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Book Reviews


Reviewed by Danel W. Bachman, institute curriculum writer, LDS Church Educational System, and Kenneth W. Godfrey, Utah North Area Director of the LDS Church Education System.

In the preface to their volume, editors Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black note the serious dichotomy between faith and scholarship in many of the books about the life and mission of Joseph Smith. They also remind us that most of these texts simply “rewrite known facts” while “ignoring well-documented new discoveries” (viii). Apparently, then, this book is intended to present new discoveries and at the same time “expand faith.” This approach appealed to us, and a review of the contributors to the volume heightened our expectations. With a small handful of notable exceptions, it would be hard to gather a more seasoned collection of faithful Latter-day Saint scholars on the life of Joseph Smith and early Church history. They have paid their research dues, and most have made significant, if not major, contributions to the Church’s growing historiography. All have demonstrated their faith in both Joseph Smith and the church he restored.

At least a third of the essays in the volume met our high expectations. Dean C. Jessee’s examination of “Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormon Record Keeping” is one of the book’s best. Having access to materials unavailable to other historians, he not only provides the reader with new information but with new interpretations as well. The publication of the first written account of the restoration of the priesthood, taken from the Joseph Smith, Sr., patriarchal blessing recorded by Oliver Cowdery, alone makes the book worthwhile. Jessee, in reviewing the Prophet’s commitment to record keeping, displays the reason why historians today have such an abundance of source material with which to work.
Larry Porter’s essay documents the accomplishments of missionaries proselyting with the Book of Mormon before the organization of the Church. While most of these details have been known to scholars, it is nice to have obvious but hitherto neglected material organized and discussed. Another fine article is William F. Hartley’s examination of the restoration of the priesthood. Like Jessee, Hartley presents new information that successfully answers the arguments advanced by critics who declare that the coming of Peter, James, and John was neither known nor talked about in Church circles until 1835. Hartley’s essay is not as thorough or comprehensive as the hundred-page unpublished study by Ronald Barney, but it is both substantive and significant. Hartley’s explanation of why some early historical accounts say the Church was organized first in Manchester, then in Fayette, and then in Colesville1 seems to be both accurate and persuasive.

Another exceptional chapter is Ronald K. Esplin’s discussion of the gradual development of Joseph’s perception of his mission. Esplin helps us to see a mature prophet, secure in his calling, working against a divine timetable rapidly approaching its final hour. His conclusion that Joseph’s martyrdom was “timely” and came only after he had finished his “mission and business” (282) harmonizes with Richard L. Anderson’s views, though Esplin does not cite Anderson.2

We are once more indebted to Robert J. Matthews for a fine essay on the Joseph Smith Translation. Using four examples, Matthews illustrates that the process of translation was “revelatory” in nature and offers this gem of an insight:

[I]t is a cause for rejoicing that these great truths were made known to the Prophet, not through language and ancient manuscripts, as only a few of the learned might be privileged to learn them, but rather through the spirit of revelation, which every faithful Saint may possess. (184)

Although Matthews has written so often and for so long and so well on the JST, we would venture to suggest yet another avenue of investigation that would bless the Church. With his great knowledge of biblical versions, as well as both the Old and New Testaments, we would like to see him tackle the knotty question of why some ancient documents seem to sustain traditional translations rather than Joseph Smith’s work.

Richard L. Anderson provides a brief though helpful analysis of the Prophet’s last speech, delivered 16 June 1844. The context of the speech shows that it was “a hard-hitting answer to his enemies” and demonstrated Joseph’s “understanding of life’s
thunderclouds which... were darkening around him” (320). Anderson sees the speech as “a solemn valedictory on the significance of his God-given mission and its revolutionary theology.”

Other articles in the book, with some mining, yield historical ore of value. Susan Easton Black, for example, tells us that Symonds Ryder’s son testified that his father did not participate in the mobbing of Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in Hiram, Ohio, because he was “ill in bed at the time.” She also informs us that none of the mobbers “experienced any repercussions from their attempt on Joseph’s life” (170). Daniel H. Ludlow provocatively begins his tribute to Joseph Smith by writing about what he was not—“Joseph Smith is not Deity” nor was he “a tool of the devil” (333)—before telling us what he was. Keith W. Perkins, who has spent more than two decades studying Mormon Kirtland (including census records, plot plans, diaries, and journals), gives us the rather startling news that both the Father and the Son frequented Kirtland meetings. This is a radical departure from the traditional idea, emphasized repeatedly by Joseph Fielding Smith, that the Father rarely visits the earth, and then only to introduce the Son. In view of this, it seems to us that Perkins’s disclosures require laying a more careful groundwork for his audience and more detailed evaluation of the evidence.

Despite the qualifications of the contributors and the undeniable value of some of the essays, the volume is not entirely satisfactory. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has said that if the story of the Church is worth telling, it should be told well. Unfortunately, the style of the majority of these essays is that of the bland graduate student research paper. There is little evidence of a unique personal style. Indeed, we have the impression that if the names were detached from many of the articles and randomly attached to others, even the most well-read in Church history among us would have difficulty discerning who wrote what. Nor is much eloquence to be found in the essays; there is certainly no B. H. Roberts in this group, much less a Churchill, Barbara Tuchman, or a James McGregor Burns.

The most serious indictment that can be leveled against the book is that a full two-thirds of the essays are little more than reviews, summaries, rehashes, or warmed-over narratives. Should one write if one has little to contribute beyond what is available in a hundred other places? The lack of substance and insight is the more lamentable because of the very qualifications of the authors. These are people who should be able to give the Church exceptional analysis and synthesis. Even Leonard Arrington, the master of generalization, and Richard Bushman, with his keen analytical skills, are disappointing in this volume precisely because their reputations led us to higher expectations.
Why then did these writers rush into print with an inferior product? We suspect the problem lies in the "publish or perish" or "publish or drift into career stagnation" phenomenon that has enveloped BYU. An easy way to bolster one's vita is to edit or contribute to a collection of essays. There has been a spate of such volumes emerging from the Provo campus in recent years, and but for a couple of notable exceptions all are similarly flawed. That is, many of the essays reflect the author's having merely dipped into well-worn files or hastily rewritten a lecture. While we do not find fault with the motive, we call attention to the inferior quality of the result. This is low-quality work, not in terms of testimony, faith, and orthodoxy, but in terms of thought, insight, and substance. We wish the editors and Deseret Book had insisted on far more of the latter qualities from the contributors.

Regrettably, the editors did not achieve their stated objective because the writers, in the majority of cases, failed to provide "well-documented new discoveries concerning Joseph" and fell into the trap of "rewriting known facts." While this collection is perhaps half a cut above some others that have been published in recent years, it still falls short of what we have a right to expect.

NOTES

1*Evening and Morning Star* 1 (April 1833): 84.