

## REVIEWS

### A National Conspiracy?

Robert S. Wicks and Fred R. Foister, *Junius & Joseph: Presidential Politics and the Assassination of the First Mormon Prophet* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005). xii + 316 pp.

Reviewed by Michael W. Homer

Robert S. Wicks and Fred R. Foister selected the title *Junius & Joseph* to emphasize their thesis that Joseph Smith's death was a political assassination. The authors point out that the *Junius* tracts were "issued by *New York Tribune* publisher and political adviser Horace Greeley, who oversaw the national effort to promote American Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay" (7). Thus the title could as well be *Junius versus Joseph* since the authors believe they have demonstrated that the Mormon prophet's assassination was "the deadly result of a Whig-backed conspiracy that arose when it was determined that the Mormon prophet's candidacy [for President of the United States] might well disrupt the outcome of the 1844 presidential election" (5).

The authors state their theses as follows: "that Joseph Smith's murder, rather than being the deadly outcome of a spontaneous mob uprising, was in fact a carefully planned military-style execution. . . . And second, this study presents incontrovertible evidence that the effort to remove the Mormon leader from power and influence extended well beyond Hancock County (and included prominent Whig politicians as well as the Democratic Governor of the state), thereby transforming his death from an impulsive act by local vigilantes into a political assassination sanctioned by some of the most powerful men in Illinois" (5).

The authors' discussion of Illinois and national politics, as well as Joseph's reaction to these events, are well done. And even though they place great emphasis on Joseph's presidential ambitions, they do not ignore the fact that it was the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* which unleashed the hatred of Joseph's detractors, who used this event as an excuse to detain and kill the young prophet. They also demonstrate (as did Dallin Oaks and Marvin Hill in *Carthage Conspiracy*)<sup>1</sup> that the Mormon prophet's murder was "a carefully planned military-style execution" rather than a "spontaneous mob uprising." Thomas Sharp, who claimed to be a Democrat, but who really wanted to sell newspapers and hoped to capitalize on a heavy dose of anti-Mormonism, was the real mastermind of Smith's murder. After Smith was arrested and detained in Carthage for ordering the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, Sharp rallied militia members to Carthage where they

met, planned, and carried out the murder of Smith and his brother. Many of these murderers were motivated by fear that Joseph had too much political power in Hancock County and in surrounding Illinois counties.

But in my opinion, the authors have exaggerated the significance of Joseph Smith's declaration that he was a candidate for the U.S. presidency. The authors argue that even before Smith announced his intention to seek that office he had "power over the ballot box in Hancock County" during the elections of 1843. Thereafter the Whigs and Democrats in Illinois entered into "an uneasy alliance" with the intent of opposing "Joseph Smith's autocratic rule" (48). His entry into the presidential race the following year "was not simply one more third-party candidate for the presidency of the United States." He was the mayor of Nauvoo but also "the charismatic founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (1). As such he was prepared not only to "secure redress for the injuries suffered by the Saints" but also "to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth" (15-16).

While Smith would have been one of the earliest third-party candidates had he lived (William Wirt of the Anti-Masonic Party ran in 1832 and James G. Birney of the Liberty Party ran in 1840 and 1844), it is doubtful that anyone outside the Mormon community took his candidacy as seriously as the authors contend. Although *General Smith's Views* was widely distributed by Mormon missionaries (108), there is little evidence to suggest that either Whigs or Democrats on the national level felt threatened by Smith's intention to seek high office. Nevertheless, the authors insist on characterizing mainstream candidates as "forces in opposition to General Smith's presidential campaign" when they discuss the campaigns of Whig candidate Clay and Democratic candidate Polk even though there is little to suggest that either national candidate considered himself to be running against the Mormon prophet (110).

While Wicks and Foister recognize Sharp's complicity and that John C. Elliott and Levi Williams, who both had local connections, were the two individuals who led the assault on Carthage Jail, they also insist that there was a wider conspiracy. But their argument that "the effort to remove the Mormon leader from power and influence. . . . included prominent Whig politicians as well as the Democratic Governor of the state" and that it was "a political assassination sanctioned by some of the most powerful men in Illinois" is dubious. For example, they place great emphasis on a statement made by Stephen Markham, Joseph Smith's bodyguard, that he broke up a secret tribunal at Carthage on the night before Joseph Smith's murder and that "there were delegates in the meeting from every state in the union except three" (165-66, 265, 271). One wonders why the authors rely on this statement to suggest a broad geographical conspiracy when Markham did not ultimately obtain the document and could not identify the state affiliations of those who attended the meeting. Inexplicably, the authors also seem to consider "the presence of undercover deputy U.S. Marshal John C.

Elliott at Carthage” as evidence of a broader conspiracy (271). Elliott was actually a close associate of Sharp who had been a deputy sheriff and constable at Warsaw.

At the conclusion of the book, they rely on “sociograms” to connect “conspirators” with Joseph Smith and Henry Clay. Based on those connections, they argue that “Clay’s men” conspired to kill the Prophet. Relying on this most circumstantial of evidence, they conclude that “the initial decision to assassinate Joseph Smith was more than likely made by Whig political managers in Illinois, quite possibly at the suggestion of Abraham Jonas, O. H. Browning, or G. T. M. Davis” (269). They suspect Jonas because he was a local Whig leader, because he supplied a printing press to the publishers of the *Expositor*, and because Governor Ford appointed him to act as a liaison with the Mormons following Smith’s murder. They suspect Browning primarily because he was a Whig and represented the men who were indicted for Smith’s murder. Davis is suspected because he was Whig, was present at the Hamilton House the night before Smith’s death, and because he authored a booklet claiming that Smith’s murder was not motivated by politics (267–69). While their conclusion that these men were part of the conspiracy is premised on circumstantial evidence, it is also true that, even if these individuals did conspire to kill Smith, it does not prove that there was either a state-wide or a national conspiracy or even that it was directed primarily through the Whig Party.

It is even more difficult to accept the authors’ suggestion that the conspiracy may have extended beyond Illinois. They speculate about the possible involvement of “national Whig leaders” such as John J. Hardin, Jacob Burnet, and even Henry Clay, stating that their involvement “remains an open question” (269). They seem surprised that Henry Clay never commented on Smith’s death (265), when it would have been surprising if Clay *had* commented on Smith’s death, either positively or negatively. One wonders what audience any presidential candidate in 1844 could have addressed on that subject hoping to benefit his campaign? Even more surprisingly, they question whether Stephen A. Douglas, or even Sidney Rigdon, may have been part of the conspiracy. They are quite suspicious of Rigdon because of “the disturbing fact that there is no record of Rigdon ever having made a campaign speech in support of Joseph Smith.” Rigdon’s motive for conspiring to murder Joseph, they posit, was Joseph’s love interest in Rigdon’s daughter Nancy (270).

Although *Junius & Joseph* is a good read when the authors are focused on marshalling evidence, many of their conclusions and most of their suspicions are not grounded in the facts. The best discussion of the assassination of Joseph Smith remains the second chapter of Oaks’s and Hill’s *Carthage Conspiracy*. I would also recommend Chapter 29 and the epilogue of Richard Bushman’s *Joseph Smith: Rough Rolling Stone* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005) which discusses some of these same events and makes more careful conclusions.