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Book Reviews

Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat. *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon*. Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015.

Reviewed by Matthew Bowman

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IN HIS FOREWORD TO THIS BOOK, Richard Bushman praises it for its meticulous attention to the historian's craft. Michael MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat have served as editors on the Documents series of the Joseph Smith Papers Project—spending months documenting, annotating, and organizing the surviving historical material from the early years of Joseph Smith's religious career—and their experience with those primary sources shines in this volume. They have tracked down scraps of information in archives from New York to Utah, from obscure nineteenth-century publications as far-flung as the *Ohio Observer* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and even from much better-known sources like the Joseph Smith revelations, which they have reread with a keen eye for detail and often-missed nuance.

This means, as Bushman observes, that this book may serve to “bring Latter-day Saint readers up to date on the results of the latest historical research” (p. v). And indeed, that is a great strength of this book. Historians will learn some things from this book, for MacKay and Dirkmaat have done much to unearth material that complicates the conventional narrative of Joseph Smith's early life. For instance, one might take a single well-known story the authors explore again: that of Martin Harris's adventures with the transcript of “Caractors” derived from Joseph Smith's

plates, which Martin took to the East Coast with hopes that a scholar might aid him in understanding them. First, MacKay and Dirkmaat suggest that Joseph Smith likely made a sizable number of these transcriptions, a suggestion that may well surprise. Then, far from the conventional narrative, which posits that Charles Anthon of Columbia was Harris's primary target because of his expertise in ancient languages, MacKay and Dirkmaat suggest that the Rutgers Medical College professor Samuel Mitchill was the man Harris really wanted to see. Mitchill is often glossed over simply as the one who referred Martin to the more well-known Anthon, who gets more notice because Joseph Smith paid him attention in his own history. But MacKay and Dirkmaat posit that taking note of Mitchill's interests and career contextualizes Harris's experience in a broader antebellum fascination with Native American civilization. Mitchill had built a reputation for studying Native American languages and, from that study, developing theories about the origins of the Native nations (who came, in his telling, from Asia, Polynesia, and Scandinavia). Indeed, in 1823 a man named Abraham Edwards brought Mitchill a manuscript with strange characters on it that he claimed to have found underneath a building he had owned. He hoped that Mitchill could provide a translation, thinking it was the product of some ancient American civilization. As MacKay and Dirkmaat sensibly point out, the notion that the hieroglyphs on the plates were "reformed Egyptian" and not, as one who took Joseph Smith's story for granted might reasonably assume, a Native American language seems to have been a later development. MacKay and Dirkmaat have unearthed several letters demonstrating that, in part inspired by Mitchill's work, Anthon had become a collector of Native American writing and stories. Thus, if Mitchill could make neither heads nor tails of Harris's transcript, passing him on to Anthon would have made sense.

Several times in the book, MacKay and Dirkmaat perform a feat like this, taking a well-known anecdote from the career of Joseph Smith and tending it until it blossoms into a local representative of a far larger story about life and culture in the early republic. This strategy embeds Joseph Smith in his time, making his story seem more comprehensible for his advocates and less outlandish to his critics. Such rich context

manages to make the ever-elusive mind and heart of Joseph Smith seem much closer; his decisions, beliefs, and calculations emerge into if not clarity, at least comprehensibility.

MacKay and Dirkmaat offer several other novel historiographical updates on the story of the translation. They make the case for the misdating of the revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants 19; they offer some hypotheses as to why E. B. Grandin did not seem eager to promote the Book of Mormon he had just published; and they do an admirable job sorting out Joseph Smith's several seer stones. In a move clearly derived from the detailed and meticulous research that the Joseph Smith Papers Project demanded, they also offer a clear and exhaustive unpacking of the various financial and legal maneuvers that the publication of the Book of Mormon required. Given all this, historians will likely find this book useful.

The authors' command of historiographical technique is all the more admirable considering that this book was written for a lay Latter-day Saint audience. From this perspective, the book reflects what Bushman praises it for: an attempt to inject professional historiographical methods into the lay Mormon conversation about their religion's past. For instance, the authors routinely cite E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled*, long dismissed as a collection of aggrieved testimonies critical of Joseph Smith. That it surely is, but though these authors are friendly to Smith, they acknowledge that the historian's task is not to dismiss sources when their bias may not be the same as one's own bias (for all have biases), but rather to evaluate each source for its worth and to use it insofar as it seems worthwhile. To this end, the authors use Howe with care, qualifying quotations when it seems warranted with words such as "likely" (p. 7). But they also acknowledge simply by the citation that Howe's sources have some worth. They also seek to rehabilitate the reputation of Lucy Harris, the wife of Martin Harris, who like Howe is often dismissed by members of the LDS Church as a shrewish caricature unaccountably hostile to Joseph Smith. The authors argue that the source of this animus was Lucy Smith, Joseph Smith's mother, who proves herself in her account to be "not fond of Lucy Harris," and who

therefore “seems to paint her in the worst light possible” (p. 25). They try their best to give context and justification to the variety of inhabitants of the Palmyra and Rochester areas who proved to be uninterested in or hostile to the Book of Mormon, like the printer and later political heavyweight Thurlow Weed. Using these sorts of strategies, the authors work gently to draw lay Mormons away from hagiography and the knee-jerk use of the term *anti-Mormon* to dismiss any account that seems hostile and toward a fuller and well-rounded grasp of their faith’s history.

Of course, by the same token historians should be aware that the book’s intended audience means that the authors take for granted the essential truth of Joseph Smith’s claims; indeed, the book is scholarly enough that I found it slightly jarring when the authors occasionally make straightforward claims about, for instance, the Book of Mormon-era provenance of the spectacles Joseph Smith found with the plates, or when they ascribe the Whitmers’ willingness to put the young seer Smith up while he worked on the translation not simply to visions (an entirely respectable phenomenological claim) but to the influence of the Lord. These claims are in the language of faith rather than in the language of the academy, and though professional historians will likely find them distracting, it is a credit to the authors how fluidly they are able to shift from one to the other. The authors have also commissioned the BYU artist and professor Anthony Sweat to produce new art documenting the translation process in depictions more accurate than those often seen in official church productions; Sweat’s illustrations, and his brief account of the reasoning behind them, are a welcome addition. Despite this, the book is a bit more heavily illustrated than I would have liked, including multiple instances where an essentially identical photo is reproduced on several pages. This was probably not the authors’ doing, but it is somewhat distracting.

In sum, though this book may well be of interest and use to serious historians, it is most valuable as a book intended for the Mormon lay audience. It is another brick in the edifice of responsible history for a lay LDS audience now being built. Hopefully it finds a wide audience.

Matthew Bowman is associate professor of history at Henderson State University, the author of *The Mormon People: the Making of an American Faith*, and coeditor of *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*.

Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds. *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Parts 1 and 2: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*. Facsimile edition. Vol. 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Janiece Johnson

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IN EARLY AUGUST 2015, the Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints held a press conference for the forthcoming two-part volume 3 of the Revelations and Translations series of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. While a public event was standard, an actual press conference was a little out of the ordinary. The highlight of the press conference was two pages of photographs included in the volume—beautiful high-resolution photographs of Joseph Smith's brown seer stone. Though the original stone continues to reside in the LDS First Presidency's vault, the photographs started a rumble through the Mormon studies community that would quickly reach the larger church. The general absence of seer stones from the devotional church narrative meant that for many, these photographs were a complete surprise. And while the existence of this stone was not surprising for many historians, this was certainly not a predictable part of the larger continued efforts at transparency by the LDS Church History Department. It seemed as though a mystical object of a supernatural past realm suddenly broke through the mundane surface of the present.