

## Belief, Respect, and an Elbow to the Ribs

Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, edited by Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 291 pp.

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I had a very strange experience once in which Richard Bushman was indirectly involved. This experience took place when I was in an interview with the chairman of a graduate program at a well-respected university. At the time, I was trying unsuccessfully to convince him to allow biblical Hebrew as one of the learned tongues that would satisfy his program's language requirement. He was surprised to find out that I was not Jewish and that my interest in the language of the Old Testament stemmed from a genuine interest in the scriptures. When I told him I was a Mormon, his attitude seemed to change. I was expecting the usual awkward silence that comes with the revelation that I ascribe to a system of beliefs that is often considered an affront to modern, enlightened, academic thinking. Instead he asked me if I knew Richard Bushman. At the time I was startled, but it soon dawned on me that he really admired Dr. Bushman and that, accordingly, my sincere belief in the Mormon faith would not be held against me, as it normally is in the world of the agnostic academe.

In some measure, reading Bushman's *Believing History* has helped me to understand why I had this experience. Obviously his long and distinguished academic career, lengthy list of publications, and awards like the Bancroft Prize have secured Bushman the esteem of his peers. These accolades must also be coupled (some would say ironically) with the fact that Bushman is a faithful Latter-day Saint holding a strong belief in Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. In *Believing History*, Bushman's editors, Neilson and Woodworth, assemble an impressive group of previously published essays that help to explain Bushman's intellectual and spiritual biography. These essays strike at the tension between the seemingly incompatible views of the believing Mormon and the unbelieving world.

In a few of these essays, Bushman demonstrates with articulate and piercing honesty the importance of admitting one's biases as a scholar and writing for believing and unbelieving audiences alike. He states in the preface that he wants his unbelieving audience to come to know the "richness and compass of Joseph Smith's thought" and then to stop dismissing the Book of Mormon and other original doctrines taught by Smith as simplistic religious fantasy. Simultaneously, he hopes some believing Mormon readers "will feel my elbow in their ribs from

time to time." He states that he wants to "awaken self-satisfied Mormons to the problems we face, both intellectual and cultural" and to tell them they do not understand "how complicated the world is" (viii).

Like most orthodox Mormons, Bushman sees belief in God and the Mormon faith as a sort of gift that a person must choose to accept. He does not think "that people can be compelled to believe by any form of reasoning, whether from the scriptures or from historical evidence." "They will believe," Bushman writes, "if it is in their natures to believe" (28). And if his unbelieving audience is not persuaded, Bushman says, "at least we can ask for respect" (viii).

The essays in *Believing History* reveal an important element of Bushman's epistemological view on Mormon studies. In a word, Bushman sees true objectivity as impossible. While he is "loath to go all the way with postmodernist thinkers," Bushman feels that "no scholarship, no truth, exists in a social vacuum" (40). In other words, the audiences we care about, as well as the ones we do not agree with, influence and even govern our ability to think objectively on important subjects. "Scholarship," Bushman writes, "is the product of people who are located in institutions—universities, research institutes, or circles of like-minded thinkers" (40). He goes on to say, "In taking an intellectual position, they silently, but inevitably, associate themselves with people of a similar outlook" (41).

As I read Bushman, I am reminded of how this sort of unconscious bias can also lead to uncritical acceptance of substandard scholarship. This appears to be the reason behind the recent fiasco at Columbia over the awarding (and then the retraction) of the Bancroft Prize to Michael A. Bellesiles for his controversial book *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000). Many professional historians struggled to explain how a book with so many flaws, errors, and even what now appear to be fraudulent claims could be honored with such a prestigious award. Others recognized that even members of the dispassionate academic community have a tendency to accept some things on faith and not question what they want to believe to be true.

The Bellesiles affair would not have surprised scholars like Richard Bushman. In fact, Bushman cites an example of this silent bias in his own work. After publishing *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, Bushman was called on the carpet for failing to address the fact that Joseph Smith's father "sometimes drank to excess." "My predilection to defend the character of the Smith family had been revealed," Bushman writes, "and my conscious or unconscious wish to clean up the record was now plainly evident" (279). In contrast, Bushman also notes the failures of unbelieving scholars who have an axe to grind. His critique of Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* is especially perceptive: "When Fawn Brodie wrote her brilliant study fifty years ago, she was fleeing Mormonism and had no sympathy for the Mormon reader. She showed no pity as she mowed down the faithful with her account of Joseph Smith. More important, she