criticisms aside as the work either of apologists bent on resisting her artfully crafted naturalistic account of the Mormon past or of mere pedants bent on finding mistakes in her work. She steadfastly avoided engaging in a conversation with her Latter-day Saint critics either in public or in private.\(^{20}\) The gentile literati and

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\(^{19}\) Brodie to Morgan, 10 December 1945, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 125.

\(^{20}\) Brodie was well aware of Hugh Nibley’s various criticisms of her work. In 1978 she wrote the following concerning him: "This man surely had a touch of genius, and a great linguistic talent. What a pity that he was emotionally trapped by his allegiance to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon." She then added: "What a pity that we never sat down and talked to each other." F. M. Brodie to Everett Cooley, 23 August 1978, Brodie Papers, box 4, folder 6B. Nothing prevented her from dropping in on Nibley on one of her frequent visits to Provo and to the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. From
cultural Mormons who fawned over her book saw no reason to question her naturalistic explanation of Joseph Smith's truth claims and were unable to identify the glaring mistakes that marred her book.

The serious reviews of Brodie's book, including those written by Latter-day Saints as well as those in academic journals, began appearing months after its publication and hence after at least twenty-five salutary reviews had already been published in newspapers and popular magazines.

But Brodie was clearly aware of Latter-day Saint criticisms. Some criticisms of her book seem to have come to her in correspondence. For example, on 12 May 1946, in a letter to Dale Morgan, she indicated that one of the "younger generation" had written to her complaining about her treatment of the Book of

what I can find in her papers, she preferred conversations with those friendly to her views and avoided confrontations with those who might have disagreed with her.


22 Even the knowledgeable Morgan, for example, did not notice Brodie's silly mistake of having the Lehi colony leave Jerusalem in "600 A.D." in either of his readings of her manuscript or when he examined the prepublication copy sent to him by the Saturday Review of Literature. The other referees for No Man Knows, Milo Quaife, Wilford Poulson, and Dean Brimhall (her uncle), as well as the editors at Knopf, also failed to notice this and numerous other obvious mistakes, some but not all of which were corrected in later printings and in the revised edition. Poulson was sent a copy of her manuscript by the publisher by 26 October 1944. Knopf was also trying to get Bernard DeVoto to read Brodie's manuscript. Brodie to Morgan, 26 October 1944, Morgan Papers, frame 89, roll 10. On 28 September 1944, Brodie indicated to Morgan that Dean Brimhall (her favorite uncle and well-known Mormon dissident) and Wilford Poulson (former BYU psychology professor and chronic critic of the Church) had agreed to read her manuscript. Brodie indicated that Poulson did not want his name to appear in the acknowledgments for her book. Brodie to Morgan, 12 May 1946.
BRODIE, NO MAN KNOWS MY HISTORY (MIDGLEY) 155

Mormon. Brodie was outraged by what I take to have been a letter from G. Homer Durham:23

Anyone who says that the Book of Mormon has “proved impregnable to attack” is either shamefully ignorant of the whole field of American Indian anthropology and archaeology and ethnology, or else has blockaded himself behind a lot of emotional barriers that no amount of documentation will ever break down.24

Still, Brodie granted that “Durham is no fool, nor is Widtsoe.”25

But many other criticisms began to be published. Perhaps the most famous was Hugh Niblley’s review essay entitled No Ma’am, That’s Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie’s Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose.26

Brodie was clearly eager to collect comments on her work, but she pouted when she discovered that most of the historians who reviewed No Man Knows were somewhat less than enthusiastic about her scholarship and were not lavish in their praise of her book, since they identified her background assumptions and biases, noticed significant mistakes, and so forth. Fawn Brodie explained to Morgan that her husband, prominent political scientist Bernard Brodie, comforted her by pointing to the favorable reviews and discounting criticism as the work of mere pedants.27

Publicly Brodie simply ignored criticisms from the Latter-day Saint community. In the face of criticisms from professional

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23 Brodie to Morgan, 12 May 1946, Morgan Papers, frame 150, roll 10, p. 1. Elder Durham was then a young political scientist who taught first at the University of Utah, and who eventually became president of Arizona State University. Later he was Commissioner of Education in Utah, and finally a member of the Seventy and LDS Church Historian. No letter fitting the description Brodie provided is in the Brodie Papers. She may have destroyed the letter from Durham.
25 Ibid., 2.
26 The pamphlet was originally published in 1946 and reissued in 1959; it is now available in Niblley, Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass, 1–45.
27 Brodie to Morgan, 12 May 1946, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 150. Brodie refers in her letter to Morgan to the review of her book in Time, 28 January 1946, which was glowing.
historians, she seems to have been somewhat consoled by what had already appeared in newspapers and literary magazines and especially by what her friends had written about her book. For example, she liked what Bernard DeVoto had written. From DeVoto’s perspective, only one who begins with a dogmatic rejection of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims could possibly tell his story.\(^{28}\) Brodie was therefore qualified, DeVoto claimed, to write what turns out to be, in his estimation at least, “the best book about the Mormons so far published.”\(^{29}\) On 22 December 1945, Morgan wrote to Brodie indicating that he was “glad that DeVoto wrote so warmly of your book. Indeed, I rejoice with you and for you for every success your book has.”\(^{30}\)

But unlike Brodie, who relished DeVoto’s praise of her obvious literary gifts, Morgan was highly irritated by some of the language in DeVoto’s review. A somewhat hostile and quite interesting exchange of letters ensued between DeVoto and Morgan, and also with Brodie, over whether Joseph Smith was a conscious liar (that is, a religious impostor and charlatan)—the Morgan and Brodie stance—or a sincere person whose delusions could be explained only by picturing him as some sort of psychopath, which was the explanation advanced by DeVoto.\(^{31}\) Whatever the

\(^{28}\) DeVoto, “The Case of the Prophet.”

\(^{29}\) Ibid. DeVoto also described No Man Knows as “a brilliant and largely satisfying book.” He thought that she had “turned up a staggering amount of new material and much of it is conclusive; she has settled many questions and solved many mysteries for good.” DeVoto granted that “in the end everything else hinges on [Joseph Smith’s] visions, his revelations and his writings. Mrs. Brodie forthrightly rejects the explanation which all the Mormons have always accepted that they came from God, and explains them in purely mundane terms.”


\(^{31}\) Items below marked with an asterisk are available in Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism, 25–29, 84–119; see *Dale L. Morgan to Bernard DeVoto, 20 December 1945; *Morgan to Brodie, 22 December 1945; DeVoto to Brodie, 28 December 1945, Brodie to DeVoto, 29 December 1945; DeVoto to Brodie, 28 December 1945; DeVoto to Morgan, 2 January 1946; *Morgan to Brodie,
differences between DeVoto, Morgan, and Brodie on the question of what might constitute the most satisfactory naturalistic explanation of Joseph Smith and the most adequate assessment of the Book of Mormon, they situated themselves on the nonbelieving side of what Morgan liked to call the Great Divide, separating the accounts of nonbelievers from those of believers.32

However, at least by May 1946, Brodie focused on the positive language in DeVoto’s review and overlooked the differences between the stance she and Morgan shared on Joseph Smith, which pictured him as a sane person involved in conscious fraud, and DeVoto’s opinion that Joseph was a psychopath—what Morgan labeled “the paranoid thesis”33 in which the Book of Mormon had to be read as gibberish.34

The anonymous reviewer in *Time*, in whose praise Brodie indicates that she took some satisfaction, was rather typical of those who reviewed *No Man Knows* in newspapers and magazines. Other than Morgan, DeVoto, and Vardis Fisher, those who praised Brodie’s book had a hard time stating her position with any degree of precision.35 The reviewer for *Time* indicated that Brodie

7 January 1946; Morgan to Brodie, 28 January 1946. This correspondence can be found in box 6 of the Brodie Papers.

32 That is, at least from Morgan’s perspective, an essentially atheistic perspective. See Gary F. Novak, “Naturalistic Assumptions and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 24–30. Novak likes to quote the following from Dale Morgan: “With my point of view on God, I am incapable of accepting the claims of Joseph Smith and the Mormons, be they however so convincing. If God does not exist, how can Joseph Smith’s story have any possible validity? I will look everywhere for explanations except to the ONE explanation that is the position of the church.” Novak, ibid., 25, quoting Morgan to Juanita Brooks, from *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 87.

33 Morgan thought that Brodie’s book was “essentially a refutation of the paranoid thesis.” See *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 92. However, in the supplement to the revised edition of her book, Brodie moved closer to DeVoto and somewhat away from Morgan by appropriating elements of a psychiatric explanation of Joseph Smith (see pp. 415–21; cf. xi).

34 See *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 93, for Morgan’s complaints about DeVoto’s highly negative evaluation of the Book of Mormon.

35 On 22 December 1945, Dale Morgan referred to “the three main reviews” of *No Man Knows*, in which class he included the reviews by Bernard DeVoto, Vardis Fisher, and the one he had written. There is no reason to believe that Morgan and Brodie later modified their estimation of who was best qualified to review *No Man Knows*. 
had dealt with Joseph Smith with "skill and scholarship and admirable detachment." Furthermore, Brodie had seen in Joseph Smith's claims to divine revelation "an unanswerable instrument of power" over his presumably mindless followers. "Was he," this reviewer asks, "a shameless fraud or true prophet?" Thus, according to *Time*, Brodie had shown that he was "something of both." *Time* also felt that Brodie had shown that Joseph also "was an out-&-out impostor"—but "impostor Smith came close to being a prophet." Came close? Was that really Brodie's position? How could that have been the case, given her assumptions? Well, he "gradually hypnotized himself as well as others. He saw himself now as the true Moses." Hypnotized himself? Really? The *Time* review clearly garbled Brodie's explanation, as one might expect in a popular news magazine. But, as I will demonstrate, most of the favorable reviews of *No Man Knows* garble the explanation of Joseph Smith contained in that book. Other than the gratification from the flattering language about her literary gifts, most reviews of *No Man Knows* must have been an embarrassment to Brodie.

It hardly seems necessary to point out the rather typical confusion of details found in news magazines in what was clearly intended to be a highly favorable review. But the reviewer is not entirely at fault. Brodie is nothing if not difficult to adequately paraphrase. Her literary style, which reviewers regularly praise, allows subtle hints and innuendo to carry much of her plot and argument. In her effort to appear to be a somewhat sympathetic insider who is merely anxious to have the non-Mormon audience understand how it really was with Joseph Smith, she prepares her readers to accept just about any surmise they may wish to make, as long as they come to the conclusion that Mormonism is grounded on untruth. This, coupled with what might be called the fine literary quality of the book, may help explain the continuing popularity of *No Man Knows* among various secular critics of the restored gospel, but also among sectarian critics who do not seem to sense or who simply do not care that the assumptions at work in her explanation of Joseph Smith and Book of Mormon are at least

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as inimical to their own brand of religiosity as they are to the faith of Latter-day Saints. 37

Brodie seems not to have been interested in confronting and even less in learning from the critics of *No Man Knows.* Morgan thought that Brodie’s critics were not sufficiently well informed or were simply unable to face the facts as he understood them. Brodie tended to view her critics as something less than appropriately appreciative of the work that went into the production of *No Man Knows*, of her literary gifts, and of her liberation from the stultifying atmosphere of parochial Mormon culture.

**The Jefferson Debacle**

Until 1974, when Brodie published her psychobiography of Thomas Jefferson, 38 her work as a biographer had not been exposed to careful analysis by competent gentile historians—that is, to the careful scrutiny of non-Mormon scholars who actually knew and cared something about the targets of her speculations. 39 To that point in her career she had enjoyed at least a modest if not large reputation as a biographer. After all, her *No Man Knows* was widely and enthusiastically praised by literary individuals and cited and imitated by cultural Mormon critics of the Restoration. Thus, according to the Brodie legend, with her naturalistic explanation of Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims she had taken the measure of Joseph Smith.

Brodie’s *Thomas Jefferson* was a huge commercial success. Marketing through the Book-of-the-Month Club made it an instant bestseller. She describes her work on Jefferson as “an

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37 Brodie had an interesting exchange with Monsignor Jerome Stoffel, a zealous anti-Mormon working in Utah. She had to explain to Stoffel that she disapproved of Roman Catholicism as much if not more than Mormonism and had no interest in getting Latter-day Saints to switch to some other brand of Christianity. See Brodie Papers, box 9, folder 3, for this correspondence.


intimate history” or what might now be called a psychobiography of Jefferson. Much like the reception given *No Man Knows*, Brodie’s account of Jefferson was immediately applauded by those who knew little or nothing about the man or his times, but who loved her efforts to “humanize” him with her extensive speculations about his relationships with his parents, and especially about his supposed sexual activities after the death of his wife. Once again, much like the treatment given her *No Man Knows* by gentile and Latter-day Saint historians, the experts on Jefferson and his times tended to be critical of her treatment of Jefferson, but only after the usual lag before these more detailed and much less favorable reviews appeared in print. Hence her *Thomas Jefferson*, much like *No Man Knows*, was eventually controversial, and for similar reasons.

Some Latter-day Saints—and I was certainly one of them—saw something of a belated vindication of criticisms Brodie got from Latter-day Saints in the pounding she took from competent historians over her biography of Jefferson. So much for the efforts of cultural Mormons to brush aside Nibley’s criticisms of Brodie as flippant and sarcastic.

But in 1974 Brodie’s work was vigorously and thoroughly probed and criticized by numerous professional historians both in academic journals and in the popular press. Once again, much as she did in 1946, she brushed aside these complaints. This time criticisms were rejected as merely an effort by what Brodie derisively labeled “the Jefferson Establishment” to protect his image, just as she had discounted the criticisms of Latter-day Saints for somewhat similar reasons.

“Humanizing” Jefferson

Brodie denied that she was “thin skinned” and insisted that she was “really tough skinned about criticism. I’ve taken a little

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40 See Midgley, “The Brodie Connection,” 59–67. In 1979, I had located thirty-one reviews of Brodie’s biography of Jefferson. These seemed at the time to constitute a sufficiently large sample from which I could begin to generalize about the reception Brodie’s *Thomas Jefferson* had received.
bit with the Jefferson book."41 A little bit? She claimed that the reviewers have mostly loved her “humanized,” warm, and passionate Jefferson. Brodie believed that she had

humanized Jefferson and reviewers have been very kind to say this, I humanized Jefferson in a way no other biographer had. He had emerged in the other biographies as a cold, austere man. I found him to be neither cold nor austere. But a very warm man. And there had been major secrets in his life, which he had helped to hide and which his biographers also helped to hide.42

Those supposed secrets involved, among other things, fathering illegitimate children with a young quadroon slave girl who accompanied him and his daughter to Paris. Thus she devotes five chapters and an appendix to the old tale about Jefferson’s supposed “affair” with Sally Hemings.

How did Brodie’s immensely popular psychobiography fare with the critics? What have competent reviewers said about her effort to humanize Jefferson, as she puts it, by looking “for feeling as well as fact, for nuance and metaphor as well as idea and action”?43 I have selected just a small sample of the criticisms about the Jefferson book in order to provide some indication of how it survived close scrutiny.

1. “Confident of her ability to divine truth,” one historian noted,

Brodie brashly rushes into areas where others have prudently proceeded with caution and restraint. Employing a wide range of the most amateurish psychological cliches, this excessively Freudian analysis portrays Jefferson as a caricature beset with all the emotional hangups known to man.44

41 Judy Hallet interview with F. M. Brodie, tape 1, page 6, box 1, folder 5, Brodie Papers.
42 Ibid., tape 2, page 2.
43 Brodie’s “Foreword,” Thomas Jefferson, 16.
44 Larry R. Gerlach, Utah Bicentennial Post 1/4 (May–June 1974): 5. Gerlach was trained at Rutgers, receiving his degree in 1968, and taught history at the University of Utah at the time he wrote his review.
There is, this reviewer continues, "simply insufficient evidence to warrant her audacious analysis. So strained is the argumentation that Brodie often contends that the lack of evidence is evidence itself."\(^{45}\)

2. Cushing Strout described Brodie as the "mistress of the iffy sentence" because some of her crucial speculation "can be neither refuted nor proved."\(^{46}\) "Too often . . . her method collapses into farfetched, arbitrary reading between the lines."\(^{47}\) And finally Strout concludes that "Brodie’s treatment of the miscegenation issue will only confirm the skeptic’s complaint that psychohistory is nothing but a form of suppositional history."\(^{48}\)

3. T. Harry Williams, author of a 1969 Pulitzer-Prize-winning book on Huey Long, noted that Brodie gave only "scanty attention" to "some significant aspects of Jefferson’s public life,"\(^{49}\) because she focused her attention instead on Sally Hemings. Why? Brodie, according to Williams,

is looking always for the hidden meaning in Jefferson's writings. Indeed, she seems to regard these records as a kind of cryptogram in which he sought consciously or unconsciously to conceal the secrets of his inner life. However, there are clues to the secrets, if one knows, as Mrs. Brodie does, how to decipher the code. One finds these clues in certain words or phrases that Jefferson used, "curious" words to Mrs. Brodie, that betray his innermost thoughts.\(^{50}\)

Williams then notes that

the content analysis goes on page after page as Mrs. Brodie finds example after example of Jefferson’s use of “curious” words, eventually becoming tedious and often ridiculous. She frequently mistakes the meaning

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 267.
\(^{48}\) Ibid.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 526.
of a word, giving it a present instead of an eighteenth-century usage, and she discovers sexual references in nearly everything Jefferson wrote.\textsuperscript{51}

Where, one might wonder, did Brodie discover her method of reading texts? Williams explains that "the techniques Mrs. Brodie is talking about," that presumably lay open Jefferson's "inner life," "are the tools of psychology and psychoanalysis put to historical service."\textsuperscript{52} But, Williams notes, "for some reason she does not give these tools their 'psycho' label, nor does she admit that she is writing what has come to be called psychobiography, but this is the genre into which her book may be most conveniently fitted."\textsuperscript{53}

But psychobiography, and its close cousin, psychohistory, after a brief period in which they were fashionable, have fallen on hard times. Though such methods were in vogue for a time, "professional historians have demonstrated a characteristic caution in adopting" psychobiography or psychohistory, the results of which "have as a whole been disappointing. . . . One of the problems of users of psychological techniques is that often they have to work from very scanty or indirect evidence to wring a generalization from thin sources."\textsuperscript{54} Brodie was faced with exactly this problem in dealing with Jefferson—she was wont "to speculate at length," according to Williams.\textsuperscript{55}

4. Garry Wills, also writing about Brodie's psychobiographical treatment of Jefferson, indicated that "two vast things, each wondrous in itself, combine to make this book a prodigy—the author's industry and her ignorance. One can only be so intricately wrong by deep study and long effort, enough to make Ms. Brodie the fasting hermit and very saint of ignorance."\textsuperscript{56} Wills added that the "result has an eerie perfection, as if all the world's

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 527.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 524.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 525.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Wills, "Uncle Thomas's Cabin," 26.
greatest builders had agreed to rear, with infinite skill, the world’s ugliest building.”

So it turns out that Hugh Nibley’s No Ma’am, That’s Not History is rather mild when compared with the reproaches directed against Brodie’s account of Jefferson by a host of competent historians.

Playing a Numbers Game

Nibley has drawn attention to the review by Garry Wills of Brodie’s Thomas Jefferson, as well as a review by David Donald titled “By Sex Obsessed.” Nibley compared the content of these reviews to some of his own earlier criticisms of No Man Knows. His remarks, written in 1974 and published in 1991, are comparable to Jerry Knudson’s more extensive, though still incomplete, review of reviews of Brodie’s book on Jefferson. Knudson came to conclusions roughly similar to those I had reached in 1979. Unfortunately, I was unaware of his study when I published my own. Knudson was able to examine a somewhat different sample of reviews of Brodie’s book than I had assembled.

57 Ibid. Wills and Brodie faced each other in a debate held at a “Town Meeting” at the Kennedy Center. For one view of what happened at this debate, see Mary McGrory, “Jefferson Lament: Author Writes Again,” Washington Star, 29 August 1975. Other materials, indicating the hostility she felt for Wills, can be found in the Brodie Papers, box 69, folder 10. Brodie appears to have been a good hater. See, for example, her indication in 1975, almost 30 years after Hugh Nibley first criticized No Man Knows, that she had long ago given up being angry at him for what he had written. Brodie to T. R. Tenney, 16 December 1975, the Brodie Papers, box 9, folder 6. But why was she angry? Academics should expect and even appreciate criticism. What is the point of being angry about a conversation flowing from the publication of one’s opinions? What happened to the open and honest pursuit of truth?

58 See Hugh W. Nibley, “A Note on F. M. Brodie,” in Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass, 49–52. In this essay, drafted in 1974, Nibley cited Garry Wills from the New York Review of Books and David H. Donald, “By Sex Obsessed,” Commentary 58/1 (July 1974): 96–98. Wills is a controversial, widely published Northwestern University student of the period of the American Founding, including Jefferson, while Donald was Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard University.

He also concluded that professional historians tended to be critical of Brodie's scholarship, while literary types tended to approve of her *Thomas Jefferson*. According to Knudson,

This new biography of Jefferson—although Brodie does not call it that—first coasted along on praise in about half of the reviews appearing in newspapers and magazines. Then it received condemnation in a number of scholarly journals. Thus, it offers a good opportunity to see what standards are used today in the popular press in reviewing new history books.  

Knudson expressed concern that historical works, when they are reviewed in the popular press, tend to be turned over to those who are neither qualified nor motivated to hold them to appropriate standards. "How did Brodie's book fare," Knudson asked, with the reviews in the spring and summer of 1974 when it first came out? In a sample of 22 reviews (11 newspapers and 11 magazines other than scholarly journals) it was found that only five historians were assigned to review the book. Did they tend to accept Brodie's evidence on the paternity matter? One did, four did not. Of other reviewers, nine did, eight did not. Why the difference?  

Apparently, historians are more often inclined than reviewers to insist on cautious generalizations, solid arguments, careful weighing of sources and so forth. The nonhistorian reviewers tended to accept whatever Brodie had set forth, especially since it dealt with the alleged sexual activity of Jefferson after his wife died, and therefore had "humanized" him.  

**Oh Really, Nineteen to One?**  

Brodie was furious with Knudson. She could "think of no more absurd way to test the validity of historical evidence than by playing this kind of numbers game . . ., but," she added, if "Mr.

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60 Ibid. 56.  
61 Ibid.
Knudson wants to play it he should at least have asked for access to [her] publisher’s clipping file. Of the several score reviews that have come my way I can assure Mr. Knudson that the favorable outnumber the unfavorable by about 19 to 1.”62 Brodie was thus anxious to rebut Knudson by playing what she called “this kind of numbers game.” She claimed that Knudson was not only wrong about the reception given her book in general, but also about how it was received by historians.

Brodie is right in arguing that it is a mistake to assess what she calls “historical evidence” by playing a numbers game. However, Knudson addressed a different issue—he wanted to see if there was a correlation between the quality of the review and the professional qualifications of those who review historical books for the popular press. After examining the reviews of Brodie’s biography of Jefferson, he was able to locate a disparity between what historians and ordinary literary types are likely to say about such books. Hence, it is not clear that Knudson thought that he was assessing evidence, except indirectly, by counting favorable and unfavorable reviews of her book. Instead, he thought that the opinion of competent historians should count for more in assessing the quality of the scholarship that goes into the writings of historians than what one can rightly assume is merely the less well-informed opining by those clearly not competent in historical or methodological matters.

Knudson does not seem to have had access to the file of reviews assembled for W. W. Norton, Brodie’s publisher, nor in 1979 did I. But that file is now available in her papers at the Manuscript Division, University of Utah Marriott Library. It turns out that her claim that favorable reviews of her Thomas Jefferson

62 F. M. Brodie, “Professor Brodie Replies.” Journalism History 3/2 (1976): 59. Brodie seems to have told one interviewer that her Thomas Jefferson had been “pelted with reviewers’ bouquets along with at least one sizable brickbat” by Garry Wills, which, to say the least, “has unleashed a tempest of debate.” Eckman also reported that “most critics have buffed their superlatives for Mrs. Brodie but some hint her theories are at best fragile.” Wills, according to Eckman, “not only denigrated her scholarship but charged Mrs. Brodie with elevating a bedroom arrangement into a grand passion.” See Fern M. Eckman, “Fawn M. Brodie: Jefferson’s Secret,” Women in the News, New York Post. 27 April 1974.
“outnumber the unfavorable by about 19 to 1” is simply preposterous.

Even if we count as favorable the brief, unsigned item that appeared in *Parade Magazine*, a Sunday supplement, as 106 separate favorable reviews, and we add ten favorable reviews for each one that got syndicated in newspapers around the nation, we would triple the number of favorable reviews, but Brodie would still fall many hundreds short of coming up with a ratio of 19 to 1 favorable over unfavorable reviews.

Quite ironically Brodie overlooked several favorable reviews of her Jefferson book that she might have cited. She could, for example, have quoted from James T. Flexner, since he is well known as the biographer of George Washington and wrote a favorable review of her book. Or she could have substituted a reference to Max Lerner’s favorable review of her book in place of those advertising blurbs written by her friends. But the most egregious lacuna in her response was her failure to mention the names of those critical of her book. One senses selection (and distortion) going on in her response to Knudson.

Furthermore, Brodie’s claim about the 19 to 1 favorable reception given to her *Thomas Jefferson* by both reviewers in general and professional historians provides me with a wonderfully instructive opportunity to assess the way in which she deals with textual evidence.

I have now located 154 reviews of Brodie’s biography of Jefferson, which I have graded as favorable, mixed, or critical. If the mixed reviews, which are at least somewhat critical, are included with those that are flatly critical, 80 are in one degree or another unfavorable, while 74 are essentially favorable. It turns out that the bulk of the unfavorable reviews were written by historians, and the favorable reviews, which tended to appear in newspapers and news magazines, were written by literary types. The bulk of the unfavorable reviews were published in academic journals. It is also noteworthy that most of the favorable reviews appeared in print in the month after the official release of *Thomas

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63 I have not included in my count some few reviews for which there is neither a publisher nor a date of publication indicated. These few items are typically very short—one brief paragraph—and unsigned. A chronological listing of these reviews is available by writing to me c/o FARMS.
Jefferson, while the unfavorable and most critical reviews were published later.64

One of Brodie's claims was that historians generally liked her Thomas Jefferson. It is true that some historians were favorable and a few were enthusiastic in their support of her book. But most were in some degree critical, and many of those were devastating in their criticisms. Brodie had a response: "Since [Knudson] has chosen to single out quotations from the more hostile among those [reviews] he has seen and to avoid quoting the best from the non-hostile, let me by way of defense quote from some professional—and distinguished—historians."65 She then quoted from one book review by a professional historian writing in a newspaper,66 and a review by her former student, James Banner, then an associate professor of history at Princeton.67 In addition, she padded her list of historians who praised her book by quoting advertising blurbs solicited at her request by her publisher from close family friends—Alexander and Juliette George—who are not historians, and Page Smith and Ray Billington, who are.68 Brodie neglected to point out that these people had not written book reviews. Instead, they had merely provided Brodie's publisher with promotional hype for her book on preprinted cards sent with advance copies of her book.69

64 In the month after its official release, that is, before 10 May 1974, 53 reviews of Thomas Jefferson were favorable, 27 were mixed and only 9 were critical. After May 10th only 21 reviews were favorable, while 11 were mixed and 44 were critical.
65 Brodie, "Professor Brodie Replies," 59.
67 James M. Banner Jr., "Jefferson Renewed," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 28 May 1974; cf. this review with that of his wife, Lois W. Banner, in the American Historical Review 80/5 (December 1975): 1390, a highly critical review.
68 Alexander George is a student of international politics.
Mrs. Brodie has written a splendid book. Conversant with depth psychology, superbly competent as a historian, she sifts through the data of Jefferson's life with marvellous sensitivity. The result is an object lesson in what psychobiography can accomplish: Mrs. Brodie brings Jefferson to life in the reader's mind.

The book is absorbing reading. Mrs. Brodie relishes history and her enthusiasm is infectious.

We salute her achievement.

Title

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

May we quote you in our advertising? Yes

Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George

STANFORD UNIV.
I found Fawn Brodie's Jefferson thoroughly fascinating, opening vistas into Jefferson's life and thought that were fresh and exciting. A superbly written book, sparkling with new information and interpretations, and rich in its intimate understanding of a man who blended a large measure of virtues with a few very human foibles. Jefferson emerges with his halo still intact, but tilted a bit at a rakish angle. I found him even more understandable and even more likeable as a result.

The remote, withdrawn, even forbidding figure of Thomas Jefferson now exists in a human and recognizable dimension, thanks to Mrs. Brodie's finely shaded portrait of him. Her new book is a remarkable achievement in deduction as well as in biographical interpretation and narrative. I'm grateful to you for sending me a copy.

Justin Kaplan
Readers should be able to judge for themselves the efficacy of Brodie's citing, without explanation, some advertising blurbs provided by her friends for W. W. Norton, her publisher.

**Manipulation and Selection, or “The Pieces . . . Take on a Life of their Own”**

When Brodie was questioned about how her biographies of Joseph Smith and Thomas Jefferson were fashioned, she had a fanciful explanation. She explained in 1977 that “you do the research first. You amass all the data. And it manages—some of it just manages to float into place by itself, almost by itself.” She explained that “you build up a mosaic as a biographer, from multitudes of small pieces that you find in as many places as you can. You don’t invent anything; you just assemble the pieces together and sometimes, as I say, they take on a life of their own.”

But the idea of pieces floating together all by themselves, without the historian (or biographer) having much of anything to contribute to the process, is extraordinarily naive. Brodie knew that she was spouting nonsense. The historian, not the texts, provides the plot. These are mined by the historian to flesh out the explanation being advanced. Brodie knew this to be true, for in 1970 she wrote the following comment on what historians must necessarily do when they try to write about the past:

> The writing of history is clearly an act of manipulation. It has to be, for the past is too vast, too full of an unimaginable number of details to be dealt with except by simplification. . . . Even the most dispassionate historian, trying to select fairly, with intelligence and discretion, manipulates in spite of himself, by nuances, by repudiation, by omission, by unconscious affection or hostility. The good historian leaves a well blazoned trail

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70 Judy Hallet’s interview of F. M. Brodie, tape 1, page 5, box 1, folder 6, Brodie Papers.
71 Ibid., tape 1, pages 4–5.
72 Ibid., tape 1, page 5.
of footnotes so that anyone can go back to his sources. 73

However, Brodie, in her response to Knudson, does not leave a trail of footnotes indicating that she had, for example, drawn upon advertising blurbs written by close personal friends. In her essay entitled “Can We Manipulate the Past?” she provided no footnotes whatsoever, and she was certainly manipulating the textual materials in an effort to defend herself against what she considered unfair criticism. Brodie seems to have wanted desperately to make it appear as though historians liked her Thomas Jefferson—that was the way she told her story. But she complained that “Mr. Knudson picks and chooses among the evidence as he picks and chooses among the reviews.” 74 Clearly she also did some selecting and hence was manipulating by intentionally omitting evidence that historians had been critical of her work. 75

Well, so Brodie manipulated in this case. So what? Had she not admitted that “all historians manipulate by virtue of the selection of the material. ‘Manipulation’ is,” she granted, “a nasty word. The good historian tries not to manipulate deliberately but to let the material shape itself.” 76 Now we are back with her mythology about the pieces just somehow floating into place as they take on a life of their own. She once indicated that she had found,

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73 F. M. Brodie, “Can We Manipulate the Past?” (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1970), 4. This is the published version of the First Annual “American West Lecture,” read at the Hotel Utah, Salt Lake City, 3 October 1970.
74 Brodie, “Professor Brodie Replies,” 60.
75 Since Brodie neglected to mention even the names of those distinguished experts on Jefferson and many other professional historians and other academics who published unfavorable reviews of her Thomas Jefferson, I will provide such a listing: Lois W. Banner, Max Billof, John B. Boles, Paul F. Boller Jr., Henry W. Bragdon, John M. Cooper Jr., Virginius Dabney, Jutes Davids, David H. Donald, Michael Fellman, Alvin S. Felzenberg, F. J. Gallagher, Larry R. Gerlach, Holman Hamilton, Steven H. Hockman, Reginald Horsman, Winthrop D. Jordan, Michael Kammen, Mary-Jo Kline, Jerry Knudson, Jon Kukla, Dumas Malone, Bruce Mazlish, Max M. Mintz, Richard Morris, Frederick I. Olson, John Pancake, Robert Rutland, Robert Spiller, Cushing Strout, Thad W. Tate, G. E. Watson, John Watterson, T. Harry Williams, Garry Wills, and Benjamin F. Wright.
especially with the Joseph Smith book, something fascinating. I was working with non-Mormon, anti-Mormon, and Mormon material and I would get three different versions of the same episode—always two, sometimes three—and when I put them together a picture emerged that I believe had nothing to do with me, nothing to do with my selection. I was just putting all the versions together and then, as I say, it was a little like building a mosaic: you don’t create the materials, the materials are there. But somehow they fell into place, partly like a jigsaw and partly like a mosaic. It was not totally mosaic, it was a combination. It was not totally jigsaw either, but a picture emerged so often as I wrote these chapters that I thought this must be the way it happened.77

This is just nonsense. Brodie started out intending “to do a small piece on the sources of the Book of Mormon.”78 But what she considered sources for that book were entirely nineteenth-century and hence her intention was from the beginning to show that the Book of Mormon is what she calls “frontier fiction” (p. 67) and therefore fraudulent. She would allow nothing to get in the way of her bias. Why? She was convinced before she “ever began writing the book that Joseph Smith was not a true prophet.”79

“The Mistress of the Iffy Sentence”80

Brodie began with the assumption that Joseph Smith fashioned the Book of Mormon out of his immediate environment; he was attempting to fashion a history of the so-called Moundbuilders (pp. 34–36, cf. 19). “The mystery of the Moundbuilders attracted no one more than Joseph Smith,” according to Brodie (p. 35).

77 Ibid., 107.
78 Judy Hallet’s interview with F. M. Brodie, tape 1, page 4, box 1, folder 6, Brodie Papers. Cf. “An Oral History Interview,” 104, where she indicated that she started out “to write a short article on the sources of the Book of Mormon.”
80 Cushing Strout, in the Pacific Historical Review, 266.
[Hence] some time between 1820 and 1827 it occurred to the youth that he might try to write a history of the Moundbuilders, a book that would answer the questions of every farmer with a mound in his pasture. [Joseph Smith] would not be content with the cheap trickery of the conjurer [Luman] Walters, with his fake record of Indian treasure, although he might perhaps pretend to have found an ancient document or metal engraving in his digging expeditions. Somewhere he had heard that a history of the Indians had been found in Canada at the base of a hollow tree. (p. 35)

She also claimed that Joseph started his career as a money-digger and only later got the idea of claiming to have found some gold plates; the idea of an ancient prophetic history written on those plates was a latter invention, since he initially started out to write an essentially secular history of the ancient aboriginal peoples in the immediate vicinity of Palmyra (pp. 19, 36–37).

It was at that point, according to Brodie, that young Joseph Smith hit upon the idea that he could use this history of the Moundbuilders to found a “church” by turning it into a religious text and himself into a “prophet.” All of this is supported by an array of suppositions cast in the form of “it may have struck him” (p. 37) or “it might have been” (p. 36), or “perhaps Joseph speculated” (p. 36). It was only later, she surmised, that Joseph Smith more or less came to believe the story that he told and the book that he had written.

After Brodie had created her interpretation of the sources for the Book of Mormon, she faced what she describes as “the much more difficult problem [of] trying to understand the man who put it all together in this extraordinary fashion and wrote a book that convinced so many people for many years that it was truly a revelation or at any rate was divinely inspired.”81 She found that she “had to write a whole book to resolve the questions” in her mind about Joseph Smith. Having done that, she “was able to describe it, summarize it pretty much in the introduction.”82 Brodie complained that “some people say I wrote the introduction first

82 Ibid.
and then tried to prove what I said. No, the introduction is always the last thing . . . you write.”83 Well, of course it is. But the background assumptions, the speculations, the categories, and the theories that are at work throughout her study fuel the explanations set forth in her books. These are then made more or less explicit in the introduction.

When the kind of unconscionable speculation that Latter-day Saint critics found in *No Man Knows* turned up in Brodie’s intimate treatment of Jefferson, knowledgeable historians objected. For example, Garry Wills protested against what he called “Ms. Brodie’s hint and run method,”84 by which he meant her proclivity “to ask a rhetorical question, and then proceed on the assumption that it has been settled in her favor, making the first surmise a basis for second and third ones, in a towering rickety structure of unsupported conjecture.”85 Another historian charged her with building her account on a flimsy “web of circumstance.”86 This same historian noticed that she was deeply enmeshed in what one called “the shifting sands of speculation,”87 while others complained of her “heroic feats of misunderstanding,”88 or of her penchant for “applying intuition to scholarship.”89 But when she offered her account of Joseph Smith, most of these weaknesses were overlooked by gentle critics.

**Tidying up Some Embarrassing “Historical Slips”**89

In her “Supplement” to the 1971 edition of *No Man Knows* Brodie moved away from the stance that both she and Dale Morgan had adopted in the early 40s concerning early events in the life of Joseph Smith. For example, she initially claimed that it

83 Ibid.
87 Wills, “Uncle Thomas’s Cabin,” 28.
was no sooner than 1838 that Joseph Smith embellished his own story of being called as a "prophet" with a tale of an initial youthful encounter with deity. On that matter both Brodie and Morgan turned out to be wrong. But unlike Morgan, who never had to face the consequences of their mistaken conjecture, Brodie had to adjust her explanation to fit solid textual evidence that flatly refuted her earlier assertions about the First Vision.

When Brodie published her book and for years afterwards, she insisted that Joseph Smith started his career as a conscious fraud, a trickster—a village scryer—who only later inadvertently drifted into religious imposture when he fashioned a "Golden Bible"—the Book of Mormon—as a kind of substitute for the treasures he had previously sought as part of a band of Palmyra "money-diggers." By 1971, without having abandoned much of her initial explanation, Brodie turned to other explanations of Joseph Smith drawn more or less from the literature on abnormal psychology. However, in 1945, following the lead of Dale Morgan, she flatly eschewed psychological explanations that in any way blunted her (and his) theory that Joseph Smith was a conscious fraud and hence knew exactly what he was doing when he wrote the Book of Mormon.90

On 24 March 1945, seven months before its publication, Brodie described to Dale Morgan how she was finding all kinds of errors in the galleys for No Man Knows.91 But her work on those galleys seems to have been inept, for there were numerous

90 Brodie attacked the Spalding-Rigdon explanation of the Book of Mormon that had dominated anti-Mormon and gentile literature of Joseph Smith from 1834 to 1945. With only a few exceptions, most writers attempting a naturalistic explanation of the Book of Mormon during this period had turned to one or another version of the so-called Spalding Theory. In this explanation, crafted after the initial Smith Theory (that Joseph Smith had written the Book of Mormon) had proved untenable, it was argued that the Book of Mormon simply could not have been written by Joseph Smith. Someone other than Joseph, someone very familiar with the Bible and also with religious controversies and history, had to have done it. The one who supposedly wrote the Book of Mormon was Sidney Rigdon. But Rigdon also needed help, which he got from a lost manuscript for a romance written many years earlier by Solomon Spalding. That the historical portions of the Book of Mormon, including its cast of characters, were based on a novel written by Spalding became the received opinion among anti-Mormons beginning in 1834 until 1945.

91 Brodie to Morgan, 24 March 1945, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 106.
mistakes she did not correct, some of which were obvious. Hence, when Brodie finally published her revised “edition” of No Man Knows in 1971, in addition to a twenty-one page “Supplement” (pp. 405–25), she indicated that “this edition contains certain significant additions ... woven into the original [text] in a fashion that permits the pagination to remain unchanged. A few specific details shown to be inaccurate by new discoveries have been deleted” (p. xi). In the 1971 “Supplement” to No Man Knows, she also acknowledged that she had “tried in successive printings [of the first edition] to edit out small factual errors as they were pointed out. . . . Hopefully, this edition will see the elimination of almost all of them. Of course,” Brodie then added, she had “not changed everything declared to be an error by critics.” She considered “many of these criticisms subjective, interpretive, and often altogether inaccurate” (p. xii).² She thereby seems to have admitted that some of her earlier claims or explanations had to be abandoned or at least altered.

One change made by Brodie in 1971 deserves special attention. As I have indicated, Brodie modified her earlier assertion that Joseph Smith had invented, no earlier than 1838, what has eventually come to be known as the First Vision. Her original thesis was that Joseph Smith had evolved from being merely a village scribe into a “prophet” and hence later read back into his past, charismatic special revelations, including the First Vision. But in 1971, even though some of her more dramatic supporting claims had to be radically modified, Brodie did not entirely abandon her original controlling thesis. Her claim that Joseph Smith simply invented the First Vision in 1838 had to be altered because considerable evidence had been uncovered showing that Joseph Smith had both told others of his first theophany, and had even begun dictating to scribes very brief, fragmentary accounts of that initial encounter with deity beginning at least in 1832. Because this was not known in 1945, Brodie’s initial treatment of the First Vision had stunned Latter-day Saints.

By 1945 the Saints were in the habit of seeing what has come to be called the First Vision, rather than the later encounters with

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² Unfortunately, she neglected to identify these criticisms or otherwise argue the issues raised by her critics.
an angel and the subsequent coming forth of the Book of Mormon, as the central or key event of the Restoration. They more or less assumed that the earliest Saints shared all the details of their own understanding of the Restoration. Hence Brodie’s original claim that until Joseph Smith began dictating his history in 1838 the earliest Saints were entirely unaware of the First Vision came as something of a shock.

An indication of the bewilderment Brodie’s original claims generated among Latter-day Saints can be seen in remarks in a letter to her by Dale Morgan, her cultural Mormon friend, who among other things shared her explanation of the First Vision. In a letter to Brodie in 1949, Morgan indicated that he had permitted Francis Kirkham, a Latter-day Saint apologist, to inspect his collection of items from “the contemporary newspapers and religious press, and,” Morgan noted, Kirkham “was struck with the fact that the First Vision was on vacation or something.” Morgan boasted that he had challenged Kirkham to discover, if he could, “whether anything at all can be found in contemporary Mormon diaries to support the First Vision, etc.” He also indicated to Brodie that Elder John A. Widtsoe had written to him “asking for any pro and con references bearing on the question of whether the First Vision was invented in 1838. I replied,” he claimed, “that there was absolutely no evidence for it before 1840.”

There were, of course, texts containing descriptions of Joseph’s early theophany in the LDS archives, but these texts were then unknown to both the Saints and their critics.

The Recent Conversation over Brodie’s Scholarship

In 1978 Thomas G. Alexander claimed that in Mormon circles “perhaps no book in recent times has evinced more comment” than Brodie’s biography of Joseph Smith. If by

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93 See Morgan to Brodie, 8 September 1949, in Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism, 175.
94 Ibid.
“evinced” Alexander\textsuperscript{96} meant something like “generated” or “produced,” rather than to “make evident,” his assessment was then true. However, it is no longer true. The publication by Signature Books, beginning in 1990, of collections of revisionist essays on the Book of Mormon has engendered a literature that exceeds, in both volume and quality, critical scholarly commentary that was devoted to \textit{No Man Knows}. Four or five essays included in a collection edited by Dan Vogel entitled \textit{The Word of God},\textsuperscript{97} and Brent Metcalfe’s collection entitled \textit{New Approaches to the Book of Mormon},\textsuperscript{98} without ever mentioning \textit{No Man Knows}, follow Brodie’s lead by attempting to read the Book of Mormon as “frontier fiction” (p. 67),\textsuperscript{99} inspiring or otherwise. Signature Books seems to be eager to promote attempts to read the Book of Mormon as a fantasy fabricated by Joseph Smith “from and reflecting frontier events and thought,”\textsuperscript{100} or as his youthful psychodrama, and hence not as an authentic ancient history.

In 1975 Brodie reported that her biography of Joseph Smith was the product of her initial desire to write an essay setting forth

\textsuperscript{96} Alexander is an authority on some aspects of the American West.


\textsuperscript{100} Language used by Knopf in the description of \textit{No Man Knows} that appeared in the American Library Association’s \textit{The Booklist: A Guide to Current Books} 42/8 (1 January 1946): 147.
a secular, naturalistic explanation of the Book of Mormon. The recent spate of efforts by cultural Mormons to fashion similar secular, naturalistic accounts can be read as a recognition by contemporary critics of the Book of Mormon that she failed to achieve her primary goal. However, recent revisionist endeavors by Vogel and Metcalfe can also be seen as a continuation and modification of Brodie’s attempt to provide a plausible naturalistic account of the Book of Mormon in which Joseph Smith is pictured, among other things, as its author and hence as a fraud, pious or otherwise.

Though Brodie’s literary skill is obvious and has been widely acknowledged, even or especially by her many detractors, her background assumptions, mode of argument, coherence, and scholarship have often been challenged; her treatment of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon has also been shown to be thoroughly flawed. Criticisms of Brodie trouble some gentle critics of the Restored Gospel, though they may, as I will show, grant that these criticisms are warranted. For example, after describing Brodie as “still Joseph Smith’s great biographer despite Mormon anger at her work,” the redoubtable Harold Bloom—a contemporary literary-cum-religious critic—in 1992 quoted her conclusion that

Joseph had a ranging fancy, a revolutionary vigor, and a genius for improvisation, and what he could mold with these he made well. With them he created a book and a religion, but he could not create a truly spiritual content for that religion. He could canitalize aspirations

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formed elsewhere into a new structure and provide the ritualistic shell of new observances. But within the dogma of the church there is no new Sermon on the Mount, no new saga of redemption, nothing for which Joseph himself might stand. His martyrdom was a chance event, wholly incidental to the creed that he created. (p. 403)103

Bloom describes this essentially concluding passage from No Man Knows as an example of what he considers “religious criticism.” Despite or perhaps because of what Brodie claimed as the utter barrenness of Joseph Smith’s “spiritual legacy,” Bloom granted that her assessment is “inadequate.” Why? Because it is somehow unfair to set up the Sermon on the Mount as the standard by which one will judge the legacy of Joseph Smith? Not exactly. He also granted that she “summed up the prophet’s spiritual achievement a touch too harshly.”104 Picturing Joseph Smith as an intentional fraud is just a touch too harsh a judgment? Since Bloom asserts “that all religion is a kind of spilled poetry, bad and good,”105 the ground for “religious criticism” is for him the critical assessment of artistic achievement by one who is presumably competent to make such judgments. Presumably only someone like Bloom—one qualified to adequately assess poetic creativity—can determine when poetic imagination is really present in “religion” and who can thereby also determine in what ways it is being “spilled.”

Bloom suspects that it is therefore impossible for a faithful Latter-day Saint to function as genuine religious critic,

since to a Mormon the Pearl of Great Price is as canonical as the New Testament. But only a handful or two of Mormons, past or present, have been authentic religious critics of their own faith, and most of those

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
have been expelled by the church (like Mrs. Brodie) or departed on their own.\textsuperscript{106}

Bloom finds Brodie’s “religious criticism” inadequate in some crucial ways. Yet he still thinks that she was right about one thing, for she “saw the truth when she beheld the religion of her ancestors as having the same relation to Christianity that Christianity had to Judaism, or that Islam had to both the religion of the Book and the religion of the Son of Man.”\textsuperscript{107} This opinion takes us no further than has Jan Shipps, who grounded her notion that Mormonism was “a new religious tradition,” and hence neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic, on a rather breezy remark by Brodie.\textsuperscript{108}

To see what might be done with the thesis borrowed by Shipps from Brodie and then elaborated, as she points out, with different details, “since her sustained argument does not follow the lines of Fawn M. Brodie’s work,” one only has to note what Bloom did with what we may label the Shipps hypothesis. Bloom argues that in the “corporately structured LDS church . . . Jesus becomes pragmatically unnecessary in the work of salvation.”\textsuperscript{109} The Saints thereby deny the necessity of the atonement wrought by the Christ—Jesus of Nazareth.\textsuperscript{110}

Bloom thus describes Shipps as “the most sympathetic gentile scholar of Mormonism,”\textsuperscript{111} and then notes that “Mormonism, as Shipps clearly conveys, is no more a kind of Christianity than Islam is.”\textsuperscript{112} Thus, despite the tendency of some Latter-day Saints to find reassurance in some of the earlier accounts of Latter-day Saint beliefs offered from time to time by Shipps, some of her carefully worded and somewhat ambiguous formulations have not been entirely consonant with faith or have been easily misread

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{109} Bloom, The American Religion, 123.
\textsuperscript{110} Bloom grounded his opinion on an odd reading of Jan Shipps’s explanation of Mormon things as set forth in her Mormonism, 148–49.
\textsuperscript{111} Bloom, The American Religion, 122.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 123.
\end{flushleft}
even or especially by very bright gentile readers like Harold Bloom. The Saints, it must be emphasized, have always thought that they were involved in what amounts to a genuine restoration of ancient things—they are "new" only in the sense that they have not been around for a while in their fullness.

Put bluntly, if Mormonism is a genuinely new religious tradition, as the Shipps hypothesis seems to claim, the Saints simply do not have access to what they believe is an authentic restoration of the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is exactly the point that Brodie was eager to make by offering her secular, naturalistic explanation of the Book of Mormon.

The Morgan-Myth: Breathing Life Back into the Legend

If most of those so-called Mormons involved in what Harold Bloom portrays as "religious criticism" have been "expelled by the church . . . or departed on their own," what stance have these critics of the Restoration taken on No Man Knows? At least some of these critics have been fond of Brodie's book, since it has provided a convenient peg upon which to hang their unbelief. It should therefore not be surprising that those whom Bloom describes as "religious critics" have tended to be highly scornful of criticisms of Brodie and some of them have striven in one way or another to refurbish and perpetuate her scholarly reputation. But the number, variety, and competence of the criticisms of No Man Knows from within the Mormon intellectual community have made it troublesome for cultural Mormon critics of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon to make much open use of Brodie's book in their polemics. Critics of the Book of Mormon have therefore moved in two directions.

First, since the sources Joseph Smith employed in fashioning his "frontier fiction" are, according to Brodie, "absolutely American" (p. 67), cultural Mormon critics of the Book of Mormon have striven to uncover all its entirely nineteenth-century sources. Hence, one of their tactics has been to ignore Brodie's book, at least in public, while working on the assumption that she was correct in claiming that "painstaking research can uncover the sources of all its ideas" (p. 67).
Second, other apologists for Brodie have directly attempted to rescue her from the opprobrium into which she has fallen among knowledgeable Latter-day Saints. Instances of this tactic can be seen in recent efforts to defend Brodie’s scholarly reputation by lionizing Dale Morgan—the one who provided her with bibliographical and other technical assistance in fashioning her biography of Joseph Smith. Dale Morgan read and commented on the manuscript for *No Man Knows* at least twice. Her manuscript, as far as I have been able to determine, was also read by two others—Milo Quaife and M. Wilford Poulson. Quaife may have been a referee selected by Brodie’s publisher. Poulson seems to have been asked to read the manuscript version of *No Man Knows* by Brodie. Morgan’s correspondence reveals that he provided her with bibliographic assistance and warned her of the responses to her book that were likely to come from faithful Latter-day Saints. In addition, as I have shown, Morgan helped launch her book with a glowing review that appeared just two days after its official release in the winter of 1945.

The initial effort to vindicate Brodie by drawing attention to the assistance provided her by Morgan came with the publication by Signature Books of a brief selection of his extensive correspondence and also the unfinished drafts of the initial chapters of what he hoped would be a definitive three-volume history of Mormonism. He worked on this history for seventeen years,

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113 John P. Walker’s “Introduction” to *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism* provides a fine example.
114 Quaife was a literary figure who dabbled in Western Americana.
115 M. Wilford Poulson taught psychology at Brigham Young University for many years. He was famous for debunking the faith of his Latter-day Saint students. Much of his energy was devoted to collecting materials on the Mormon past. He did not, however, publish on Mormon history or on the prophetic truth claims of Joseph Smith, though he was a critic of both. Still, both Morgan and Brodie were suspicious that Poulson might still harbor some sentimental links to his Mormon past that might color his judgment.
117 See Morgan’s “A Prophet and His Legend.”
118 For the details, see Novak, “‘Most Convenient Form of Error,’” 126, 133–37.
but eventually abandoned his effort. ¹¹⁹ Both Morgan and Brodie have their devoted followers on the fringes of the Mormon academic community,¹²⁰ and even among a few gentiles interested in Latter-day Saints.

For example, Clare Dobay, a non-Mormon who wrote a dissertation in 1980 assessing recent historiographical controversies,¹²¹ argued in 1994 that back in the 1980s “the individual scholar’s predisposition toward religion” grounded what she sees as the current polarization over the Mormon past.¹²² “Authors with a more skeptical intellectual attitude toward religious experiences,” according to Dobay, “were more apt to agree with anti-Mormons in seeking naturalistic explanations of [Joseph] Smith’s career.”¹²³ The spate of revisionist essays recently published by Signature Books (along with some essays that have appeared in Dialogue and Sunstone) seems to support her contention.

Dobay traces the recent flowering of naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon (and Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms) back to the earlier opining of Brodie and Morgan. From Dobay’s perspective,

¹¹⁹ See Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism, 219–400, for the published version of Morgan’s seventeen-year effort to write the definitive history of Mormonism.
¹²¹ Clare V. Dobay, “Essays in Mormon Historiography” (Ph.D diss., University of Houston, 1980).
¹²² Clare V. Dobay, “Intellect and Faith: The Controversy over Revisionist Mormon History,” Dialogue 27/1 (1994): 104. I have not focused on Cragun, who is a much better example of one who essentially sees the world through the eyes of Brodie and Morgan. Unlike Dobay, Cragun’s opinions are accessible only in an unpublished dissertation, while Dobay’s have been published.
¹²³ Ibid.
Fawn Brodie and Dale Morgan provide the best examples of this category. Morgan’s portrait of [Joseph] Smith as a talented youth who stumbled into his religious role by accident, then evolved in it to the point of believing himself a prophet, was close to Brodie’s. The appearance of his unfinished work on early Mormonism in 1985, though a product of an earlier era, represented a significant contribution to [the study of] early Mormon history.124

Dobay thus has a rather sanguine view of the current work of Mormon historians, both gentile and Latter-day Saint.125 Similar to Robert B. Flanders, a former RLDS historian who in 1974 popularized the vague, amorphous, and unfortunate label “New Mormon History,”126 Dobay holds that

Of all the transitional works usually mentioned as bridges between the old Mormon history and the new, Brodie’s naturalistic study of Joseph Smith[,] by raising questions regarding the prophet’s credibility and the religious context of his work[,] touched the rawest nerve in Mormon historiography.127

Likewise, I must point out that criticisms of Brodie-like explanations of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon seem to touch a raw nerve in cultural Mormon as well as anti-Mormon historiography.

RLDS “Liberals” Embrace Brodie . . .

The initial RLDS reaction to the publication of No Man Knows can best be described as venomous.128 But since the sixties there has been a takeover of the Reorganization by a faction anxious to

124 Ibid.
125 Ibid., 104–5.
downplay the traditional links with what is now considered an embarrassing parochial past. These “liberals” are anxious to transform the Reorganization into something like a liberal Protestant “church” or even into a “peace movement.” It has been common for at least some of the more bold RLDS “liberals”—if that is the appropriate label—to celebrate Brodie’s book.

For example, Bill Russell, one of the more vociferous RLDS “liberals,” claimed in 1972 that “Mormon historians owe a great debt to Mrs. Brodie, one which it is time we acknowledged.” He granted that “even among the more scholarly Mormons, it has been popular to claim that while Mrs. Brodie uncovered much new information, her biases distorted her ability to put it all together.” However, Russell dismissed even this assessment. Instead, he claimed that Brodie was “very fair” and that her book “has stood the test of time and richly deserves to be republished.” Russell regretted that, “when No Man Knows My History burst upon the scene in 1945, it shocked Mormons (Utah and Reorganized alike) and brought harsh rebuttals, yet”—our fashionably “liberal” savant reported—“it was well received by scholarly reviewers.” Exactly who these “scholarly reviewers” were Russell does not say.

In 1986, Paul M. Edwards, currently head of the RLDS Temple School—their ministerial training operation—claimed that

131 Ibid. I am unaware of Mormon historians claiming that Brodie uncovered new information, though Bernard DeVoto thought that she did. See his “The Case of the Prophet.”
132 Ibid. Brodie avoided, according to Russell, “accepting uncritically anti-Mormon propaganda which so many other accounts of Joseph Smith and Mormonism have done. She often evokes a real sympathy for Smith, producing admiration for the man.” But on this matter Russell is wrong. The fact is that Brodie fashioned her portrait of Joseph Smith almost exclusively from anti-Mormon accounts. She dismissed elements of anti-Mormon propaganda only when they could not be made to fit her explanation.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid., 517.
Brodie’s “biography of Joseph Smith was an open, honest, generally objective, yet strangely limited account.” ¹³⁵ Without identifying any specific limitations, Edwards then added that Brodie’s “position has often been misunderstood and her motives seriously questioned,” though he also did not indicate how, why, or by whom she has been misunderstood or her motives questioned, since they seem obvious. “But she raised,” according to Edwards, “the significant question of Mormonism as a new religious experience in the Western religious world.” ¹³⁶ Since Edwards was writing in 1986, he was merely repeating (and garbling) the theme developed by Jan Shipps out of an assertion by Brodie in No Man Knows.¹³⁷

Exactly how did Brodie understand Mormonism as a “new religious experience”? Her naturalistic perspective rested on a dogmatic atheism and hence entailed the rejection of all prophetic truth claims. She argued that Joseph Smith consciously fabricated the Book of Mormon and therefore was from the beginning involved in intentional fraud. It is therefore difficult to see exactly how Brodie raised a significant question about what Edwards calls “Mormonism as a new religious experience,” other than to attempt to explain away that experience in naturalistic terms—that is, as the product of a conscious deception by Joseph Smith with which he duped and manipulated the Saints.

In 1974, Flanders treated the publication of No Man Knows “as a landmark,” since “a new era dawned with her book. All subsequent serious studies of early Mormonism have necessarily had Brodie as a reference point.” ¹³⁸

. . . While Latter-day Saints Challenge Her Scholarship

Flanders was right: No Man Knows was a landmark in explanations of Mormon truth claims. If nothing else it seems to have awakened Latter-day Saints to the necessity of defending the

¹³⁶ Ibid.
¹³⁷ See Shipps, Mormonism, 169 n. 2, where she quotes Brodie (p. viii).
foundations of their faith from cunningly crafted naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic charisms.

“Having been presented to the world as a work of literature,” Hugh Nibley noted in 1955, “Mrs. Brodie’s biography of Joseph Smith enjoyed with its reviewers the license of creative writing (which it was) and an indulgence that would never have been accorded it had those reviewers been historians and not literary men.” Nibley was also confident that “gentlemanly reviews are wont to give well-documented books the benefit of the doubt, especially when to question them might lead to some controversy or, worse still, force the reviewer to do a little work.”

Nibley also claimed that those who initially applauded Brodie’s book “were not in a position, even if they had the inclination, to put Mrs. Brodie’s impressive documentation to the test; it is doubtful,” he claimed,

if any of them has ever read a line or even seen a copy of the Documentary History of the Church; yet anyone who will take the pains to compare Brodie’s footnote citations from that source with the Documentary History itself will quickly discover that our author has been extremely free not only in misinterpreting but in deliberately misquoting her sources.

Was the initial praise heaped on No Man Knows from gentlemanly reviewers—“literary men”—who were not inclined or qualified to check on her sources or question her assumptions? Was Brodie praised by essentially uninformed literati—and not by those Bill Russell describes as “scholarly reviewers,” that is, by historians?

Newell G. Bringhurst, who is currently finishing a biography of Brodie, has sketched what he describes as the “applause,

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139 Nibley, “Introduction,” to F. M. Brodie’s Reliability as a Witness.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
142 Bringhurst has already published, as a prelude to his biography, several important studies of F. M. Brodie, including the following: “Fawn Brodie and Her Quest for Independence,” Dialogue 22/2 (1989): 79–95; “Applause, Attack, and Ambivalence—Varied Responses to Fawn M. Brodie’s No Man Knows My History,” Utah Historical Quarterly 57/1 (1989): 46–63; “Fawn M. Brodie—Her
attack, ambivalence” found in responses to No Man Knows. Bringhamurst’s alliteration contains the proper labels to describe the responses to Brodie’s work. Being appropriately sympathetic with the object of his inquiries—as befits a biographer of a controversial figure—Bringhamurst does not, however, raise the mischievous questions suggested by Nibley’s description of the responses of the “literary men” who initially reviewed No Man Knows.

Signs of Early Scholarly Ambivalence about Brodie . . .

Nibley exaggerated a bit when he claimed that the reviews of No Man Knows had come exclusively from “literary gentlemen.” In addition to Nibley, six other historians reviewed the first edition of Brodie’s book. Five of these six reviews were written by gentiles and one by an LDS historian. These tended to be at least somewhat ambivalent if not thoroughly critical of Brodie’s book, and they were published after numerous favorable reviews by literati had already appeared in print, which is exactly the pattern I have documented with Brodie’s Thomas Jefferson.

I will examine each of these reviews in detail:

1. Herbert O. Brayer, then the archivist for Colorado, writing in the Mississippi Valley Historical Review, claimed that “Mormon readers will . . . quarrel seriously with the author’s interpretations of both Mormon doctrine and the facts presented, and with Mrs.


143 See Bringhamurst, “Applause, Attack, and Ambivalence.” In this essay, Bringhamurst cites and quotes from twenty-three responses to Brodie’s book.

144 The six essays include two unsigned booknotes that appeared in academic journals and exclude the review by Dale Morgan, since he was heavily involved in the production of the book and was therefore not in any position to provide an independent evaluation of its merits and defects.
Brodie’s frequent use of certain notable anti-Mormon works.”

Quite unlike many—if not most—of the literati who lionized Brodie, Brayer correctly identified the thesis advanced in *No Man Knows*. Brodie’s “Joseph Smith” was, according to Brayer, a genius—a mythmaker—who created a fable, but certainly not a genuine prophet. Brayer thought that Brodie had presented “an impressive array of sources to bolster her contention.”

Brayer also thought that “Mormon readers will be hard put to find many errors of fact in this account.” He also granted that “at various places throughout the work simple errors mar the otherwise excellent scholarship.” What might constitute these errors found “throughout the work”? Brayer identified several embarrassing mistakes made by Brodie. For example, he pointed out that Brodie “falls into serious error by stating that painstaking research ‘can uncover all its ideas’—the Book of Mormon. If this were true, Mrs. Brodie would indeed owe her readers another volume in proof.”

When it was first published, *No Man Knows* was simply larded with mistakes large and small—some though not all of which were silently corrected in succeeding printings. Brayer calls attention to some of these egregious mistakes. He realized that, contrary to her claim, there was no sword in the stone box from which Joseph Smith got the plates and the interpreters. “And on page 43 the

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145 Herbert O. Brayer, in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 32/4 (March 1946): 601. Brodie was heavily dependent upon the notorious gossip located or fabricated by Philastus Hurlbut and then published in Eber D. Howe’s *Mormonism Unveiled, or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, From Its Rise to the Present Time: With Sketches of the Characters of Its Propagators, and a Full Detail of the Manner in Which the Famous Gold Bible Was Brought before the World, to Which Are Added, Inquiries into the Probability That the Historical Part of the Said Bible Was Written by One Solomon Spalding, More Than Twenty Years Ago, and by Him Intended to Have Been Published as a Romance* (Painesville, Ohio: printed and published by the author, 1834). (Spalding is variously spelled.)

146 Brayer, 601.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid., 601–2.
150 Ibid., 601.
date 600 A.D. should read 600 B.C."  

But Brayer identified only part of the problem in the passage with which he quarreled. While referring to the Book of Mormon, in at least the first two printings of No Man Knows the following howler appeared: "The first prophet, Nephi, was a young Hebrew who had left Jerusalem A.D. 600 and had sailed to America with his father, Lehi, and a few followers to avoid the destruction of the city."  

Brayer realized that Brodie was wrong in claiming that the Lehi colony left Jerusalem in A.D. 600, but he did not realize that Brodie had also neglected to notice that the founding prophet of the Lehi colony was Lehi and not Nephi.

Brodie wrote to Dale Morgan on 12 May 1946, over two months after Brayer’s review had appeared in print and admitted that

There’s really no excuse for . . . the error that the Nephites came to America in 600 A.D. instead of B.C. Golly, I know that date as well as my own birthday, and how I could have blundered so I can’t imagine. Incidentally the latter error was pointed out to me by no less a person than the Catholic Bishop of Salt Lake City—Hunt.  

Brayer recognized that No Man Knows “purports to be a ‘definitive biography,’” but he argued that “it is unfortunate that the publishers who awarded Mrs. Brodie one of their coveted Fellowships in Biography had to mislabel the work by terming it a ‘definitive biography.’” He also pointed out that

It is unfortunate that Mrs. Brodie attempted to dress up already excellent work by coloring episodes in such

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151 Ibid. This mistake appeared in at least the first two printings of No Man Knows before it was silently corrected.

152 Brodie, first few printings of the 1945 edition of No Man Knows, 43.

153 Brodie to Morgan, 12 May 1946, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 150, p. 1. The Catholic Bishop of Salt Lake to whom Brodie referred was the Most Reverend Duane G. Hunt, who served in that capacity from 6 August 1937 to 1951. I have been unable find anything in the Brodie Papers supporting Brodie’s claim concerning Hunt’s role in informing her of the mistake in No Man Knows.

154 Brayer, 601.

155 Ibid., 602.
a manner as to leave her open to criticism by objective readers. That this was probably due to an attempt of the publishers to popularize the book may be true, but it will be the cause of considerable adverse comment.156

Unlike other gentle reviewers, Brayer noticed at least some of the more obvious mistakes made by Brodie. But those who edited, published, and promoted No Man Knows seem to have been unaware of such problems. Perhaps because of the mistakes that mar Brodie’s book and also because of its dependence upon anti-Mormon sources, Brayer anticipated that it would “probably be one of the most highly praised as well as highly condemned historical works of 1945”157—exactly what was later said about Brodie’s book on Jefferson.

In 1974, Marvin S. Hill, commenting on Brayer’s anticipation of controversy over Brodie’s book, claimed that it “has indeed been highly praised and highly condemned, with plaudits coming generously from professionals in the field of American history.”158 But on that issue Hill is mostly wrong. As I will show, Nibley got it right—literary experts applauded Brodie’s book and not, as Hill has it, “professionals in the field of American history.” Hill, unlike Bill Russell, was able to cite one example of someone “in the field of American history” who had a high regard for No Man Knows. Thus, according to Hill, “evidence of the respect it still commands is provided by Sidney [Sydney] Ahlstrom of Yale University who recently termed it a ‘sympathetic and insightful account’ which is ‘unequaled as a life of the Mormon prophet.”159 Those who have grounded their assessments of Brodie’s book on materialist or naturalistic assumptions have often been unaware of or quite indifferent to its flaws.

156 Ibid.
157 Ibid., 601.
2. Ralph Gabriel, a Yale University historian known for his work on the history of American political thought,\textsuperscript{160} provided another scholarly review of \textit{No Man Knows}.\textsuperscript{161} “Mrs. Brodie approaches her study,” according to Gabriel, “with memories of a childhood spent in Utah and with certain understandings that spring from a Mormon background. Her book, however, has neither the adulation of a believer nor the venom of an apostate. She has striven to achieve objectivity and has produced a work that may be called appropriately secular history.”\textsuperscript{162}

Gabriel granted that Brodie’s “account is fresh, well organized, and well written.”\textsuperscript{163} He noted that, though she stresses “the influence of frontier evangelical Protestantism on the Mormon church in its formative days in Kirtland, Ohio,” she “does not try to appraise the influence of the American frontier itself in adding to the membership of the church.”\textsuperscript{164} But Gabriel also noted that Brodie “maintains persuasively that the chief influence in drawing converts into the church was not Smith but the Book of Mormon.”\textsuperscript{165} He insisted that Brodie’s book “is valuable chiefly as a compilation of information about Joseph Smith and about the history of the church up to the time of his death.”\textsuperscript{166} Gabriel believed that Brodie “makes no effort to explain how a man of Smith’s sense of humor could take himself so seriously as to announce himself to be the mouthpiece of deity.” He attributes this flaw to her having avoided “psychological or psychiatric analysis or speculation.”\textsuperscript{167} But Brodie’s fascination with motivation and her penchant for what even her favorable reviewers sometimes called “intuition” or “mind reading” later turned her into psychobiographer, if not psychohistorian, which turned out to be the very thing that made her famous or infamous.

\textsuperscript{160} Ralph Gabriel, \textit{The Course of American Democratic Thought} (New York: Ronald, 1940).
\textsuperscript{161} Ralph Gabriel, in \textit{American Historical Review} 51/4 (July 1946): 725–26.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 725.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 726.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
Finally, Gabriel claimed that Brodie provided “an excellent circumstantial account of the writing of the Book of Mormon.” How did Joseph Smith come to write what she denigrated as mere “frontier fiction”? Gabriel reported that “she narrates the story of a boy and young man who was an inveterate seeker of treasure and a believer in ‘peep stones’ whose imagination was stimulated by the aboriginal remains found in western New York.” But he also pointed out that “she has drawn a surface portrait of the prophet.” Gabriel was more laudatory of *No Man Knows* than was Brayer, but certainly not entirely enthusiastic about what he described as a “secular history.”

3. In 1946, a short unsigned booknote appeared in the *Missouri Historical Review* indicating that Brodie had investigated and rejected the Spalding theory of the authorship of the Book of Mormon—something no other early reviewer had noticed. This reviewer then correctly recognized that Brodie attributes a fecund imagination to Joseph Smith as her way of dismissing the Book of Mormon as mere “frontier fiction.” *No Man Knows* is seen as addressed to the gentile reader.

4. Blake McKelvey, then a prominent historian, reviewed *No Man Knows* in the *New England Quarterly*. He read Brodie’s book as a sensitive treatment of Joseph Smith. Brodie had included much talk of buried treasure, Indian antiquities, mysterious mounds, and lost tribes of Israel in her explanation of Joseph Smith’s sources for the Book of Mormon. She argued, according to McKelvey, that after Joseph Smith had fabricated the Book of Mormon from such materials, he somehow “convince[d] even himself of the divine source” of his ideas. McKelvey noticed that Brodie opined that Joseph Smith might have become a great novelist. There is no unity, humor, or understanding of man in the Book of Mormon, when it is read as “frontier fiction.” He also

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168 Ibid., 725. Gabriel quoted a long passage from *No Man Knows*, 67, which is crucial in understanding her thesis concerning the Book of Mormon.
169 Ibid.
170 Ibid., 726.
171 *Missouri Historical Review* 40/3 (April 1946): 450.
thought that historians would find *No Man Knows* "a model of scholarship."\(^{172}\)

5. *Christian Century* carried a brief unsigned booknote concerning *No Man Knows* in which it was noted that Brodie had written for the gentile reader—her book will make more sense to such people than previous explanations of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith. And Brodie’s book also appears to be unprejudiced and honest.\(^{173}\)

6. An additional highly critical review of *No Man Knows* was published by Milton R. Hunter, a Latter-day Saint historian, who argued that Brodie merely pretended not to select her sources, while being unscrupulously selective. Hunter granted that she produced a book that was very well written, at least from a literary viewpoint. He noted mistakes in Brodie’s book: for example, the false and still uncorrected claim that Joseph Smith found a sword in the stone box from which he retrieved the plates and interpreters.\(^{174}\) Hunter’s review was published despite opposition from Austin Fife, a folklorist and friend of Brodie, who wanted to review her book favorably.\(^{175}\)

**“The Historical Magazines Have Not Been Too Kind to Me”**\(^ {176}\)

Brodie was aware of the criticisms of *No Man Knows* that were written by professional historians. She wrote to Morgan that


\(^{173}\) *Christian Century* 63/23 (5 June 1946): 722.


\(^{175}\) The whole story is spelled out in Fife’s correspondence with Brodie, found in the Brodie Papers, box 9, folder 7. See especially Austin Fife to Brodie, 6 March 1946, where he indicates that he thought that *No Man Knows* was the “first objective and impartial work on Joseph Smith.” See also Austin Fife to F. M. Brodie, 20 March 1945 [467]; and also a copy of Fife’s review of *No Man Knows* (manuscript of a review written for but rejected by the *Pacific Historical Review*).

\(^{176}\) Brodie to Morgan, 12 May 1946, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 150.
The historical magazines have not been too kind to me. The Missouri Historical Review dismissed [No Man Knows] with a curt, very brief paragraph; the Mississippi Valley Hist. Review, while favorable in spots, managed to mention all of these annoying little errors I have been correcting in printings. And the reviewer made the astonishing statement that while the Church Archives in Salt Lake were closed during the war they are now open to "responsible scholars" with the permission of Church authorities. Milton Hunter, one of the seven presidents of the Seventies, has reviewed [No Man Knows] for the Pacific Hist. Review, and I have heard indirectly, what was to be expected, that it is highly critical. It isn't out yet. 177

Brodie was troubled by such criticism. How could reviewers be so mean to her? Why would they be troubled by errors and mistakes? Why would they not recognize the literary quality of her work? She indicated to Morgan that her husband, political scientist Bernard Brodie, comforted her when she encountered these criticisms by saying, "All of these guys are pedants!", and [he] reminds me what swell treatment I got from you and DeVoto, and Time magazine, etc. But it all makes me wonder why I should bother trying to make my second book good history. The historians are bound to find errors, and the public won't care a hang for it. 178

Panegyrics from the "Literary Gentlemen"

If reviews of Brodie's book by historians were somewhat guarded or even mildly critical, those reviews written by Nibley's "literary gentlemen" tended to be highly favorable. Of the dozens of such reviews, only four were written by individuals who had some familiarity with Latter-day Saints and their history. These were the reviews that drew attention from Brodie.

177 Ibid., frame 117.
178 Ibid., pp. 2-3.
1. The first of these was written by Dale L. Morgan, a cultural Mormon and also a thoroughgoing atheist, who had helped Brodie with her biography of Joseph Smith. Morgan’s review appeared in an influential literary magazine two days after No Man Knows was released by Knopf.179

Did Morgan think that No Man Knows was, as its publisher insisted, definitive? Almost, but not quite. Why? Because Morgan was at that time still presumably working on what he claimed would be the definitive history of Mormonism. After struggling for seventeen years on his projected three-volume work, he abandoned work on his magnum opus and turned to other less controversial issues in the early history of the American West.180

2. Vardis Fisher, known for a “Mormon” novel entitled The Children of God,181 noted that Brodie believed that research can uncover all the sources for the Book of Mormon. He also thought that her book was objective, but that she faltered because she knew exactly nothing of psychology or comparative religion. Furthermore, Brodie had built her case by quoting from apostates. Finally, Fisher thought that her book read like a novel. He also noted that she held that Joseph Smith was a deliberate impostor. Fisher noticed that Brodie essentially borrowed her explanation of Joseph Smith from materials published by E. D. Howe.182

Brodie was annoyed by Vardis Fisher’s comments on her book, though Morgan granted that it was one of the three reviews written by those he considered competent in Mormon matters, the

179 Morgan, “A Prophet and His Legend,” 7-8.
180 Including his Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West (1953; reprint, Lincoln: Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1964). Richard Saunders correctly describes this as “Morgan’s most famous work.” It was, he also notes, quickly written “after Farrar and Rinehart dropped the publication contract for his history of the Mormons and the Guggenheim Foundation failed to renew his fellowship for its writing. Despite the impetus behind its creation it is perhaps the best fur trade biography yet written.” Saunders, Eloquence from a Silent World, 11.
other two being Morgan himself and Bernard DeVoto. On 12 May 1946, she wrote to Morgan that “after reading Vardis Fisher’s review in the Sunday [New York] Times, I spent a bad day reflecting on the futility of writing books at all, and particularly spending seven years at it.” But at the same time she also told Morgan that she considered herself the “luckiest of all authors” because he had favorably reviewed her book: she told Morgan that “your review, simply bowled me over.”

3. Bernard DeVoto, a famous American literary figure who was born in Ogden and was curious about Latter-day Saints, thought that Brodie had written the “first honest and intelligent biography of Joseph Smith.” He also claimed that Brodie’s book was the first “dependable history of Mormonism,” though he had “to add that W. A. Linn sifted a good deal of her material forty-three years ago and came to conclusions that square with hers.” According to DeVoto, Brodie had produced “a brilliant and largely satisfying book.” She has “settled many questions and solved many mysteries for good.” She wrote with a “profound sympathy for the Mormon people,” and she wrote “objectively about their history.”

DeVoto also noted that “she also has written as a detached, modern intelligence, grounded in naturalism, rejecting the supernatural.” “In the end everything else hinges on his visions, his revelations and his writings. Mrs. Brodie forthrightly rejects the explanation which all Mormons have always accepted, that they came from God and explains them in purely mundane terms.” But DeVoto flatly rejected her explanation of Joseph Smith’s crucial prophetic truth claims. He complained that “she pretty consistently avoids the crucial issue.” Brodie tried to explain the Book of Mormon as Joseph Smith’s primitive effort to write a novel. “She endows it with an integrated, carefully wrought structure and subtle, eloquent and moving English style.” DeVoto saw it differently. “Actually the gold Bible had neither form nor

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183 Morgan to Brodie, 22 December 1945, in Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism, 102.
184 Brodie to Morgan, 27 November 1945, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 121.
185 Ibid.
structure of any kind, its imagination is worse than commonplace, it is squalid, and the prose is lethal. The book Smith wrote is not a novel to any literary critic. Moreover, this theory necessarily describes Smith as a lifelong impostor and charlatan, which is incredible.” DeVoto did not think that Joseph Smith was an intentional fraud. Instead, “he had hallucinations. Out of them he developed a prophet’s authority, a religion, a society, a Bible and a series of messages from Almighty God. Once the momentum of the Church was established, he necessarily had to fake visions in emergency. His paranoia was intermittent and in the beginning slight,” when he was dictating the Book of Mormon, “but it grew and finally it overwhelmed him.”

Concerning Bernard DeVoto’s review of *No Man Knows*, Brodie indicated to Morgan that she could not pretend to be anything but elated by it; I glow inside everytime I look at it. I was really very apprehensive of what he might say, and the fact that he chose to be so generous brought me extra pleasure. The only thing that he said that was really unfair was that I said the B. of M. [Book of Mormon] has a subtle, eloquent and moving English style. I think when I write him a note of thanks I shall chide him about that. Golly, I even quoted Mark Twain about it being “chloroform in print.”

Brodie then indicated that “DeVoto of course absurdly underestimates the Book of Mormon. I wonder,” she mused, “if he ever really read it through.” If DeVoto could be suspected of not having given sufficient attention to the Book of Mormon, what might one conclude concerning the attention given to that book by all those “literary gentlemen” without Mormon or Utah background who heaped praise on *No Man Knows*?

187 Ibid., 2.
188 Brodie to Morgan, 18 December 1945, Morgan Papers, frame 129, roll 10.
189 Ibid.
4. Harry Beardsley, the author of an earlier abortive biography of Joseph Smith,\textsuperscript{190} claimed that Brodie’s treatment of Joseph Smith “answers none of the many questions that have made Mormonism and Joseph Smith controversial subjects for more than a century.” He felt that Brodie had slanted “her own interpretation in favor of Smith.” Brodie plays down “factors that caused the gentiles justifiably to view the Mormon movement with alarm.” She “has striven to do an objective job,” but her Mormon “background could not permit her to be wholly objective—and whose background can?”\textsuperscript{191} Clearly Beardsley was annoyed that Brodie had managed to produce a book that was more attractive than his own sectarian diatribe against Joseph Smith. Brodie thought Beardsley’s charge that she was “pro-Mormon . . . really very amusing, in the light of the reception at home” that her book received.\textsuperscript{192}

Other Literati Respond to Brodie

1. One day before Dale Morgan’s highly influential review of \textit{No Man Knows My History} appeared in print, Elmo S. Watson\textsuperscript{193} claimed that “Joseph Smith was a product of the American frontier,” coming from a region that somehow “produced more new religions than any other place or any other time in New World history.”\textsuperscript{194} Watson reckoned that “the religion [Joseph Smith] founded was well adapted to the crude, vigorous frontier America.” But why did Joseph manage to succeed, when others failed? Watson thinks that this is the question Brodie answers. “Either Smith is depicted as a prophet . . . , or he is a charlatan, a

\textsuperscript{190} See Harry Beardsley, \textit{Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931).


\textsuperscript{192} Brodie to Morgan, 12 May 1946, Morgan Papers, roll 10, frame 150, p. 2.


lecherous rogue and a false prophet.” Watson claims that “somewhere between these two extremes stands the real Joseph Smith. Mrs. Brodie,” according to Watson, “seems to have captured him. In a volume that is a rare combination of sound scholarship and lively, readable narrative she gives us a believable picture of one of America’s most interesting characters.” Believable indeed!

2. On 24 November 1945, Frederic L. Bullard indicated that Brodie had shown that Joseph Smith was the most amazing of fakes. Bullard was impressed by her effort to link Indian mounds to the Book of Mormon. He thought that Brodie had shown that Joseph began digging for treasure and then claimed to have found some plates. He also claims that no one ever saw those plates, except three individuals in a vision (he fails to mention the Eight Witnesses). Bullard also thought that Brodie had shown that Joseph Smith had a talent for hypnosis.

3. On 24 November 1945, an unsigned review of No Man Knows appeared in the New Yorker. This anonymous reviewer saw Brodie as having shown that Joseph Smith was a psychic discoverer of buried treasure in upper New York. Of course, given that premise, what Joseph made available was “patently fake,” and it was employed to create a tyranny. Brodie, in telling her story, was, of course, objective. Unfortunately, for this reviewer, Brodie never explained what the Mormon religion is and how it works.

4. On 25 November 1945, Kelsey Guilfoil claimed that Brodie had pictured Joseph Smith as a “virtually illiterate” fellow who was interested in the great mounds near his home and hence ended up telling a strange story of “a part of the 10 lost tribes of Israel.” Brodie’s biography was described as “a scholarly and definitive study of Joseph Smith,” and fully sympathetic. Brodie “lets the facts speak for themselves.” Guilfoil also described Brodie as an apologist for Mormon things, since he did “not find

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195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
197 Bullard wrote a travel book entitled Historic Summer Haunts from Newport to Portland (Boston: Little, Brown, 1912).
199 Unsigned review in the New Yorker, 24 November 1945.
that she has ever quit Mormonism. Yet her portrait of Joseph Smith . . . is about as impartial as any Mormon or 'gentile' could write." Previously, "writers from Mark Twain down . . . have exhibited bias, or lacked scholarship, or were ax-grinders and special pleaders." But Brodie, according to Guilfoil, had managed to produce "a monumental and lasting piece of work."200

5. Also on 25 November 1945, Ernest Cady parroted Brodie's publisher's claim that No Man Knows is "the definitive biography of the Mormon prophet." Cady thought that Brodie had shown that Joseph Smith had "an 'imagination,'" and he also wrote that she rejected the notion that Joseph Smith was either "a victim of fits or of adolescent mysticism," whatever that might be.201

Quite contrary to Cady's reading of No Man Knows, it should be noted that Brodie describes young Joseph Smith as "a visionary boy caught by revival hysteria and channeled into a life of mysticism and exhortation" (p. 16), and she describes Mormonism as a kind of combination of "Jewish and Christian mysticism" (p. ix; cf. 172). Brodie also speculates that Joseph, perhaps to compensate "for his sense of inferiority . . . had endowed himself with mystic powers to which no one else could aspire" (p. 168). But she also insisted that since "embedded in Joseph's character was the commonplace Yankee mixture of piety and avarice," he was not "a true mystic." Why? Presumably because he was not "preoccupied with things of the spirit" and so forth (p. 263). After insisting that "Mormonism became not only a belief but also a way of life," Brodie also then opined that "it had never pretended to be a mystical sanctification or even a new ethical code" (p. 295). So Cady's confusion over whether Joseph was a mystic may have roots in what Brodie had written.

6. Ted Robinson, also on 25 November, described Brodie's book as "definitive." He praised her "narrative skill and . . . literary technique." He also, of course, praised her for "treat[ing] her subject with [an] objective and unbiased attitude of a

scholar.” She was, according to Robinson, “utterly without prejudice.”

7. An unidentified reviewer, whose evaluation also appeared on 25 November, claimed that Brodie, unlike most of the others who have written on Joseph Smith, was not biased “one way or the other.” Instead, she was anxious “to reconcile contradictory stories.” Then we are told of Joseph Smith’s “curious hunts for treasure,” the Book of Mormon, and his lynching.

8. On 26 November, Newsweek indicated that Brodie had worked on her book for nine years (1936 to 1945) and also described it as definitive. Brodie is said to have taken up one side of an either-or analysis of Joseph Smith. He was either a prophet or a Hitler. And on which side would Newsweek want its readers to place Joseph Smith? Be that as it may, Brodie simply cannot believe the story told by Joseph Smith. Why? Well, for one reason, “nobody ever saw his golden plates, at least not long enough to decipher their purported hieroglyphics.” Of course, Joseph was a dictator with an army—remember, he was a Hitler. He went against “almost every canon of nineteenth-century economics, religion, and morals.” He had the “boundless ambitions of modern dictators,” and hence “Smith went against most American traditions.” But he was also a genius who created a fable.

It may well be that the reviewer for Newsweek merely followed Brodie’s suggestion in her preface that, “if one were unscrupulously selective in choosing details, one could make [Joseph Smith] out to be... a political menace—a dictator complete with an army, propaganda ministry, and secret police who created an authoritarian domination on the American frontier” (p. viii). She also added that she believed that “it is easy to match his unscientific racial theories, his autocratic organization, and his boundless ambition with the theories, organization, and ambitions of modern dictators” (p. viii). In these two sentences, Brodie moved from supposition about what might be done “if one were unscrupulously selective,” to a claim about how “easy” it would be to turn

Joseph Smith into a dictator. Can anyone blame the harried *Newsweek* reviewer for taking up her confident suggestion about what it would be easy to do?

9. On 27 November, Lewis S. Gannett described Brodie’s book as having dealt with the Book of Mormon in the following way: it was, of course, written by Joseph Smith “as conscious artifice; but one of the most consistent qualities of mystics is a genius for self-conviction.” It is, according to Gannett, properly labeled by Brodie as mere “frontier fiction” because she uncovers its nineteenth-century sources. Gannett thought that Brodie had demonstrated “elements of conscious deception” in Joseph Smith’s career.205

10. Marguerite Young, on 8 December 1945, claimed that Brodie had shown that Joseph Smith founded a church “by a series of accidents.” It all began with treasure hunting and ended up with a tale of a “purely hypothetical Indian tribe of vanished Semitic mound-builders,” with Moroni being a “guardian spirit of the lost tribe.” She also reiterated that only Joseph Smith saw the plates. Joseph “devoted himself to translating the microscopic picture handwriting on the invisible golden plates.” Ms. Young even claimed that Joseph Smith’s “Semitic Indians” can be discounted because later research shows that they “never did exist.” This review is especially larded with confusion over the contents of Brodie’s book.206

11. “Joseph Smith, businessman, drinker, wrestler, politician and the author” of the Book of Mormon—all this according to the understanding of Brodie’s book offered on 9 December 1945 by W. J. G. Rogers. Brodie, he asserted, “lets us have the story raw and strong right in the face, as it were.” It all started with Joseph Smith’s “search for treasure with the aid of magic.” But what Americans “did to Mormons was what Hitler did to Jews.”207

205 Lewis S. Gannett, *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 November 1945. He was also the author of *John Steinbeck, Personal and Bibliographic Notes* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Haskell House, 1939).
12. On 22 December 1945, much like Beardsley, John M. Thurber argued that Brodie, because of her Mormon background, tended to be too cautious in her use of anti-Mormon sources.\footnote{John M. Thurber, “New Biography Seeks to Vindicate Mormon Prophet,” Buffalo Evening News, 22 December 1945.}

13. Henry S. Canby\footnote{Henry S. Canby was the author of The Age of Confidence: Life in the Nineties (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934); American Memoir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947); American Estimates (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1968, ©1929); The Brandywine (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941). This is an entry in the Rivers of America series to which Dale L. Morgan contributed his book on the Humbolt—a river in Nevada. Canby also produced Seven Years Harvest: Notes on Contemporary Literature (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1936); Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939); and a biography entitled Walt Whitman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943).} promoted Brodie’s book for the Book-of-the-Month Club by claiming that hers was the “first satisfactory explanation” of Joseph Smith. He also declared, of course, that Brodie “writes objectively.” Why? Because “no veils are drawn over Smith’s charlatanism, his sexuality, his duplicity.” Joseph Smith, however, “must be numbered among the great leaders of men in history.” And Canby mentioned “the gossip angle of this book.”\footnote{Henry S. Canby, Book of the Month Club News, December 1945, 7.}

14. On 9 January 1946, Orville Prescott,\footnote{See History as Literature, ed. and introduction by Orville Prescott (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).} while reviewing No Man Knows, claimed that Joseph Smith once walked upon the water. Well, he had heard that story and just had to repeat it. Prescott informed his readers that Brodie’s book was “called definitive by its publishers,” and, furthermore, because No Man Knows is “scrupulously objective . . . it is quite impossible to label it as a ‘pro’ or ‘anti.’” But devout Mormons, of course, will label it “anti.”

Prescott thought that Brodie invoked vivid memories of melodramatic fiction in her biography. Remember, she always wanted to write fiction, and Vardis Fisher thought that she ought to try her hand at it. Some, however, would see her book as too “pro,” according to Prescott. With Joseph Smith we are faced with an either-or decision. Either he was an “infamous impostor” or a ‘prophet.’” Brodie shows him to have been “a dabbler in magic,
BRODIE, NO MAN KNOWS MY HISTORY (MIDGLEY)

‘a low necromancer’ who . . . went into the money-digging business.” Then he came up with a tale about finding gold plates and then the Book of Mormon. Well, how did he actually produce a long text? The “American frontier was crawling with inspired prophets,” according to Prescott. That takes care of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith was “a product of his times and of the frontier,” where “piety and avarice were confused,” and where “the glory of God was identified with the making of money.” Prescott thought that Brodie had not decided “whether Joseph Smith was a marvelously successful and cynical fraud, or whether he was a sincere victim of his own hallucinations.”212

15. Then on 13 January 1946, Clip Boutell claimed that Brodie, “with loving care . . . has demolished the Mormon prophet,” and in so doing she used only the “mildest irony.” She “lets her revelations tell their own story.”213

16. On 15 January 1946, a New York City newspaper carried the following rather lurid headline: “On Recount Joseph Smith had 49 Wives! New Life Story of the Mormon Leader Reveals Startling Facts.”214 But the review reveals nothing, except that the unnamed reviewer was taken by what they believed could best be described as Mormon “mystic rites.”

17. In February 1946 a Cincinnati, Ohio, newspaper reported that Brodie had written a “readable, thoroughly documented biography of Joseph Smith.”215

18. The Bookmark reported to librarians eager to purchase books that Brodie’s account of Joseph Smith was “readable, objective, thoroughly documented.”216

19. Time, on 28 January 1946, reported that with “skill and scholarship and admirable detachment,” Brodie had dealt with Joseph Smith, whose revelation was “an unanswerable instrument

215 The Cincinnati Guidepost, February 1946.
216 The Albany Bookmark, May 1946.
of power.” This anonymous reviewer could see that in dealing with Joseph Smith one is faced with a fundamental either-or question: “was he a shameless fraud or true prophet?” Time incorrectly thought that Brodie had argued that he was “something of both.” But Time also thought that he “was an out-&-out imposter.” Yet the “imposter Smith came close to being a prophet” by “gradually hypnotiz[ing] himself as well as others.”

20. Moyle Rice, in a literary magazine, reported that No Man Knows was the fruit of nine years of research, and its distinguished publisher calls it definitive and claims that it “vividly illuminates many hitherto hidden passages.”


**In 1963–64 the Brits Also Review It**

In 1963 Eyre and Spottiswoode published No Man Knows for the British market. Summaries of several reviews reveal their reactions:

1. T. G. Platten thought that Brodie had shown that Joseph Smith was concerned about the lost ten tribes and buried treasure, then wrote a “spurious history’ of an American Indian race.” He also claimed that Latter-day Saints make an “identification of God with material prosperity,” and hence “material rewards need not be despised.”

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217 “Mormon Moses,” 58, 60.
2. Augustine Martin\textsuperscript{222} thought that Brodie had shown that Joseph Smith blended the spiritual and commercial but that thousands gave up wealth and security to follow the Prophet.\textsuperscript{223}

3. J. P. O’Reilly thought that Brodie had shown that there was a wealthy, lunatic fringe attracted to Joseph Smith. He also reported that Brodie “seems impartial.” O’Reilly was certain that Joseph Smith had achieved “financial success as a charlatan,” wrote a mythical history, and that the plates were not seen by anyone. He was sure, according to Brodie, that Joseph Smith’s “holy book” was no longer read by the Saints.\textsuperscript{224}

4. Denis Deagan called \textit{No Man Knows} a classic. Brodie was not embittered, and hence was no debunker. He liked her “calm academic prose” and her warm if critical loyalty to the church. Loyalty? She had declared the real Joseph Smith to be either a prophet or a fraud. Deagan also noted that Brodie dismissed the Spalding theory.\textsuperscript{225}

5. Gene Baro\textsuperscript{226} thought that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon to tell the story of the “Lost Tribes of Israel.” He believed that Brodie treated Joseph Smith “seriously and sympathetically.”\textsuperscript{227}


\textsuperscript{226} Gene Baro, ed., \textit{After Appomattox: The Image of the South in Its Fiction, 1865–1900} (New York: Corinth, 1963); and he was also involved with \textit{Claes Oldenburg, Drawings & Prints}, introduction and commentary by Gene Baro (London: Chelsea House, 1969); and \textit{Twenty-First National Print Exhibition} (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1978), which was the catalog of an exhibition held in 1978–79.

6. Benedict Kiely\textsuperscript{228} was eager to refer to the "faked and fanciful revelations" of Joseph Smith, who "combined his treasure-hunting and longbowmanship" to gather a following. Of course, "nobody ever say [sic] the plates." The Book of Mormon is frontier fiction—a popular history of Moundbuilders—and then somehow Joseph Smith became religious.\textsuperscript{229}

7. Gilbert Thomas\textsuperscript{230} believed that Brodie "looks impartially at Joseph Smith."\textsuperscript{231}

8. H. D. Ziman referred to Brodie's nice treatment of "Holy Joe."\textsuperscript{232}

9. A. W. Parsons wrote fourteen one-sentence paragraphs about Brodie's book in four inches of printed text.\textsuperscript{233}

Brodie could not have been pleased with what these gents wrote about \textit{No Man Knows}. These reviews are simply embarrassing. Nothing more can be said about them. But they served to advertise her book and spread confusion about it and about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon as well.

"A Broad, Promising Middle Ground"?

When \textit{No Man Knows} first appeared, the Saints were unable to respond adequately to all the substantive charges Brodie brought against Joseph Smith. The primary reason was that there were no professional Latter-day Saint historians who had given attention to the relevant literature. Hugh Nibley, whose training is in ancient history, wrote a witty reply to her book that signaled to faithful

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\textsuperscript{231} Gilbert Thomas, "Varieties of Religious Experience," \textit{Birmingham Post}, 12 November 1963.


Latter-day Saints, and perhaps to others, that there was still room for a nonnaturalistic account of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims. Then, in several series of essays, Nibley provided numerous reasons to believe that the Book of Mormon was an authentic ancient history. He stressed its subtle complexities, which seem beyond the capacities of anyone in America at the time the book was published.234

The result has been that the generation following Nibley has been much more intently concerned than was the previous one with the teachings found in the Book of Mormon and also, of course, with the question of its historical authenticity. Of course, not all Latter-day Saints were pleased with Nibley’s efforts to read the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text or to coax the Saints into reading it carefully for its prophetic messages. In order for the teachings found in the Book of Mormon to be taken seriously, it was obvious to the Saints that it could not be read as “frontier fiction,” which is exactly what Brodie had done.

According to Marvin Hill, “the most plausible exposition of the Smith hypothesis [that Joseph Smith fashioned the Book of Mormon out of nineteenth-century sources] was made by Fawn Brodie, author of No Man Knows My History.”235 Brodie argued, again according to Hill, that “Smith employed a fertile imagination and unusual responsiveness to his environment to magnify the theme of Ethan Smith’s View of the Hebrews, a book which identifies the American Indians as the Lost Tribes of Israel.”236 Instead of lifting the narrative portions of the Book of Mormon from an old and even presumably lost Spalding romance, either real or imagined, Brodie initially pictured Joseph Smith as having


236 Ibid.
borrowed heavily from a book by Ethan Smith entitled *View of the Hebrews*.237

Hill thus concludes that Brodie felt that both the *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon
describe the deterioration of an Israelite civilization in America, mention a written record of the aborigines once buried in the earth, and sponsor missionary efforts to convert the Indians. She points also to the fact that *View of the Hebrews* cites Ezekiel chapter thirty-seven in a manner suggestive of the Mormon use to vindicate their sacred book, and shows that Joseph knew of the work since he quoted it in his newspaper in 1842. Some additional parallels seem superficial. She states that both books quoted "copiously and almost exclusively" from Isaiah. Actually they both cite a number of Old Testament books. It is true, as she indicates, that both works open with a mention of the destruction of Jerusalem but the fact is not especially significant. The Book of Mormon refers to the Babylonian conquest while Ethan Smith’s work discusses that of the Romans.238

Other than a brief, laudatory review by Bill Russell in 1972 of the revised edition of *No Man Knows*, to which I have already referred, the only other examinations of Brodie’s modification of her original stance on Joseph Smith have been offered by Marvin Hill.239

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237 In the second edition of *No Man Knows*, Brodie silently moved away from the *View of the Hebrews* as the source for the plot of the Book of Mormon and moved overtly to the notion that its plot is grounded in Joseph Smith’s inner and also family life. By 1971 she had become at least somewhat familiar with Freudian and other psychoanalytic theories. Her papers (housed at the Marriott Library at the University of Utah) show only a modest command of psychoanalytic literature. And she never made an effort to either apply or test any specific theory. She merely dabbled in the literature on abnormal psychology, applying what she considered insights she gleaned from apparently casual reading.


In 1972 Hill asserted that Brodie’s biography of Joseph Smith “has been recognized by most professional American historians as the standard work on the life of Joseph Smith and perhaps the most important single work on early Mormonism.” However, he offers no evidence to support this generalization. He then attempts “to consider Brodie’s interpretation . . . on her own secular terms.” Hill faults Brodie for attempting to answer the question: “Is Joseph Smith a prophet of God in the sense that the Church he founded maintains . . . ?” Hill insists that Brodie made a dreadful mistake in attempting to answer that question.

Hill does not believe that the question of whether Joseph Smith was a prophet can be dealt with by a historian because

The historian has no sources written with the finger of God to prove that Joseph Smith was called to his divine mission, nor does he have any human sources to prove conclusively that he was not. One’s answers to this cosmic question depend entirely upon the assumptions he brings to it—assumptions about the nature of the world and man’s place in it; these rest in the last analysis upon personal predilection, not historical evidence.

Therefore, in 1972 Hill emphatically did not think that there could be “any final resolution to the question which” he thinks Brodie “mistakenly tries to answer.”

If a final, conclusive proof is not possible, could some proximate indication be worked out? Hill’s dated, naive positivism leads him into confusion over what possibilities are available to historians. Proof is possible in formal logic and mathematics, but not when one confronts the past and must depend upon fragmentary and conflicting sources, most of which already carry with them the biases and assumptions of those who recorded them in the first place. Certainly faith does not require that its object be proven conclusively. It is not that answers, to what Hill calls a “cosmic question[,] depend entirely upon assumptions” brought to it by

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241 Ibid.
242 Ibid.
the historian. The answer to every question will be colored by the biases and assumptions—the formal and informal pre-understandings—employed by the historian. Hence the determination to approach prophetic truth claims with secular, naturalistic assumptions is itself a decision on the “cosmic question.” Moreover, it is not obvious that it is the correct decision, since it begs the very question it sets out to answer.

Hill did not sense that, by attempting “to meet Brodie on her own grounds,” that is, with what he called “the naturalistic assumptions of the professional historian,” he had already begun to beg the important question of whether the Book of Mormon is true and Joseph Smith a prophet. Naturalistic assumptions are not neutral when they are invoked in inquiries into prophetic truth claims. Hill takes these assumptions for granted. Hence he did not even bother to set them out. He also neglected to provide a critical examination of them or their role in explanations of the Book of Mormon or Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims. Why? I suspect that the reason is that he accepted Brodie’s background assumptions, and chose only to quarrel with her about the details of her explanation of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith.

If I am wrong about this or if Hill has recently changed his mind, I invite him to come forward with a clarification or explanation. The fact is that anti-Mormons and cultural Mormon dissidents who are now attempting to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient history sometimes identify Hill as a collaborator in their endeavors.244

243 Ibid., 73.
244 Some of those who now argue that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon and that it is not an authentic ancient text read Hill in precisely the way I do. For example, David P. Wright claims that “some studies in recent years” have attempted to understand the Book of Mormon not as an ancient composition, but as a recent one, “set pseudonymously or pseudepigraphically in the past.” Wright then includes in his list of such revisionist studies two essays by Hill. See Wright, “In Plain Terms That We May Understand: Joseph Smith’s Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12–13,” in New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, 165. See Novak, “Naturalistic Assumptions and the Book of Mormon,” for a careful criticism of Hill’s stance. Compare Novak’s careful arguments to Hill’s angry, confused response. See Hill’s “Afterword,” BYU Studies 30/4 (1990): 117–24.
Writers like Hill have generally been a shy and retiring lot—not bold and adventuresome, not given to clarity and candor, and not equipped for sophisticated reflection on the consequences of their explanations for themselves or the Saints. While some are indifferent about such matters, others who strive to turn the Book of Mormon into a “recent composition” (or into what Brodie more boldly described as “frontier fiction”) seem concerned to retain their identity as members of the Church. Those who do tend to argue that portions of the book may still be somehow inspiring or even “inspired,” even when the book is read as a “recent composition” or as Joseph Smith’s fiction. Others who do not care about their standing in the Church, usually take the now well-known tack and argue or imply that its having been written by Joseph Smith makes it and him into something fraudulent.

Hill provides a nice list of items in Brodie’s revised edition of her biography of Joseph Smith where “it is undeniable that her history retains its relevance and authenticity.”245 For example, she was able to dethrone the Spalding-Rigdon theory of the authorship of the Book of Mormon, and she pictured Joseph Smith as “a man with rich imagination and high intelligence who responded to the intellectual currents of his time from which he drew elements which shaped Mormon thought.”246 Of course, exactly this portrait of Joseph was essential to Brodie’s argument that he was a liar and charlatan. Hill also finds something splendid in Brodie’s having brushed aside older psychological explanations of Joseph Smith. He was enthralled by Brodie’s “humanizing” of Joseph Smith—“Brodie focused on his human qualities, his loves, his hates, his fears, his hopes and ambitions,” and so forth.247 Of course, this is just what she later did with Jefferson.

But mostly Hill quibbles with Brodie for not having realized that being a money-digger and being religious and sincere were not necessarily inconsistent, if one understands the times. Unfortunately, neither Brodie nor Hill define what they mean by the slippery word “religion.” Be that as it may, Hill faults Brodie for having “too much of Sigmund Freud, too much of

245 Hill, “Brodie Revisited,” 73.
246 Ibid.
247 Ibid.
rationalism” in her to properly appreciate the mixing and blending of superstition, mysticism, magic and the occult that went into Joseph Smith’s “religion” and also into that of those who became his followers. Hill pictures Brodie as “a disgruntled ex-Mormon striking back at a ‘myth’ told her in her childhood.” What he wants to charter is a view of Joseph Smith in which he did not have real plates, or encounter real heavenly messengers, but where all of that is somehow explained as part of what Hill calls the “mysticism” of the age in which Mormonism arose.

Hill’s final estimation of Brodie’s biography is “that it falls short of greatness because of fundamental weaknesses which no amount of patching in a later edition can correct.” He clearly wants to dethrone Brodie in order to justify his own attempt at writing a naturalistic biography of Joseph Smith, one that would employ what he called “her own secular terms.” Hill ends his first review of Brodie with the following: “To write the truth about a man who was so many sided, so controversial as Joseph Smith is a very difficult thing. Nonetheless, with an attitude less cynical than Fawn Brodie’s, it is time for some of us to try.” In 1977, Marvin Hill’s sister, Donna Hill, published a biography of Joseph Smith.

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248 Ibid., 75.
249 Ibid., 79.
250 Ibid., 75 (“she cannot handle the religious mysticism of the man or of the age”), 78 (“in short there was an element of mysticism in Joseph and the early Mormons that Brodie did not face up to”). In this initial treatment of Brodie, Hill gives no indication whatsoever of what he means by mysticism or how the appropriation of such a category would fit with the Book of Mormon or with Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims.
251 Ibid., 74.
252 Ibid., 72. Or with “naturalistic assumptions.” He used both expressions. Ibid., 73.
BRODIE, NO MAN KNOWS MY HISTORY (MIDGLEY)

name removed at the last minute for reasons that are not entirely clear.

In 1974 Hill published another review of No Man Knows.\textsuperscript{254} In this second review, Hill claimed that Brodie's "book has indeed been highly praised and highly condemned, with plaudits coming generously from professionals in the field of American history."\textsuperscript{255} The criticisms of Brodie's book were characterized by Hill as essentially "dissertations, innumerable articles, books circulated largely among the Mormon intellectual community," which "have questioned Brodie's denial of Smith's first vision, her thesis that Smith was a gold digger before he turned prophet and the argument that the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham, two of Smith's works considered ancient scripture, were written by Smith himself."\textsuperscript{256} But these criticisms of Brodie are downgraded by Hill.\textsuperscript{257} "That Brodie's work has gone so long without effective challenge or criticism is peculiar," according to him. Hill thought it remarkable "in the face of so much change and revision" in the understanding of religion in America and of
dissertation. His basic assumption is set forth in that book as follows: "Some historians, including Fawn Brodie, have tended to view a belief in magic . . . as chicanery and fraud—proof that Smith's religious claims were not genuine. A more temperate view has recently emerged among scholars of religion, and it is now clear that magic is but one means people employ in efforts to make contact with the divine." Ibid., 4 and cf. 24, for Hill's cautious acceptance of Brodie's explanation of how Joseph Smith was able to fashion the Book of Mormon.

\textsuperscript{254} Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History?" 78–96.
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., 78. As I have shown, this is not true.
\textsuperscript{256} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{257} In his Quest for Refuge, 24, Hill opined that Brodie "argued that the Book of Mormon was written by Joseph Smith himself, unaided, except that he borrowed ideas from Ethan Smith's View of the Hebrews." He then added that, "although Brodie has had her critics [citing his two reviews of No Man Knows and nothing else], her version of the origin of the Book of Mormon has remained the most widely accepted one in non-Mormon scholarly circles during the past forty-four years." Ibid. If this were true, and it may be true, what does it demonstrate? That scholars outside the Latter-day Saint community, who know virtually nothing of the details of the debate over the authorship of the Book of Mormon, tend to accept something like Brodie's account? Does that lend credibility to her account? Hill simply remains silent on all the crucial issues. But his cautious language signals to cultural Mormons and dissidents that he believes that something like Brodie's account of the origin of the Book of Mormon is the truth about the matter.
the Mormon past since 1945 that "Brodie's biography has maintained its status." 258

In 1974 Hill attributed what he considered "Brodie's considerable influence with professional historians . . . to her skill as a narrator, to her impressive research in many areas—especially her background on the Book of Mormon and the Spalding theory of its origin, as well as that on the Book of Abraham" and so forth. He then noted that some Latter-day Saints "have been reluctant to attempt a biography" of Joseph Smith. 259 "As for the non-Mormons, they . . . have perhaps been satisfied with what Brodie had to say and seem hesitant to deal with Smith's visions, his golden plates and his witnesses, all of which are awkward to handle objectively," that is, in secular, naturalistic terms. 260

Once again Hill faulted Brodie for dwelling on "the truth or untruth of the prophet's claims." 261 "By concentrating upon whether or not Smith's vision actually occurred, Brodie missed its historical significance." 262 Once again he faulted Brodie for not being sufficiently sensitive to what he labeled the mysticism common to the age in which Joseph Smith lived. 263 Hill was clearly attempting to get beyond what he thought of as faulty either-or alternatives in dealing with Joseph Smith.

Hill clearly wanted to avoid Brodie's approach of seeing Joseph Smith from either a sectarian (genuine prophet) point of view or a secular perspective in which he is pictured as a liar and charlatan. He was looking for a middle ground between those alternatives.

But what about Smith's claims that he translated Egyptian papyri to obtain the Book of Abraham, his

258 Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History?" 79.
259 Ibid.
260 Ibid., 80.
261 Ibid.
262 Ibid., 84.
263 Ibid. "She never explains how so many of mystical persuasion were attracted to him when he was supposedly cynical, contemptuous of sectarianism and revivalism, and an opportunist who exploited the piety of others for his own aggrandizement" (p. 80); within Joseph Smith and his followers "there was an element of mysticism that made the transition more natural" from magic and the occult to religion "than Brodie was willing to admit" (p. 86).
story of gold plates and his witnesses? Should not, as Brodie puts it, "the casual reader . . . be shocked" at his pretentious claims in the field of religion? Or are such claims to miracles basically any different from those that have traditionally given support to Christianity? If we assume that Smith wrote the Book of Abraham, which the Utah church denies, for Smith to claim Abraham as author of his book may be no more fraudulent than for the writers of the early New Testament epistles to claim apostolic authorship.264

No more fraudulent indeed!

Hill then justifies such presumably fraudulent claims by arguing that "a new religion required an authoritarian base, particularly in the face of so many contending sects in nineteenth-century America." Then Hill claims that Joseph Smith said "that when the angel first came to him to tell him of the plates, he thought it was a dream but later changed his mind."265 What Joseph Smith dictated to his scribe, quoted here in an unedited version, is as follows:

it was on the 22d day of Sept. AD 1822 and thus he [the angel] appeared unto me three times in one night and once on the next day and then I immediately went to the place and found where the plates was deposited as the angel of the Lord had commanded me and straightaway made three attempts to get them and then being exceedingly frightened I supposed it had been a dream of Vision but when I considered I knew that it was not therefore I cried unto the Lord in the agony of my soul why can I not obtain them behold the angel appeared unto me again and said unto me you have not kept the commandments of the Lord.266

264 Ibid., 91.
265 Ibid., 91–92.
266 Joseph Smith "History" [1831], exactly as found in The Papers of Joseph Smith, vol. 1, Autobiographical and Historical Writings, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 8.
Hill reads this passage as suggesting "the possibility that some things which may have been looked upon as natural in the early years took on more miraculous significance as time passed. Rather than deception," Hill speculates that "we may be dealing with a frame of mind in some ways more idealistic and mystical and less cynical than our own." With Hill we may be dealing with someone who has uncritically accepted the prevailing secular bias against prophetic truth claims, and who therefore turns to explanations that are entirely naturalistic.

Thomas G. Alexander once contrasted "the scholarly Marvin Hill's" reviews of Brodie's book with "the rather outrageous Hugh Nibley's No Ma'am That's Not History." Outrageous? Why? Because he mocked the motley collection of opinions hostile to Joseph Smith that were swept up by Brodie and used as the support for her naturalistic explanation of Joseph Smith's prophetic charisms?

But what exactly was Professor Alexander's "scholarly Marvin Hill" trying to say? His thesis is summed up in the following:

Perhaps what Brodie may have recognized at last is that her original interpretation perceived Joseph Smith in falacious [sic] terms, as either prophet in the traditional Mormon sense or else as faker. Her original thesis opens considerable room for speculation because its either-or alternatives were precisely the same as those of the early Mormon apologist and missionary, Orson Pratt, [which were] presented to his potential converts in the 1840s and 1850s. But between Pratt and Brodie a hundred years of Mormon experience have intervened.

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267 Hill, “Secular or Sectarian History?” 92.
Whereas Pratt affirmed that with Smith’s accomplishments he must have been a true prophet, Brodie, looking at the man’s limitations, concluded he was a fraud. Possibly now historians should begin to explore the broad, promising middle ground which neither Pratt nor Brodie fully perceived.270

So what Hill wanted to do was advance his own secular, naturalist explanation of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. In it Joseph would be seen as a superstitious, magic-saturated “mystic” who was sincere in his illusions, since he appeared to have believed that he had conversations with heavenly messengers and so forth. Hill’s portrait would not be one that pictured Joseph as a liar and charlatan, as had Brodie, but as someone sincerely religious—though still someone who was not a genuine prophet.

“Mischievous and Manipulative Historians”—Whatever Happened to Detachment and Objectivity?

In 1970 Brodie read a lecture in Salt Lake City that carried the title “Can We Manipulate the Past?”271 Marvin Hill reviewed this lecture in an essay entitled “The Manipulation of History,”272 and he argued that it might make little difference to the Saints “if they are told that some of the divine books have been altered, or even that the accepted view of the origin of one of their books might have to be revised.”273 Perhaps Hill had in mind the Book of Mormon or it may have been the book of Abraham. In either case, he was wrong. Hugh Nibley got it right when he argued that the Book of Mormon “must be read as an ancient, not as a modern book. Its mission, as described by the book itself, depends in great measure for its efficacy on its genuine antiquity.”274

270 Hill, “Secular or Sectarian History?” 96.
271 This lecture was then published by the Center for Studies of the American West, at the University of Utah.
273 Ibid., 97.
What Brodie apparently had in mind in the question posed in the title of her lecture, was that

men in positions of power can and do manipulate written history for purposes of social control. It is the job of the historian, she affirmed, quoting the Cambridge historian J. H. Plumb, to “cleanse the story of mankind from those deceiving visions of a purposeful past,” thus preventing it from being put to ruthless use by willful members of the establishment.275

Brodie was obviously opposed to “men in power” who she thought manipulate the past “to sanctify authority, to justify their policies, to change the direction and destiny of whole nations.”276 But there are various forms of authority and power and one of those that is deeply involved in manipulating the past just happens to be the secular, liberal Establishment. She was especially fond of pointing to churchmen whom she accused of manipulating the past for their own purposes.277 Unfortunately, she preferred not to “talk about how mischievous and manipulative historians can be.”278

Were Brodie’s own literary ventures not at least in part efforts to control the future by manipulating the Mormon past? Instead of engaging in a healthy and honest look at her own agenda, she was admittedly eager—much to her credit, I must add—to defend the history profession, though she granted that “historians may seem mischievous and destructive to churchmen, and especially to politicians. Historians,” she granted, “are dangerous.”279 She was right, of course, though in an ironic way. But how could they be dangerous, given the controlling mythology in which they picture themselves as dispassionate, detached, objective—merely

275 Brodie, “Can We Manipulate the Past?” 4.
276 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid.
letting the facts speak their truth through them as neutral observers? 

The Great Divide Revisited—No Middle Ground on the Crucial Issues

Brodie was closer to the truth when she and Morgan insisted on the existence of a Great Divide that separates the way accounts will be fashioned about the Mormon past. On one side of this Great Divide are those who insist on secular, naturalistic accounts of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims, and on the other are those who are genuinely open to the possibility that angels may sometimes bring books and so forth.

Until recently, as I have shown in my review of the reviews on *No Man Knows,* it has been fashionable for anti-Mormons, cultural Mormons, and their gentile allies, to advance a mythology in which what they call “objectivity,” and hence some privileged access to the truth about what really happened, was available only to those on the secular, naturalistic (and atheist) side of the Great Divide. This assumption is pure rubbish.

Hill read the report by John Hutchens of a conversation he had with Brodie that was published in the *New York Times* on 20 January 1946 as saying that “her research was two-thirds completed before she discovered that Joseph Smith was an imposter.” 

But what Brodie told that reporter was that “she had examined two thirds of the materials before she arrived at her thesis that until a certain point in his career Smith was an impostor.” 

What she came to believe is that Joseph was a liar and charlatan at the beginning when he started telling tales about visits with angels and plates containing an ancient history, but that at some point he began, more or less, to believe his own lies. Brodie was two-thirds of the way through her research when she hit on this thesis, and hence it was at this point that she had more or less settled on the

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280 For a constructive critique of this professional mythology, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

281 Hill, “Secular or Sectarian History?” 80.

details of the explanation she would advance in her book. But she started out fully convinced that Joseph Smith was not a prophet.

It is a mistake to see Brodie, as Hill does, as one disillusioned when she looked into the Mormon past and hence one whose historical inquiries caused her to cease being a believer. She does not appear to have been "a disgruntled ex-Mormon striking back at a 'myth' told her in her childhood," as Hill claimed. That explanation might better fit Hill than Brodie. And if so, then we have an explanation for his own equivocations, ambiguous formulations, and shifting of opinions. Hill was right when he insisted that more than anything else it is what the historian brings to the quest for understanding of the past, what he calls "assumptions about the nature of the world and man's place in it," which he sees resting "in the last analysis upon personal predilection, not historical evidence," that determines the kind of stories that will be fashioned.

Perhaps if Hill had noticed that what he sensed were Brodie's "naturalistic assumptions," in various ways color, regulate, or even determine how one comes out on the question of whether the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient history and whether Joseph Smith was God's prophet, then he might have been somewhat more thoughtful and even more cautious about adopting assumptions that necessarily place him on the secular (and from my perspective the wrong) side of the Great Divide. Consequently, he might not have devoted his career to looking for a plausible middle ground between genuine prophet and faker.

But perhaps the problem stems from an enthrallment with what Hill seems to recognize as the assumptions of professional historians. Both secularized historians and those with different confessional commitments will bring to their inquiries into Mormon things biases and understanding that either fundamentally differ from or flatly contradict those held by the faithful. That is to be expected. Hence we can expect gentiles to write differently about the Restoration than will faithful Latter-day Saints. Surely a seasoned Latter-day Saint—one who has genuinely experienced God's gifts—need not yield to the temptation to adopt the

283 Hill, "Brodie Revisited," 79.
284 Ibid., 72.
285 Ibid.
skeptical posture inherent in the currently dominant intellectual fashions at work among those who tend to mock divine things from their lofty perches in highly secularized academic institutions.

Some Strange Signs of Squeamishness about Brodie

No Man Knows has served as an icon for cultural Mormons anxiously seeking for a peg on which to hang their unbelief. But since her work has been rather thoroughly examined, and its weaknesses made known, an open reliance on her book or its arguments has been politically unwise, except in RLDS circles. I will offer one example of this squeamishness about Brodie. A good specimen is provided by D. Michael Quinn, a former Mormon historian.

After noting that Joseph Smith’s neighbors in Palmyra “testified that during the spring of 1820 Smith became a seer in quest of buried treasure,” Quinn adds that “by all accounts [Joseph] Smith continued as both farm boy and treasure seeker for years until he announced that he had obtained gold plates.”

286 D. Michael Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 2 vols., Origins of Power (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 1:3. The neighbors Quinn has in mind are Joshua Stafford and Willard Chase. Their rather bizarre “statements” were collected or written by Philastus Hurlbut, who had briefly been a member of the fledgling Church of Christ but was excommunicated for conduct unbecoming a Saint. The gossip collected by Hurlbut was eventually included in Howe’s Mormonism Unvailed, 240, 258. Howe’s book is the mother of all anti-Mormon books. Whatever else one might say about the gossip published by Howe, it should be noted its reliability is open to question.

287 Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 1:3. It is therefore not clear what he means by “all accounts,” since he cites secondary works in a lengthy note (p. 270 n. 16). There are no newspaper accounts, letters, or diaries that hint that Joseph Smith as “farm boy” was a “treasure” seeker prior to the publication of such charges by Obadiah Dogberry (aka Abner Cole) beginning in June and July 1830. Cole published his Palmyra Reflector in Grandin’s print shop where the book of Mormon was being readied for publication, and he violated the copyright for the Book of Mormon when he published excerpts in January 1830 in his Palmyra Reflector. He ceased doing this only after an ugly confrontation with Joseph Smith. Cole responded by charging Joseph with being involved in “magic” and “treasure hunting.” Hence not all contemporary sources and especially not the first published sources made this claim. Instead, the earlier newspaper accounts essentially tell Joseph’s story from his and his followers’
This is, of course, pure Brodie. But Quinn does not at this point cite Brodie. Why not? Perhaps because to do so would invite criticism. Instead, Quinn claims that "scholars have long recognized that the first vision account was not published or used in any proselytizing tract until the 1840s and that it was not used regularly as a Mormon proselytizing tool until fifty years after [Joseph] Smith's theophany." 288 Quinn adds that, "for this reason, Fawn M. Brodie . . . dismissed [Joseph] Smith's visionary claims as 'sheer invention.'" 289

What Quinn does not point out is that Brodie began by claiming that Joseph Smith concocted the story of his initial vision around 1838. As I have demonstrated, Brodie was subsequently forced to qualify her assertion. In 1971 she shifted to claiming that the very early accounts provided by Joseph Smith seemed to her to be contradictory (pp. 408–10), which was clearly not her position in 1945. She also argued that "to the nondevout the differences" between the various early accounts of the initial vision "are evidence of Joseph Smith's exuberant talent for improvisation before a stimulating audience and his lack of care about the consistency of detail" (p. 409). She claimed that these reports supported her "original speculation that the first vision, if not an invention, was an evolutionary fantasy beginning in 'a half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood'" (p. 409). 290

Instead of setting forth and then confronting the assumptions upon which Brodie rested her argument, Quinn tries to explain why he ignores her work. 291 His explanations are instructive.

perspective, including, as Quinn notes, even statements to the effect that Joseph Smith "had seen God frequently and personally." Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 1:3, citing the Palmyra Reflector, 14 February 1831.
288 Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 1:3.
289 Ibid., 271 n. 18.
290 Exactly what audience might have stimulated Joseph Smith to fabricate the accounts of his initial vision, Brodie does not say. Was it his scribe, a visit from Robert Matthias, otherwise known as "Joshua, the Jewish minister," or a conversation with Alexander Neibaur? If such was Joseph's audience, his accounts were otherwise unknown until long after 1945.
291 One may suspect that Quinn is more dependent upon Brodie than he is willing to admit openly.
In one context, after Quinn denounces what he considers the "sins"—his word—of the traditional Latter-day Saint view of the Mormon past, and the "dishonesty"—again his word—of the "apologists" for these traditional understandings, he baldly asserts that "Brodie's erudite and literary biography has [much] in common with the sins of traditional Mormon history." Quinn then opines that what he pejoratively labels the traditional Latter-day Saint view of the Mormon past therefore lacks the virtues—including the "functional objectivity," whatever that might be—of what he ambiguously labels the "New Mormon History." Quinn's feels that Brodie "discussed fundamental issues of Joseph Smith's life without taking his religious claims seriously and filtered her evidence through the perspective that the Mormon prophet was at best a "parapath" and at worst a charlatan." Quinn is, of course, as I have already shown, wrong about Brodie's arguing that Joseph Smith was a "parapath." That was the view held by Bernard DeVoto, which was strongly opposed by Brodie and Dale Morgan. They preferred, instead, the notion that Joseph was a conscious liar and charlatan. But a number of those Quinn indiscriminately celebrates as virtuous "New Mormon Historians," including, among others, Klaus J. Hansen, Mark P. Leone, and Lawrence Foster, hold that Joseph Smith was at least some sort of charlatan. Foster has also identified what he considers Joseph's pathology, which he thinks was manic depression.

292 D. Michael Quinn, "Editor's Introduction," New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past, ed. D. Michael Quinn (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xiv n. 7. Quinn's opinion is somewhat like Hill's, since both hold that the chief difficulty in Brodie's approach to the Mormon past is that she sees the fundamental issues in either "prophet" or "not prophet" terms.


294 Ibid.

295 Ibid., xiv-xvii n. 8. Quinn's list of favorite authors should be compared with the listing found in his "On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath)," in Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 99–101 n. 12, and also 97 n. 5.

In another context Quinn attempts to justify his reluctance to cite or otherwise openly confront *No Man Knows*:

Some may wonder why I rarely cite Brodie, whose biography has remained in print for fifty years due to the respect and popularity it has among non-Mormon readers. Despite her erudition, skillful prose, and insights, Brodie’s biography is flawed by its inattention to crucial archival materials and by her penchant for filtering evidence and analysis through the perspective that the Mormon prophet was either a “parapath” who believed his own lies or a fraud.297

Once again Quinn wrongly charges Brodie with holding that Joseph Smith was a “parapath.” Yet some of his opinions on Brodie’s work are, of course, solidly grounded. He is, however, just a trifle confused on certain issues. For instance, he cites, quotes, and relies upon essays written by Robert Hullinger, Rodger I. Anderson, Michael Marquardt, and the late Reverend Wesley P. Walters, all sectarian anti-Mormons. He also seems fond of secular anti-Mormon writers like George D. Smith and Dan Vogel. None of these writers are any less hostile to the truth claims upon which the Restoration rests than was Brodie.

Much like Brodie, these writers approach Joseph Smith with naturalistic assumptions. They also filter “evidence” through a network of secular assumptions. They may either have their own brand of “religion” that they are pushing or they may eschew faith in God altogether. Why, then, the defensiveness—even a public display of squeamishness—about citing or otherwise dealing with Brodie, when one has no qualms whatsoever in citing these other individuals? Why not take a consistent approach to those who advance naturalistic explanations of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon? Is it that to acknowledge openly and honestly even some dependence upon Brodie tends to lessen one’s authority in the Mormon intellectual community?298 Perhaps Quinn

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298 Quinn would benefit from a careful reading of the various versions of Brodie’s argument and also from a close attention to commentaries on Brodie.
is innocent of the bias of the anti-Mormons he often quotes with approval, or he may not anticipate criticism when he holds hands with the current crop of secular or even sectarian anti-Mormons.299

Quinn’s assessment of Brodie suffers much from inattention to crucial archival materials such as the papers of Dale L. Morgan, Madeline Reeder McQuown, Bernard DeVoto, and Juanita Brooks, as well as those of Brodie herself. Careful attention to these materials might have provided him with a more accurate understanding of Brodie’s approach to Joseph Smith and they might also have directed his attention to the role of secular, naturalistic assumptions in the writings of some of those he indiscriminately celebrates as virtuous revisionists or “New Mormon Historians.”

Getting the Saints’ Attention—Back to the Essentials

More than anyone else, it seems, Brodie drew the attention of the Saints to the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s account of its coming forth. For this she is to be congratulated, whatever else one might think about her treatment of Mormon things. Though it was certainly not her intention, Brodie almost single-handedly managed to focus the attention of Latter-day Saints on the crucial historical foundations of their faith. She has thereby helped an entire generation of Latter-day Saint historians to devote careful attention to what can be found about the Mormon past in libraries and archives. Brodie also stimulated research into the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, as well as into the notion, which she helped polish, that Joseph Smith was the author of the Book of Mormon. Though this explanation has not gone away, it has come more and more under critical scrutiny and seems even less plausible now than it did in 1945, when Brodie brushed aside the Spalding-Rigdon Theory and replaced it, at least in gentile and

299 Sandra and Jerald Tanner, for example, know more about Quinn than they are willing to let on in public. Why do they not expose some of his recent antics in their gossipy newsletter? Is it that they find it useful for their own partisan reasons to leave Quinn alone because they wish to use his current quarrels with Latter-day Saints for their own partisan advantage? So much for their concern with truth.
cultural Mormon circles, with a somewhat refurbished version of the original anti-Mormon Smith Theory.

For reasons that are only too painfully obvious, it seems that it takes bigger and better anti-Mormon books to stimulate—even force—the Saints to take their founding stories and texts seriously. If this is true, and I believe that it is, some may begin to see the hand of God in all of this. Whatever her own self-understanding, I see Brodie's role as providential.