

## REVIEWS

### The Diary of a Historian

Richard Lyman Bushman. *On the Road with Joseph Smith*. (New York: Mormon Artists Group Press, 2006). 83 pp., unbound in paper folio in cherry wood slipcase, \$150.

*Reviewed by Marshall Hamilton, proprietor of Harpers Ferry Books, a used and rare bookshop in historic Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, who has, as his main Mormon history interest, the Nauvoo period.*

In 1945, Fawn McKay Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, was published by Knopf. The book received critical acclaim, establishing Brodie's career as a biographer.

Nevertheless, the biggest natural market for a scholarly bio of the Prophet, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was much more restrained.

Brodie presented Joseph Smith as a good-natured, lazy, extroverted, and unsuccessful treasure seeker, who, in an attempt to improve his family's fortunes, first developed the notion of golden plates and then the concept of a religious novel, the Book of Mormon, which he partially based on an earlier work, *View of the Hebrews*, by a contemporary clergyman. Brodie asserts that at first Joseph Smith was a deliberate impostor who, at some point, became convinced that he was indeed a prophet—though without ever escaping “the memory of the conscious artifice” that created the Book of Mormon.

Fawn Brodie grew up in Utah in a Mormon family; her father was the brother of Apostle David O. McKay. Despite her family connections, Brodie was excommunicated from the Church in 1946.<sup>1</sup>

Brodie's work is often seen as the first scholarly attempt to tell Joseph Smith's life story. Sixty years after the publication of *No Man Knows My History*, Alfred A. Knopf published another such attempt: *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, written by Richard L. Bushman, a retired history professor from Columbia University.

Timed to coincide with the bicentennial of Smith's birth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* was published on September 27, 2005; by the

following May, Knopf had printed 70,000 copies, vastly exceeding Bushman's own hope for sales of 20,000 or so.

Bushman, like Brodie, refused to shy away from controversial topics in his biography. Like Brodie, he describes Joseph Smith's money digging, plural marriages—including polyandrous relationships—and freemasonry, among others.

I was interested in Bushman's book and curious about how it would be received by members of the LDS Church and by Church leaders. Modern correlated Church manuals seem to me to be at least as sanitized now as they were two generations ago. The tolerance among the leadership of the Church seems about as resistant to departures from orthodoxy as ever. I wondered whether the Church might treat Bushman in the same way Brodie had been handled sixty years ago.

So I was very interested when I learned that Bushman has documented his hopes, his concerns, and his successes in an unusual author's memoir: *On the Road with Joseph Smith*.

At the suggestion of Glen Nelson, who chairs the Mormon Artists Group of New York City, Bushman kept a diary for about a year, from July 2005 until August 2006. During that time, the editorial work on *Rough Stone Rolling* was completed, the book was published, and Bushman traveled around the country to publicize it. The book was reviewed by some Church and national publications and ignored by others; Bushman found both acceptance and rejection from LDS and non-LDS readers. In the diary, Bushman describes his reactions to these events and presents a look at how they affected him.

By revealing who he is and what he stands for and by candidly describing his own reaction to other people's responses to the book, he manages to bear an eloquent testimony of his own faith. With this unconventional expression of testimony, he conveys a message of hope for those whose faith does not rely on the uncontroversial version of Church history provided by the Church Curriculum Department, whose testimony does not depend upon an idealized image of perfection in Church leaders, and whose own questions of faith are actually strengthened by learning of other people's struggles in being faithful.

Before I get too deep into what Bushman says, let me describe the first edition of this work. It is, in a word, beautiful. At \$150 per copy it should be nice; I'd say it's worth it. "Slipcase" only begins to describe the outer package. It's not cardboard like most slipcases; it's real wood: natu-

ral cherry, known for its streaks of blond and pink sapwood and warm red heartwood. Each slipcase, of course, is unique.

The text is set in Caslon #3 Roman, a traditional face, with fairly pronounced serifs and a very pleasing balance of thick and thin vertical strokes. This variant of William Caslon's seventeenth-century original is slightly heavier than the original. My only complaint with the type is that the lines are more than six inches long. Even with larger than usual leading, that's too long to be truly readable.

The pages are 8½x11, printed in a single column. The paper is Mohawk Superfine white with an eggshell finish. This is not a book in the usual sense; there is no glue or stitching to bind the pages. The leaves of paper are printed on only one side, and collected in a folio with a green cover, printed on the front and spine with the title of the book. The entire folio fits into the slipcase for safekeeping. The walls of the slipcase are about ¼" thick, fitted and glued together, creating a very sturdy "book."

Mormon Artists Group published 100 copies of this edition, each one signed "Richard Lyman Bushman" and hand-numbered on one of the introductory pages. Regrettably, the first edition is completely sold out. As of this writing, one copy is available on internet book marketplaces, offered at \$500; but a second edition is planned for May 2007 from Greg Kofford Books of Salt Lake City, to be released at the Mormon History Association's annual meeting.

The text of *On the Road with Joseph Smith* consists of actual entries from the diary, full of Bushman's candid introspection. Was Bushman an apologist for Joseph Smith? He considers the question, anticipating that he will get "stuck" with the term. He finds the term unfair to his motives and the result of his seven years of work. He tried to tell the story as he saw it, without bending the evidence. He tried to see the world as Joseph Smith saw it. Is that apologetic? he asks, without knowing the answer (6).

The first formal review of *Rough Stone Rolling* was mostly positive, written by Jeffrey Needle of the Association of Mormon Letters. Bushman was annoyed by Needle's comment that as Bushman presents the story in all its richness, "warts and all," he added "the veneer of credibility" (7, 11). It's sometimes surprising how thin-skinned Bushman was as reviews of his book came out. Sometimes he is annoyed by more mundane concerns: losing his cell-phone charger, for example.

The diary also quotes letters that Bushman received and answered, plus his preparations for providing quotations for news articles, reviews,

media interviews, and personal appearances. Bushman works hard on every answer to make it pithy and clear. Especially perplexing is dealing with the “tough” issues like polyandry. Bushman suggests that Joseph wanted to bind everyone to everyone and admits that it “is hard for us to understand these days.” Bushman admits that his explanation is not quite satisfactory but tells a correspondent: “I hope that you don’t make it a matter of belief or unbelief, but of inquiry” (63–64).

The major media reviews for *Rough Stone Rolling* were by Larry McMurtry in the *New York Review of Books* and by Walter Kirn in the *New York Times*. McMurtry talked much more about Joseph Smith (he dislikes him) than about Bushman (McMurtry feels Bushman is naive for refusing to face up to problems with the golden plates) (41). Kirn imagined Bushman wearing “intellectual bifocals”—one lens skeptical and clear, the other reverent and rosy, as good a description of a Urim and Thummin as I can imagine. Overall, Kirn, a lapsed Mormon, is supportive of Bushman’s efforts to make sense of Joseph Smith. Bushman is relieved not to have been “publicly shamed” by the *New York Times*, his hometown newspaper (68).<sup>2</sup>

All in all, Bushman reveals much about himself in the diary: his concerns, his occasional depression, and his reasons for the choices he has made.

Bushman is a faithful, active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In fact, he is a stake patriarch and a temple sealer. He even sought and received a blessing from Apostle Boyd K. Packer before starting to write *Rough Stone Rolling* (21). He makes clear that he’s not sure how Church authorities might react to the published biography or what repercussions there might be from the Church and notes no official condemnations of either him or the biography. The only direct response is what he calls a “generous note” from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (68). He does describe “critical comments emanating from the Church Education System” which he characterizes as “a kind of unbending stiffness that denies the realities” (55).

Although I personally have met Bushman only once, at a Sunstone meeting, his willingness to share his personal reactions throughout the diary makes me feel quite well acquainted with him.

For example, to a reader who says he still believes in the Prophet but has troubling questions, Bushman advises confronting concerns directly: “[T]ake the top three [problems] and write them down . . . describe exactly

what happened and why this bothers you. . . . Consider the biases, both pro and con, of those who describe the events. Then ask yourself why does this seem contrary to what a prophet would do. What exactly is wrong? . . . Try to be hard-headed about this” (72). He advises that the reader consider Smith’s accomplishments as well as the concerns and weigh whether the entire package is in keeping with his prophetic role. I personally found his advice quite profound—a way for a thinking person to survive in a faith-based organization.

This diary can, and should, be read in a single sitting. After Bushman describes his highs and lows, his good interviews and those where he felt himself falling short, the thoughtful and the thoughtless reviews, he ends the diary with an essay he wrote for Laurel Thatcher Ulrich to be published in the online journal *Common-Place*. In his essay, he describes his thinking on the role of passion, commitment, and balance in making sense of our world and its history: “What is the place of personal values and beliefs in scholarship? Our personal commitments bias our work, but is that necessarily bad? Historians write with passion about slavery, race, women, war and peace, freedom, and injustice. Is their work marred by their belief? Beyond question, their values shape the work” (81). He asserts: “My advantage as a practicing Mormon is that I believe enough to take Joseph Smith seriously” (82).

Bushman’s problem with Brodie is that she took a cynical view of Joseph Smith. Once she had decided that he was an impostor, that assumption cast a long shadow over her biography of Smith. Joseph’s exhortations to godly service, his self-sacrifice, his pious letters to his wife, and his apparent love for his fellow-workers all look like blatant manipulation to her.

Skeptics and cynics do not work at penetrating the mind of an impostor; as a believer Bushman can try to show what about Joseph Smith appeals to his followers, today’s Mormons as much as those who moved from England to Nauvoo.

In refusing to be cynical, Bushman also made a conscious decision to be candid. Mormons technically don’t believe in infallibility, but by insisting on perfection in human leaders, Church members have created a virtually impossible image of their prophets. Curiously, the efforts to fashion a better-than-human person in Joseph Smith have resulted in a person who is more image than human.

In *Rough Stone Rolling*, Bushman tried to keep everyone, believer and