

seven or eight basic plans permitted by the Church architect's office," is "big, efficient, carpeted, air-conditioned—comfortable." The old meeting house in Zarahemla, built by Jared's great-grandfather, has six stained glass windows for which the people of the village had to save for twenty years. The sun coming through the windows fills the chapel with "a hazy golden glow. And it was as if Brigham Young, the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Angel Moroni, the Father, the Son, and the other figures stood suspended in air, each window a vision."

In virtually every way life seems to have grown cheaper, more standardized, less authentic. Jared, growing up without a father, has had to work hard and accept responsibility all his life. His sons, however, "didn't need poverty or a depression to motivate them. The boys in Indian Hills expected to be presidents of corporations, doctors, lawyers, generals, cabinet members, or scientists, so counted on success always. The Church helped to breed that kind of ambition; doctrine, leadership, organization, pro-

grams, and dedication had become the most important things now." When Jared takes his sons to the creek where he used to swim, "they seemed almost afraid. They wore their trunks, didn't run and yell, didn't really enjoy the rope swing." And yet these sons are both the product and the hope of the new Church: "Their generation would be the new bishops, stake presidents, mission presidents, and other leaders the expanding world Church needed. And they would be successful doctors, lawyers, scientists, professors, and businessmen."

Another list of abstractions; another generation of planned-out lives. But at the end of *Under the Cottonwoods* it is far too late for us to be convinced of the value of these things, far too late to be convinced that Jared's dream of a second mission to Mexico holds anything but an illusion of fulfillment.

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## The Hill Version of the Prophet's Life

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

*Joseph Smith, the First Mormon.* By Donna Hill. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1977. pp. xix, 527, \$12.50.

Prospective Latter-day Saint readers of Donna Hill's biography of Joseph Smith will want to know two things: Is there anything new, and is it sympathetic to the Prophet? The answer to both questions is definitely yes. Historians of Mormonism have been more active in the past ten years than ever before in the Church's history. Although this is her first venture into history, Donna Hill has read their reports and incorporated the new findings. She acknowledges the aid of her brother Marvin Hill, associate professor of History at Brigham Young University. As one of the most astute and best-informed scholars of early Mormonism, Professor Hill is an excellent guide to the current research, much of which he has done himself. The

historians have made few startling discoveries, but at innumerable points details have been added and perspectives enlarged. *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* affords Latter-day Saints convenient access to the new material.

The book is a friendly reading of the facts new and old. "As a descendant of Mormon pioneers who crossed the plains in faith and hardship," Donna Hill confesses in the Preface, "I cannot deny that my sympathies lie with the Saints." That is not to say that the biography was written to please a Mormon audience. On the doctrinally crucial question of revelation, the book does not take a clear stand. A comparison of Joseph's written revelations with Sidney Rigdon's sermons, she says at one point, "makes it apparent how much Joseph's revelations were indebted to inspiration, how-

ever that may be defined, in religious terms or in those of spontaneity and intensity of feeling." On the other hand, she does not explain away the revelations by attributing them to cultural influences, imagination, or psychic perversity. For the most part, she presents the revelations as facts without calling their authenticity into question. The reader interprets them for himself. Mormons will rarely find themselves arguing with the book over the source of Joseph Smith's inspiration.

There will be more arguments about his actions in the Hill version of the Prophet's life. Mormons may not believe he did all the things she says he did, and particularly that he took plural wives long before 1841. Hill presents evidence that Joseph married or had relations with Nancy Johnson while he and Emma resided on the Johnson farm in 1832, and goes on to imply that this incident and similar ones troubled Joseph for many years until he was reassured by the Lord that he was not an adulterer. The book also has Joseph marrying, spiritually at least, women who were already married to other men. By their nature, such matters are usually conjectural, and to imply involvement on the basis of hints or partisan accusations borders on gossip. Some Mormons may prefer to pass over such ticklish points so long as we lack trustworthy evidence.

Even at the points where Mormons are most likely to take offense, however, it should be recognized that Hill never forces the evidence or tries to degrade the Prophet. She discounts the idea of polygamy as an outgrowth of "excessive sexual needs" or as an attempt on Joseph's part to relieve "his strict Puritan conscience which would not allow extramarital sex." In trying to fathom the personal meaning of celestial marriage for Joseph, she gives much more credence to his "enormous capacity to love" and "his wish to bind his loved ones to himself forever, in this life, in the millenium and throughout eternity," a generous interpretation and one in greater harmony with Joseph's total personality.

Mormons would do an injustice to Hill to discredit her work because they differ with her treatment of Joseph in a few instances. Casual readers may overlook the many places where hostile biographers have maligned the Prophet, and where she chooses to put him in a favorable light. The money-digging episodes, Zion's Camp, the Book of Abraham, the Kirtland Safety So-

ciety, bankruptcy in Kirtland, the Nauvoo Legion and land dealings in Nauvoo, among many, have at one time or another been used to blacken Joseph's character. Hill consistently treats the sore spots neutrally or finds evidence of good sense, courage and compassion in the midst of adversity. It is clearly to the Church's advantage to have this book in public libraries. We at last have a volume to recommend to readers who react more favorably to a balanced story than to accounts of flawless heroes.

*Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* is not a deep book. It makes no pretense of plumbing Joseph's character, or of setting him and the Church in place in American culture, or even of explicating Joseph's teachings. The book's strength lies in its narrative line. Hill's mind takes hold when there is conflict or a clash of character. The most gripping chapter is the one on the expulsion from Jackson County. She sketches scenery and character masterfully.

When it comes to doctrine, the book skimps. The priesthood, the temple, Israel, the restoration of all things, the gathering, the last days, the worlds beyond are dealt with in a few sentences each. Not that she disparages Joseph's teachings or denies the importance of doctrine, but the abbreviated treatment affects the picture. Joseph Smith's life becomes a story of motion, of building, of persecution, dissension and conflict. It was all that, but it was also vision and idea. The motive power of the action is lost to us without an understanding of the prophet's depiction of heaven and earth, of past, present, and future, and of providential forces moving the peoples of the earth toward a grand confrontation with the powers of heaven. Without this Hill cannot develop the insight of a visitor to Nauvoo who wrote that Joseph Smith's hold on his followers arose from his dominion in the "empire of their consciences."

Donna Hill sees in Joseph Smith "the enthusiasm and the imagination of a child at play." She never doubts his sincerity or will; she admires him for hanging in when "the fun began to wear thin." But given the narrative strategy she has chosen, she cannot convey to readers the intense seriousness underlying the childlike ebullience. There are no words to express the compelling purposes of Joseph Smith's life apart from the visions of eternity God opened to his view.

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