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Historical Paradigms in Conflict: The Nauvoo Period Revisited

Glen M. Cooper

Rightly did Joseph Smith say "No man knows my history," a statement that Fawn Brodie considered disingenuous. Joseph's observation, however, expresses a fundamental truth: It is difficult to reconstruct "what actually happened" and why so-and-so did such-and-such. In principle, these same difficulties face scholars trying to write the history of any person. Joseph Smith was not special in this regard. Since there exists more documentary material about his life than about most people, contradictory statements and perspectives are inevitable. In addition, the controversy that attended him and his deeds and the conflicting testimonies about him leave us to discern the truth. *Cultures in Conflict*, however useful it may be as a collection of source documents, is very poor as a work of scholarship. The historical commentary that accompanies each primary source selection manifests prejudice, generalization, poor evaluation, and tendentious misreadings of those sources. One editorial commentary is in fact so agenda-driven that one even suspects that the choice of primary documents is not representative.

Why begin a review of a book about Nauvoo with mention of Joseph Smith? Because Hallwas and Launius treat him as the central

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figure in the Nauvoo "passion play." It is primarily Joseph Smith's motives and mind that such historians attempt to divine. Elden Watson, the author of a review of *Cultures in Conflict* that appeared in an earlier issue of *FARMS Review of Books*, notes that the portrait of Joseph Smith that Hallwas and Launius present is far from flattering: Watson makes a case that the book is anti-Mormon because of its attack on the character of Joseph Smith. While I acknowledge that the portrait of Joseph Smith is uncomplimentary, I am not concerned with the status of this book as anti-Mormon. *Cultures in Conflict* is presented as a serious work of historical scholarship, and I evaluate it against standards appropriate for such a book. It is unfortunate, however, that reviewing this book requires an examination of some rudimentary historiographical principles. Furthermore, since I suspect that many who consider themselves Latter-day Saints would find nothing reprehensible in Hallwas and Launius's portrait of Joseph Smith, to call the book "anti-Mormon" is both inaccurate and beside the point.

In preparing the present essay, I have had access to three previous reviews. Since each review fails in one or more ways to do justice to this book, I feel compelled to offer my own analysis in the form of a review essay. Several critical issues require further development than is possible within the dimensions of an ordinary review. Mine was mostly written before I read the others. I shall comment on the earlier reviews as necessary. The first chronologically, by Glen M. Leonard, while making a few useful but diplomatic observations, ultimately

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2. I would apply the same rigorous criteria to all books, including those about the history of my faith, in spite of the fact that I am a believer—a fact that, according to Hallwas and Launius, renders my remarks dispensable.

3. My review existed in penultimate form before I read the others. I was originally requested to write a review of *Cultures in Conflict for Dialogue*. When my review was completed, however, it was rejected. The reason proffered was that the book had been published too long for them to print a review of it. I express sincere gratitude to the editor of the *FARMS Review of Books* for providing a home for this review essay.
fails to grapple with the faults of the book. The next, by Watson, almost completely misses the point of *Cultures in Conflict* as a work of scholarship. Ironically, therefore, he falls right into the caricatured pattern of myth and belief that Hallwas and Launius describe, which I shall discuss below. Donald G. Godfrey has written the third review, in my opinion the best of the three, but although he makes some accurate criticisms and his review should be read, it is too short to be of any real use. I intend to demonstrate here that *Cultures in Conflict* has major deficiencies when measured against the standards of serious historical scholarship.

The title of the book accurately reflects the ethnic character of the Nauvoo conflict, at least with regard to the Latter-day Saints, and the clash of incompatible cultures, each with its peculiar way (or ways) of viewing itself and others. The primary sources presented in *Cultures in Conflict*, some complete and some excerpted, from parties both favorable and hostile to the Saints, vividly illustrate this ethnic incompatibility. The nearly one hundred sources are arranged in a logical order covering six periods in Nauvoo history (1839–46), beginning with a section entitled “The Coming of the Mormons” and ending with “The Exodus and the Battle of Nauvoo.” In addition, the editors offer historical commentary and analysis of those texts. As I shall demonstrate via representative examples, methodological flaws mar the editors’ description and treatment of these documents. For example, the editors claim that not only were cultures in conflict (which I accept), but that individuals, namely the Latter-day Saints, also were conflicted within themselves. They therefore adopt a psychologistic scheme, complete with psychoanalytic jargon, to explain both the large-scale, cross-cultural conflict as well as an apparent disparity between Mormon beliefs and actions. Even if it is true that the Saints were thus internally conflicted, simply too much must be assumed

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5. Watson, review of *Cultures in Conflict*.
a priori: The amount of theoretical reconstruction required on the basis of the most tenuous evidence ought to make any rational person consider this approach more in terms of what it tells us about two scholars writing at the close of the twentieth century than about Latter-day Saint beliefs and actions of the 1840s.

Furthermore, with reference to the title *Cultures in Conflict*, it is clear enough that the Latter-day Saints constituted a new culture or ethnicity; however, that those outside of Latter-day Saint culture were another unified “culture” is doubtful. It seems that this latter group was unified only in its hatred of Joseph Smith and Mormonism. So one group, the Latter-day Saints, constituted a new culture that repudiated the values of the surrounding “culture,” and another group, the hostile neighbors, in response to the (alarming) growth of the first, polarized against it. To apply the term *culture* to this latter group in the same sense as to the Saints is to commit the fallacy of equivocation.

Conflict in Illinois during this period involved large groups of people—the primary documents, some of which are reproduced by Hallwas and Launius, amply attest to this. Of greater concern to me, however, is another conflict involving the editors themselves, their treatment of this material, and the methods of sound historical scholarship. I perceive two historiographical paradigms in conflict: (1) the older approach to history that respects the validity of a historical text and considers how its textual detail can contribute to a historical picture, while reserving judgment about individuals and motivations per se; and (2) the “psychohistorical” approach, which, although giving the illusion of rational objectivity, reduces historical detail to generalities and produces essentialized caricatures of agents, assigning their characters and motivations to general types. The latter method, although generally decried by scholars, is the one employed by Hallwas and Launius in their treatment of these primary sources of Mormon history. This approach to historiography has been discredited when applied to “serious” historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson (no matter how well-written the works are), but religious figures, considered only liminally rational or not at all, are
apparently still considered fair game. (I am referring, of course, to Brodie's imaginative treatment of the life of Joseph Smith, which, incredibly, is still regarded even by some educated people as Joseph's definitive biography.)

In addition, although providing scholars ready access to relevant primary documents from this formative period of Mormon history is praiseworthy, it soon becomes clear that the selection and editing of these documents is driven by the editors' agenda of speaking for the (hitherto ignored) "non-Mormon" neighbors and systematically deconstructing and discrediting Mormon accounts, employing the slippery notion of myth. So *caveat lector*: let the reader be wary. The term *myth* is used in this book to mean anything that is fervently held to be true (but which is in fact false) by a self-deceived people, which shapes their thoughts and actions for better or worse. Myth seems ultimately to mean what these editors do not like. The result is a drastic and self-conscious revisionism—the editors aim to demonstrate the presence of virtue in those who are not Mormons and the lack thereof among the Mormons.

Perhaps the most innovative feature of *Cultures in Conflict* is its attempt to speak for the other side. The editors observe that previous historians have paid little attention to the perspective of those not belonging to the church, so they will champion them. These earlier historians, mostly Latter-day Saints for whom the Nauvoo period constitutes an important part of their sacred history (and hence not part of "objective history"), have "failed to explore fully the wide range of available documents" (p. 5). According to the editors, these scholars have emphasized the victimization of their coreligionists without justly considering the claims of their opponents. While speaking for those who have been ignored seems a noble task, the approach rapidly becomes imbalanced in the other direction. One virtue of the book is that it provides many neglected documents. It is to be hoped, therefore, that historians will consider them in future histories of

Mormon Nauvoo. The editors’ specious arguments, however, must be countered by meticulous attention to textual detail and sound reasoning, neither of which graces the present book. Slipshod analysis and trendy conclusions must be defeated by continually rereading the primary sources and discarding, as far as possible, all a priori preconceptions. To do otherwise is to speak unfairly and misleadingly for the dead, appropriating their suffering for the use of modern agendas.

The subject of the Mormon conflict in Illinois is extremely complex, and it would be very difficult or altogether impossible to evaluate it fairly in a brief introduction. Entire books could (and ought) to be written for this purpose. Nevertheless, Hallwas and Launius essayed in a mere eight pages to provide comprehensive conclusions about what happened and why. Thus they have reduced the complexities of the conflict to superficial comprehensibility by invoking a trendy explanatory notion: a simplistic and misleading notion of myth, which, as I indicated above, is a facile psychological concept. They accuse previous historians of ignoring “the crucial influence of myth on the attitudes, perceptions, actions, and interpretations of the early Saints” (p. 5). Furthermore, they claim that since believing Latter-day Saint historians belong to “the same interpretive community” (p. 1) as the Saints in Nauvoo, they are thus incapable of assuming a historical perspective on their coreligionists. This conclusion is doubtful since contemporary Latter-day Saint historians have the benefit of a century and a half of subsequent experience and hindsight.

The editors’ usage of the term *myth* as an explanatory concept plays off uneasily against current usage. In everyday parlance, myth has a negative meaning: a fable or false account believed in by primitive, nonrational people. According to these editors, who anticipate the reader’s negative response, a myth is “not a fable or falsehood but a story or understanding about events and situations that have great significance for the people involved.” But J. O. Robertson in *American Myth, American Reality* is more to the point: “Myths are not deliberately, or necessarily consciously, fictitious”;8 instead, they are unkon-

sciously fictitious, in other words, a kind of self-deception under-
mining the editors' claim that such myths are not falsehoods. Pivotal
to the Mormon *mythos*, according to Hallwas and Launius, was the
myth of "persecuted innocence," whereby the Latter-day Saints
thought of themselves as inherently innocent because they were
God's chosen people. This view implied that their opponents were
inherently guilty since any opposition to the efforts of the chosen
people to build the kingdom of God on earth was perceived as perse-
cution by evil and conspiring men. The other side, in this view, had
its own countermyths—the "Gentiles" saw themselves as patriots in
the American myth of democracy and equality, defenders of the
democratic way of life against despotic religious separatists led by
their power-hungry prophet. Subtleties of belief and religious out-
look were irrelevant to them, since they saw their freedoms threat-
ened by the growing political and economic power at Nauvoo.

What may at first seem like a historiographically transparent no-
tion is actually a rudimentary psychoanalytical scheme: Myths, as the
theory goes, are part of the subconscious content that influences a
subject's conscious thoughts, intentions, and behaviors. The situation
in which a subject says or apparently intends one thing but actually
does something else has been of special interest to philosophers and
psychoanalysts at least since Freud for its supposed evidence of the
actual subconscious disunity of the human mind. The solution to the
question of the subject's paradoxical intention, in this view, is to in-
voke supposed unconscious motivations and desires. In the case of
Joseph Smith and his followers, how can the historian explain the ap-
parent inconsistency between their professed high moral values and
the accounts that allege serious wrongdoing on their part? Or, stated
differently, how can a mass of conflicting testimonies be reconciled,
preferably without critically and painstakingly assessing each one

9. In a review of *Zion in the Courts: A Legal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900*, by Edwin B. Firmage and Richard C. Mangrum, *Journal of
the Southwest* 32/2 (1990) 241, Launius more clearly states his views about the antideo-
cratic character of Mormonism, "a religious organization whose views on government . . .
run so contrary to the most cherished principles of the United States."
individually on the basis of its manifold textual detail? This is surely a daunting task. One easy way is to adopt the ready-made theories of the psychoanalysts, as well as the literary critics who have appropriated their jargon, and to resolve the apparent paradox in terms of unconscious myths. The Nauvoo scenario would appear as follows: The Saints, via conversion and membership in the same interpretive community, invest themselves in the myth of "persecuted innocence" (p. 300) by taking on the identity of the Lord's chosen, which operates in their subconscious. The result is that they understand themselves as innocent in whatever they do to further the Lord's kingdom. All who obstruct them are persecutors and thereby are inherently guilty. The Saints' own evil is thus projected onto their supposed persecutors. Such is the superficial level of historical discussion once the older and sounder philological methods of historical criticism are abandoned.

An example of how the editors use the concept of myth to elucidate an account by psychoanalyzing its subject is furnished by a speech delivered by Joseph Smith on 26 May 1844 in which he publicly denies "spiritual wifeism" (pp. 138–41). The editors assume Joseph Smith was actually guilty of the adultery charges to which he was responding, even though Smith insisted publicly on his innocence. This apparent contradiction is read as an instance of the "myth of persecuted innocence": Smith is the Lord's chosen prophet, so whatever he does, he is by definition innocent. But, I ask, what if Smith were not actually guilty of adultery but instead were following a program of legitimate, though clandestine, plural marriage? Then he would have been truly innocent of the charge of adultery and not just mythically so. Furthermore, what Smith denies is spiritual wifeism and adultery, not polygamy or plural marriage. These are very different things; spiritual wifeism is apparently the adulterous version of plural marriage luridly depicted by John C. Bennett in his expose and apparently practiced by him.10 This may seem like quibbling over details, but often

the details undermine superficial explanations and suggest others not considered before. But why should it be necessary to remind a scholar of this?

Nowhere do these editors consider the possibility that Smith or any of his followers might actually have been virtuous, but every account of their supposed crimes is given disproportionate credence. In statements calculated to offend, Smith is everywhere contrasted with “men of integrity . . . such as William and Wilson Law” (p. 112). Furthermore, with regard to the supposed misuse of the law to free Smith from arrest, textual evidence suggests that Smith and his followers truly misunderstood the *habeas corpus* provision of the Nauvoo Charter and thought that it could legitimately be applied outside of Nauvoo. Smith was no lawyer—his (mis)quoting of that portion of the charter in a speech of June 1843,12 reproduced on page 96, suggests how he truly understood it. Joseph Smith quotes it as follows: “The municipal court shall have power to grant writs of *habeas corpus* arising under the ordinances of the city council.” The actual Nauvoo Charter reads: “The municipal court shall have power to grant writs of *habeas corpus* in all cases arising under the ordinances of the city council.” This version contains the phrase *in all cases*, and thus the meaning of the entire clause is significantly different. Omitting the phrase that restricts the power of the Nauvoo City Council significantly with regard to *habeas corpus* would rule out its application in arrests by federal or state authorities, whether in Illinois or Missouri. Joseph Smith’s version suggests that he thought that writs of *habeas corpus* are wholly within the authority of the city council, whereas the actual passage indicates quite otherwise. If this passage was truly misread, misunderstood, and misapplied, how tragic the consequences! The question as to why people misread in this way is a question for

11. The *habeas corpus* provision of the charter was used on several occasions to free Joseph Smith from arrest, a practice which infuriated his enemies and created new enemies, who cited this as evidence that Joseph considered himself above the law.

12. This followed Smith’s triumphal return to Nauvoo when he was freed after having been arrested (or kidnapped) by a Missouri official.
our would-be psychologists. (But since they seem not even to have noticed the variant reading, I would not place much confidence in their answer.)

In their discussion of the resolutions of the Carthage Convention, which met on 1–2 October 1845 to consider the Saints’ decision to leave Nauvoo the following spring, the editors suggest that, in groping after the true reason for incompatibility between the communities, the delegates lacked "a modern comprehension of myth, or the vocabulary for expressing it" (p. 305). Would the resolutions of the Carthage Convention have been stated more clearly if they had held the sophisticated psychomythic perspective of these editors? This I doubt. Yet the editors want to foist their own notions onto long-dead agents. The delegates had no need of any "modern comprehension"—they understood exactly whom they did not like and why, and who had to leave—namely, the Mormons.

Elsewhere in their analysis of a specific Latter-day Saint account,13 the editors proclaim, "The tendency of myth to gloss over the complexities of history is striking" (p. 321). This could be read ironically. They mean those who are self-deceived by myth, but the statement could also be read as applying to those who employ the mythic concept in historical analysis. I would rephrase it thus: "The tendency of those who employ a mythical paradigm to gloss over the complexities of history is striking." One of the dangers of using psychoanalytical concepts in historiography is that it tends to reduce the detail of a subject’s account to standard forms and archetypes.14 Critical detail is lost, and the historian usually ends up revealing more about himself than about his subject. That is the case here, and with much of

13. Joseph Lee Robinson (1811–90) left an account of the last days of Nauvoo. But no date is given for this manuscript: how can we completely assess its historical value? Hallwas and Launius are consistently careless about such details. It would be useful to know since clues within the text suggest that it was written near the end of his life, and if so, then some of the details about Nauvoo polygamy found in no other source may be legitimately questioned (because of faulty memory, etc.).

14. Here the subject’s account is categorized as describing "an episode in the cosmic struggle between God and the devil, good and evil." I read the account and see no such thing, I see, rather, a wealth of interesting details about the man’s religious faith.
the other commentary also. Moreover, the editors attempt both to place a particular selection in its historical context as well as to show how it proves their theory of Mormon vice and gentile virtue via the intermediary myth. I find this explanatory theory to be inadequate, as are all attempts to view historical data through the lens of a simplistic a priori theory. The result is a loss of important detail and a distortion of events, either in their content or significance.

Just how superficial an analysis is advocated by Hallwas and Launius may be seen from this statement: "It is impossible to produce anything other than a simplistic, inaccurate history if documents of the era are not evaluated critically as expressions of myth and ideology" (p. 8). This is a very revealing declaration since they unequivocally state their intention to read texts not for what the texts can tell us but for what they want to find in those texts. This approach biases the reading with imported concepts. Do the editors mean that all histories written before these explanatory notions were invented are to be discarded? Such a procedure privileges and prioritizes this particular theory to an unacceptable degree. Documents (if they express anything at all) express intention that must be understood against the socio-linguistic background of their time. A competent historian must be thoroughly familiar with the idiom of the period under consideration. Myth and ideology are modern constructs foisted upon these accounts, forcing them to say things never intended by their authors. So, the result is that the editors allow neither side to speak for itself but make both speak to the editors' own agenda.

Furthermore, in their attempt to speak for the other side, Hallwas and Launius dismiss the work of believing Latter-day Saint historians about their own religious history, claiming that it is impossible for believers to understand the truth about their own sacred history. This is another egregious fallacy, that of ad personam, or dismissing a person's statements or arguments simply because of some personal feature of his character, instead of examining his words on their own merits. The reason for this, they maintain, is that this very history is central to the myths held by the believer that cannot, by
definition, be false for him. In this, Hallwas and Launius rely on the views of Jan Shipps: "By its very nature [sacred history] can only be retold and defended; not reinvestigated, researched" (quoted on p. 2).

An example of rejecting a work of scholarship on these grounds concerns a landmark (and lengthy) legal study by Elder Dallin H. Oaks before he became an apostle. The editors casually dismiss this thorough and fair study, asserting that Oaks "has tried to pound a square peg into a round hole in seeking to legitimate the clearly illegal act of destroying the Expositor" (p. 9 n. 6). Oaks's leadership role in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is also mentioned, evidently intended to cast his scholarship into doubt. But I ask: If the destruction of the Expositor were "clearly illegal" (as nonlawyers Hallwas and Launius characterize it), then how could there be room for Oaks's extensive legal discussion? Nevertheless, Oaks is to be commended for the thorough character of his scholarship in considering all perspectives in the Expositor affair, doing so in the context, as far as possible, of the legal knowledge, practice, and precedents of the time. He has thus exerted a much greater effort to understand the complexities of these events than Hallwas and Launius seem capable of doing. Furthermore, Oaks does not whitewash the Saints but criticizes their deeds when appropriate. He clearly distinguishes which actions of the Nauvoo City Council were legal and which were not, according to the legal practice of the time. Rather than offhandedly dismissing the work of a scholar such as Oaks, Hallwas and Launius could learn a sounder and more just way of handling historical texts and issues, which approach is lacking in their present treatment.

In a description of their method in the preface, the editors propose to read each account "as a symbolic structure, an expression of the author's inner self" (p. ix). This sounds less like historiography and more like an attempt at the (pseudo-)objectivity of psychoanalytic "science." Once again, this conceptual importation is blatant. They continue to sound not like historians so much as literary critics:

“We would like to help historians ... to read better, to realize that nonfiction writing provides not just facts but fascinating self-revelations.” As I stated earlier, the approach they take does produce self-revelations, but of the historian’s self, not the subject’s. I cringe whenever humanistic scholarly discussion degenerates into talk of symbols and universals because these are several steps removed from direct evidence. I am usually uncertain what scholars mean by these terms or how such concepts are more relevant to the subject under discussion than to those doing the discussing. Symbolic structure and self-revelations may be appropriate for discussing a poem in freshman English but are not suitable for analyzing historical documents, at least among professional historians.

Consistent with their predilection for literary criticism, these editors seem more interested in the writing per se, the style of a given account, and not in its credibility as a historical source. Some sources are praised for no other reason than being well-written (in the editors’ opinion), and others are criticized for falling short of some unstated standard. For example, on pages 340 and 342 two accounts written by anonymous reporters describing Nauvoo in late 1846 are praised for the quality of their prose. The first is called a “very effective piece of writing,” and the second, “another well-written description of Nauvoo.” On the other hand, the apparent misspellings in Vilate Kimball’s account (pp. 214–16) are taken as evidence of her lack of education. Thus the old stereotype of the Latter-day Saints’ ignorance and gullibility is underscored. The editors are apparently ignorant of the fact that English spelling was not standardized until a later period. Who would take Shakespeare’s multifarious spellings, for example, as evidence of a lack of education? The historian’s purpose ought not to be to admire beautiful writing but to evaluate a source for its historical value, a practice which is almost completely lacking in this book. A rhetorically well-crafted piece of prose may be worthless as historical evidence; yet, if we allow ourselves to admire its style, we may be prone to deception. One of the conspicuous features of Brodie’s historical fiction that deluded many was her fine
prose style. (It truly makes a good read.) That a work of history is well-written does not entail that it is soundly researched or carefully reasoned.

In analyzing so many personal historical accounts, Hallwas and Launius indulge in a kind of crude psychologizing attempt to reveal the self behind the words. Very often the editors claim to know what an individual was thinking or really intended. On page 3, for example, while discussing the actions and motivations of the dissenting Mormons who published the *Expositor*, they declare that “the dissenters’ actual motive” was to reform the “Mormon church.” The editors do not, however, explain how they are privy to this information. Was it divined, or does it derive from their pseudoscientific psychologizing analysis? What evidence is there on which to base any analysis, apart from the dissenters’ own statements? The dissenters’ actions and words suggest a far more complex intention than simply to reform the church. A historian should show an awareness that no bare facts can be extracted from an account: The truth of an author depends on his rhetorical stance and purpose as depicted by the manifold detail of the text, not by a hypothetical reconstruction of the contents of his inner self. Motivation is not among the phenomena but must be rationally inferred, and this is largely determined by the paradigm from which an author’s reasoning derives.

The dissenters’ actions were, according to the editors (who accept their tendentious statements in the *Expositor* at face value), “an ethical protest by some Nauvoo church members against what they believed was oppression from an ecclesiastical institution gone awry” (p. 111). How ethical was it to launch a slanderous attack, filled with innuendo and obscene rhetoric, which they must have realized (and even perhaps intended) would bring mob action against the church leaders as well as possible injury to ordinary people? They probably realized there was no other way to wrest control of the church from Joseph Smith than to generate a popular uprising against the leaders. In addition, the editors make another misstatement: The dissenters were not just “some Nauvoo church members,” as Hallwas and Launius maintain, but high-ranking leaders in the church and community,
some of whom apparently had clashed with Smith (and perhaps others) over business matters. Although Hallwas and Launius assert that “There is no evidence . . . that the dissidents wanted anything but the reforms they mentioned in their newspaper” (p. 160), the rhetoric in the *Expositor* and the actions of the dissidents provide abundant evidence to the contrary.

Attempts at mind reading are even more blatant in other passages in which psychoanalytical jargon is used freely. In describing the deliberations of the Nauvoo City Council against the dissenters, which occurred on 8 June 1844, the editors refer to the “inner tensions of the accusers.” And with Orson Spencer’s remark about the dissenters being “covenant breakers,” we are told that he “unconsciously put his finger on the repressed anxieties that haunted the Mormon mind” (p. 149). This is a great example of pretended historiography. The editors’ introduction contains the following assessment of the conflict: “In psychological terms, both sides repressed (and hence ignored) their own potential for evil and projected it onto their ideological opponents” (p. 6). In describing an account by a former member, the editors comment: “This letter reveals the inner state of people who have rejected the core myths of their church” (p. 169). “Unconsciously”? “Repressed”? “Projected”? “Inner state”? Please. These terms belong in the psychoanalyst’s vocabulary, not the historian’s. Have we learned nothing from Brodie’s example of how not to write history? Since the book under review is a collection of primary documents, perhaps it would have been better served had the editors simply provided the necessary historical background and withheld commentary. The slipshod analysis that they do provide is worse than none at all.

If historical or textual analysis is to be included at all in a book such as this, it should be thorough, at least in the case of the pivotal accounts. Every historical document has a rhetorical purpose, for

16. This is the meeting at which the *Expositor* was determined to be a nuisance that must be eradicated.

17. Letter of Isaac and Sarah Scott, dated 16 June 1844, describing what they object to in Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice.
example, that a historian should take into account. Furthermore, a historian must possess a command of the way language was used in the particular period under examination. These editors seem to be clueless as to the explosive power of the obscene rhetoric of the *Expositor* in the linguistic context of the time. As mentioned earlier, Oaks, in his thorough analysis of the legal aspects of that affair, shows a keen awareness of such linguistic details. I add that, given its lurid content, even the name of the paper is racy—“expositor” means “one who exposes, who strips (something) naked.” Future historians ought to pay closer attention to the details in the words themselves to avoid unwarranted conclusions such as those of the present editors. One must be aware that English has changed since the days of Joseph Smith—it is easy to read an account from that time and think we understand it. Fortunately, reference works can provide clues as to what various words meant then—the Oxford English Dictionary and the reprint of the 1828 Webster dictionary ought to be basic tools for the historian of this period.

Hallwas and Launius seem oblivious to the fact that certain sources are inherently untrustworthy, something that can be ascertained from the texts themselves. For example, one woman reports that she solemnly promised not to tell what passed between her and church leaders but then proceeded to break her confidence in the letter reproduced on pages 122–25. How can such a source be trusted? She lied once—why not again? Furthermore, the testimony of the disaffected from any group must be taken with caution by virtue of the fact that they are disaffected. Similarly, an interview with Sarah Pratt (pp. 125–28), who became estranged eighteen years earlier, is included in all its bitter detail, describing events that supposedly took place over forty years earlier. (The amount of elapsed time since the events described ought to be sufficient to render this account suspect). The editors take particular delight in this account, which con-

18. A lengthy letter written by Martha Brotherton at the request of John C. Bennett, dated 13 July 1842; she was supposedly propositioned by Joseph Smith with the connivance of other church leaders.
tains details of Smith’s supposed adulterous encounters and John C. Bennett’s ameliorating abortions that are found in no other source. Pratt’s report contains details that surpass nearly all other sources and is replete with stylistic details of disaffection that could be demonstrated by thorough textual scrutiny. My scientific background predisposes me to prefer simpler explanations; it is simpler to suppose that Pratt and Bennett had the adulterous relationship while Orson was away on church errands than to hypothesize a broad conspiracy between the leaders of the church and their married paramours. The possibility that Pratt lied and had ample motivation for doing so, as the wife of a leading apostle, is not even considered, although the editors are quick to impute deception to other accounts that seem to favor the standard Latter-day Saint view of Nauvoo polygamy. But these editors enthusiastically and uncritically accept such unfavorable testimony as valid. In both cases, the responsible historian must assess the author’s intention as manifest in her words, not from an a priori and anachronistic theory.

Specific reports of Mormon vice are given disproportionate credibility without considering the validity of the testimony. “The evidence of Mormon theft is substantial” (p. 67). This assertion is supported only by a few anecdotes remembered decades after the supposed events, which is hardly “substantial” evidence. Even the minimal reported cases of theft may have been normal for neighboring populations of the time and not due to any supposed condoning of theft by the Saints. This possibility is not even considered—thief is explained through the mythical notion of the Mormons’ “inherent innocence” and their arrogant belief in their right to take whatever they pleased. I suspect the reason Hallwas and Launius so readily accept these reports is their predilection for simple a priori theory: They already know that the Saints were antidemocratic, self-righteous, deluded,

19. Including how Joseph Smith supposedly frequented houses of prostitution, had intercourse with married women so that the children of these illicit unions would appear to belong to the cuckolded husband, and employed the expert services of the abortionist “Dr.” Bennett.
and dangerous fanatics, so they all too readily accept slim evidence that favors this view, and any evidence to the contrary is simply false.

The most damaging criticism I have of this book is that the editors fail to appreciate what religion is. This is a lethal flaw in historians who undertake to write about the history of a religious group. They make the outrageous claim: "The only documented case of out-and-out religious persecution enacted in Hancock County" was the persecution of the dissenters and the destruction of the press by means of which they "dared to point out Mormon shortcomings in their newspaper and demand reform" (p. 6). In this view, the editors seem uncritically to follow the resolution of the Carthage Convention: "We do not believe [the Mormons] to be a persecuted people. We know that they are not; but that whatever grievances they may suffer are the necessary, and legitimate consequences of their illegal, wicked and dishonest acts" (p. 307). I point out, however, that religion is more than beliefs and rituals, a fact that we tend to forget in our secular society. It is an entire way of living. Latter-day Saints were trying to build a community, as they and many other religious traditions—such as those of Jews and Muslims—have sought to do at various times and places. Whatever outside agency frustrates that purpose commits to some degree or other religious persecution, whether an outsider would call it that or not. Religious persecution is thus classified by those who suffer it. Nauvoo would not have existed in the first place without Mormonism, and their neighbors outside that way of life well knew that it was the religion that held the Latter-day Saints together as a people, an ethnicity. In fact, there were, as is well-documented, numerous instances of religious persecution directed against the Saints as a religious people. At the very least, if compelling the Latter-day Saints to leave Nauvoo in 1846 was not religious persecution, I do not know what could be.

In conclusion, although the historical commentary is almost worthless (except perhaps as itself a historical curiosity for future scholars), Cultures in Conflict should be read and compared with sounder scholarship, or even serve as an invitation for other scholars
to do better work. Future scholars should employ time-proven methods of reading historical documents, which are not as easy as invoking a theory such as myth or an ideology that reduces all the details to a simple entity that can easily be dealt with. Such methods are faithful to details of fact, circumstance, and rhetorical situation and require genuine effort to employ them well. I trust that one day someone educated in this more thorough method will produce a good history of the Nauvoo period. I suggest that one can have a valid way of understanding this period without believing that Joseph Smith was a “miserable impostor,” that the Saints were his dupes, justifying evil through “myth,” or that the opposition was a homogeneous evil mob. But that historical treatment is yet to be written. If *Cultures in Conflict* does make a contribution, it is in showing how those not belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ had legitimate concerns about their neighbors. But to champion them instead of the members of the church is to commit the same error of which the editors accuse Latter-day Saint historians. Lastly, I am disappointed that such low-grade history could be published by a reputable academic press.