

Georgian Houses in England and Virginia: Origins and Development through the 1750s (Toronto: Associated University Presses for the University of Delaware Press, 1986); Harold Wickliffe Rose, *The Colonial Houses of Worship in America Built in the Colonies before the Republic and Still Standing* (New York: Hastings House, 1963); Roger Moss, *Century of Color: Exterior Decoration for American Buildings, 1820–1920* (Watkins Glen, N.Y.: American Life Foundation, 1981); and Ellen Denker and Bert Denker, *The Rocking Chair Book* (New York: Mayflower Press, 1979).

3. Margaretta Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); and David Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

INTRODUCTION TO LAURIE MAFFLY-KIPP

LAURIE MAFFLY-KIPP has been at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill since 1989. She received her B.A. from Amherst College in English and religion (summa cum laude) and completed her Ph.D. in American history at Yale University (1990). She is now professor and chair in the Religious Studies Department and holds an adjunct appointment in the American Studies Department. Professor Maffly-Kipp's research and teaching focuses on African American religions, religion on the Pacific borderlands of the Americas, and issues of intercultural contact. In *Religion and Society in Frontier California* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994) she explored the nature of Protestant spiritual practices in gold-rush California. In articles on Mormon-Protestant conflicts in the Pacific Islands, African Americans in Haiti and Africa, and Protestant outreach to Chinese immigrants in California, Professor Maffly-Kipp has analyzed the religious contours of nineteenth-century American life. Along with Leigh Schmidt and Mark Valeri, she served as co-editor of *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2006). She also co-edited with Reid Neilson a collection of essays about Mormonism in the Pacific world, *Proclamation to the People: Nineteenth-Century Mormonism and the Pacific Basin Frontier* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), wrote the introduction for the Penguin Classics edition of the Book of Mormon (2008), and serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Mormon History*.

In 2010, the prestigious Belknap Press imprint of Harvard University Press published Professor Maffly-Kipp's *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); and Oxford University Press published her *Women's Work: An Anthology of African-American Women's Historical Writings from Antebellum America to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), edited with Kathryn Lofton. As if all this were not enough, Professor Maffly-Kipp is president-elect of the American Society of Church History.

LAURIE MAFFLY-KIPP

It's a great pleasure to be here to celebrate and honor the work of a colleague and friend I have admired for many years. I feel particularly fortunate to have been asked to talk about Richard's monumental biography of *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005). One of the books on my list for my comprehensive exams as a graduate student was *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), the first installment of this project. When this extended treatment appeared in 2005, I felt as though I finally had the bookend to that earlier study. The story had been completed. I know that for Richard it felt as though it had been a long time in the making, too. But it was worth the wait. *Rough Stone Rolling* is so clearly the work of a judicious and seasoned scholar who has a thorough command of his sources and an encyclopedic knowledge of his subject. I can't begin to count the number of times in the last five years that I have returned to consult *Rough Stone Rolling* as the definitive account, the last word—well, maybe not the last, for we are academics, after all—on Joseph Smith's life and legacy.

It also seems fitting that Richard's work and this book in particular are the subject of a joint session sponsored by three groups: the American Historical Association, the American Society of Church History, and the Mormon History Association. For these overlapping communities are three of the intended audiences for this book, another being Mormon lay readers who are not scholars or historians. Richard took on a particular kind of challenge in addressing them simultaneously. They are diverse audiences, to be sure: *Rough Stone Rolling* has received views from multiple quarters that exhibit different and sometimes contradic-

tory modes of analysis and critique. They represent not simply different scholarly fields, but communities with distinctive questions, methods, and epistemologies. To Richard's great credit, readers in all of these areas have found much to praise. Ironically, Richard himself has been perhaps his own harshest critic, writing in his later memoir, *On the Road with Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), about his various regrets in terms of the way he approached the subject, detailing things he might have done differently. I would instead credit him with enormous bravery—not only in his willingness to voice publicly his own fears about the reception of his research—fears that we all feel and that most of us spend our lives trying to mask—but also courage in the optimism and audacity of his vision of the possibility of presenting Joseph Smith to believers and nonbelievers alike in a way that all might understand, if not entirely agree with.

If the first thing to be affirmed is the methodological difficulty of this task, the even more striking feature of this project is the stubborn opacity of its subject. I received an email several months ago from someone I did not know. The subject line was of the sort that should always give one pause: “a quick question.” Here was the email: “Do the elements of the Book of Mormon—language, phrasing, sentence structure, nouns, concepts—appear to be similar or related to any religious writings you are familiar with that existed before 1823? I just can't believe Jos Smith Jr. made all that up out of thin air, but I don't believe in divine personages, either. Can you recommend good books on this?”

The question might have been quick, but the answer, as we all know, is not. Joseph Smith Jr. is a complete puzzle of a figure; he is extraordinarily difficult to “explain” as a human being, even if one brackets the claims of miracles. An uneducated young farmboy who produces an extraordinary text and eventually launches an elaborate and bureaucratically sophisticated religious movement; a man who gives his all to the growth of a community yet simultaneously acts in ways that he knows will result in persecution or even his own death; a charismatic figure who elicits both utter loyalty and intense loathing from observers.

These are not easy characteristics to explain, and there is a reason that few people have attempted a comprehensive biographical treatment. The fact that Fawn Brodie's work, first pub-

lished over sixty years ago, has until now been the “go to” book on Smith’s life by most historians outside of the LDS Church, speaks volumes about the reticence of mainstream historians to take on a tough personality—much less tackle the subjects of revelation, the miraculous, and the power of the religious imagination. It is also testimony to the elusiveness of Smith himself. *Rough Stone Rolling* bores directly into some of these puzzles and asks precisely the right set of questions: How can we possibly understand this man? What makes him tick? And I should note that Church leaders have been no more anxious than outsiders to rush to get comprehensive biographies of Smith in print.

One of the highlights of the book for me is the skill with which Richard thinks through a plausible logic for Joseph’s actions over time. He humanizes the young prophet; at times he presents a number of alternative possibilities for behavior—and he tells his reader honestly when Smith becomes a cipher in his own writings; this insight is enormously important as an admission of the limits of the historian’s craft. Richard steers a deliberate middle ground between a hagiographic portrait of Smith and an exposé of his more colorful exploits. The Smith that emerges here gets angry, sometimes impetuously and violently so. He agonizes over his family situation. He runs up debts and runs away from the law. But Bushman provides the social and cultural context that renders many of the Prophet’s reactions understandable, if not always laudable. Bushman gamely tackles the most controversial elements of Smith’s life: the early visions, the translation of the Book of Mormon, the failures of the community in Kirtland and in Missouri, and the intra-communal tensions surrounding the revelation on plural marriage. He gives historians precisely the kind of texture and density that they love, if not always the explanations they can accept.

Richard explained in his later writings that he was also trying to give believing Mormons what he thought they needed: honesty about the character flaws of the most revered of their religious leaders.¹ Smith’s deep humanity in the face of revelatory bombardment could be seen as an endearing attribute in a prophet. But here the gulf between non-LDS historians, who tend to view biography as evidence that can provide a distinctive path into a more general knowledge of the past, and believers, who seek

truth of a different sort in the life of the biographical subject, seems to have become most apparent.

Or is this the most accurate diagnosis of the battle over Joseph Smith's legacy? Is it really evidence of a division between believers and nonbelievers, between those who seek scientific fact in biography and those who clamor for a faith-promoting rendering? It is the easy explanation, to be sure, and it fits with a pattern of intellectual exclusion that Mormons have long felt within the academy and have themselves fostered at times. It is also the way I understood the divide when I reviewed Richard's book—believers versus hostile, nonreligious academics. But on further reflection I believe that this analysis is too easy, and it causes us to overlook some of the more significant methodological questions raised by Richard's work. This presumed war between secular and faithful readings of *Rough Stone Rolling* has been, to my way of thinking, overblown; this relatively simplistic analysis of the situation does not accurately describe the myriad reactions to Richard's interpretive choices or to Smith himself. Apologetics is not the only intellectual fault line that we can see; it prevents us from probing further into the very questions that this work so elegantly raises. I have time here for only a few brief examples that suggest a more complex mapping of the battle over the biography of a religious leader.

In an extended essay in the *FARMS Review* about reactions to *Rough Stone Rolling*, Daniel C. Peterson, a BYU professor, was quite laudatory of Richard's multi-faceted depiction of the prophet: "I hope that Joseph Smith will be perplexing to others. He should be. Unless and until onlookers come to grips with his claims—in my view, until they accept them—they should continue to find him baffling."² By "accept," I take Peterson to mean something quite different from understanding the facts of Smith's life as revealed in the biographical form. Indeed, he seems to suggest that biography cannot completely explain Smith but must be a preliminary step toward another kind of agreement with Smith's religious claims.

An online blogger, also a believer who praised the book, suggests a somewhat different aim: "Bushman's purpose wasn't to 'dig up dirt' on the prophet, but rather to point out that the 'dirt' that has already been dug up really isn't as bad as people sometimes think. Once it is placed in its historical context, and once we see Joseph as a man, then the so called 'dirt' isn't such a big deal,

and we can get back to the work of thinking of Joseph as the Prophet of God, and the 'Hero' that he was."³ In this case, the "dirt" of biography is an obstacle, not a help, to a different kind of knowledge of Smith as a prophet. In both cases, believers weigh in on this book and find it helpful—but their reasoning is radically different and the distinctions are worth pursuing if we are to understand how they and others might characterize their own relationship to the past and to Smith as a historical subject.

Lest we assume, though, that historians have a more unified, secular perspective on what biography should be, we need look no further than the editorial statement of the *American Historical Review*, which claims that, as a general rule, the journal does not publish biographical pieces—unless the biography can say something more fundamental about historical events or periods. The AHA has long displayed an ambivalence about the significance of biographical method, and some historians have even charged that it yields a "lesser" form of history than other kinds of analyses. (Who will define value and significance in these discussions is a subject left unexplored.) For others, biography is a more forthrightly presentist enterprise; rather than toeing a positivist line about the need for particular and verifiable forms of evidence (measures unmet by discussions of miracles and revelation), quite a few historians would agree with the formulation of Louis Menand that biography is a powerful form that verges on fiction: "A biography is a tool for imagining another person, to be used along with other tools. It is not a window or a mirror."⁴

I don't have time to do more than gesture to the fact that historians and believers both weigh issues of knowledge and truth in their formulations, and their assessments are hardly uniform, nor are they easily lined up along sacred/secular lines. If we can move past cultural battle lines, *Rough Stone Rolling* raises profoundly important questions for both historians and others about biographical method, about the value of study of the past for present communities (both those that are avowedly religious and those that are less explicit about the values they share and promote), and about the questions that motivate our study in the first place. For me, the book also opened up new sorts of questions about the power of religious imagination and how we evaluate it. Richard does a wonderful job of placing Smith's activities in a localized context of reli-

gious ferment and prophecy. The more one looks, the more one finds other ordinary and many unschooled Americans of his day thinking “like the Bible” (107), as Richard puts it, writing and publishing extrabiblical texts or glosses on scripture that, when taken in the aggregate, challenge easy assumptions about the inviolability of Protestant notions of the canon as closed.

The second point I want to raise concerns the relationship of Smith as biographical subject to the historiography of Mormonism as a whole. It seems to me that readers on all sides have conspired to equate Smith’s life story with the history of Mormonism. It is revealing that the *New York Review of Books* called on Larry McMurtry, a writer of fiction set in the American West, to review *Rough Stone Rolling*.⁵ Smith himself, of course, never set foot in anything resembling the American West of today (although admittedly Missouri was, at one time, a frontier); his life is not like the story told in *Lonesome Dove*. I read this editorial choice (to have McMurtry review the book) as a conflation of the later history of the Church with Smith’s life story. Surely Smith is inextricably linked to the church he founded, and his claims regarding the Book of Mormon (including writing himself into the story) forever bind his own life to the sacred history that he revealed. Yet many Mormons in the early period came to the Church without ever having met Joseph Smith or having seen the Book of Mormon. While Smith as a sign or symbol was surely important to their acceptance of religious claims, his life does not encapsulate the entire history of the early Church, and we should not treat it as standing in for a more full-blown look at why many believers from many different places joined the Mormons in this early period.

The temptation to conflate Joseph Smith’s life story with the history of the Church also springs, I think, from Richard’s success: the persuasive way in which he narrates the unfolding of revelation as a coherent and teleological set of steps, a series of events that dramatically unfold into a worldview. *Rough Stone Rolling* does a marvelous job of articulating the appeal and coherence of Mormon cosmology and ecclesiology for the uninitiated. This approach pays off in lucidity. Drawing on a number of excellent studies of early Mormonism and American culture in the Early Republic, Richard makes a strong case for the appeal of a family-based, priesthood-centered theology centered in ongoing reve-

lation. Despite the tendencies of anti-Mormons both then and now to make Mormon cosmology sound bizarre and exotic, Richard artfully connects Mormon beliefs to longstanding debates and issues in Christian theology. And he places the Mormons politically as well, noting the differences between their “kingdom talk” and the republican rhetoric of their neighbors.

Yet this smoothing down of the rough edges, the ignoring of the bits and pieces of revelation that never went anywhere, leads to a methodological question: Did Joseph Smith Jr. ever understand Mormonism in the way that Richard describes it, or is this a Mormon theology for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? What I want to make clear here is that this problem is not one of religious apology as much as one of historical method. I’m not convinced that Joseph understood the totality of his teachings in as lucid a manner as they are described here, since Richard also tells us that revelations came to Smith unsystematically, in scattered “flashes and bursts” (xxi). Surely many of Smith’s contemporaries did not share the certainty, for example, that women occupy the most central and important role in the Mormon system (444), or that the Book of Mormon is a transgressive text that champions the “native point of view” (98–99). At best these are contested issues, and certainly they are points that were not decided in Smith’s lifetime.

I want to stress, returning to my first point, that this issue is not necessarily a difference of belief versus nonbelief. It dovetails with crucial debates over the interpretive method employed by the biographer: How much coherence should an author attribute to the subject? How much is any life experienced as a fragmented and partial set of events? Here, of course, the stakes for understanding Joseph Smith’s life as existentially coherent are great for those who believe that he was an instrument in the unfolding of a grander cosmic scheme. But for historians, the question may simply be: Does this narrative tell us about Joseph Smith’s self-understanding, or does it provide a retrospective view of how one might imagine Smith’s bursts of insight to cohere? These, it seems to me, are questions well within the bounds of scholarly debate and are fruitfully asked about any portrait of a religious founder. Where does the leader stop and the tradition begin to take on a life of its own?

I return, in closing, to the difficulty of this task. Writing biography is hard work. But it is particularly difficult with a figure as

elusive as Smith, a religious leader who stands for so much to so many. *Rough Stone Rolling* is a terrific example of a book that achieves what such works do best: It gives us a comprehensive and compelling reading of an individual life, it uses that life as a window into a historical period, and it forces us to grapple with issues of meaning and value that are never settled or closed. That it leaves unanswered some questions about ultimate truth, while it may dismay those who want to just go back to seeing Joseph Smith Jr. as a “hero,” is in my mind a signal achievement. I applaud Richard for helping us all to continue these conversations.

Notes

1. Richard Lyman Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author's Diary* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 19–20, 121.

2. Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction: Reflections on the Reactions to *Rough Stone Rolling* and Related Matters,” *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): xi–liv, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/?vol=19&num=1&id=631> (accessed April 19, 2011).

3. James Carroll, “Rough Stone Rolling Review,” <http://amateurscriptorians.blogspot.com/2009/02/rough-stone-rolling-review.html> (accessed April 19, 2011).

4. Louis Menand, “The Lives of Others: The Biography Business,” *New Yorker*, August 6, 2007, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2007/08/06/070806crbo_books_menand (accessed April 19, 2011).

5. Larry McMurtry, “Angel in America,” *New York Review of Books*, November 17, 2005, 35–37.

GRANT UNDERWOOD

What a rich and stimulating session! Thanks to all our presenters for their warm and insightful remarks. At this point, Claudia Bushman has graciously agreed to offer a few personal reflections by way of introduction to Richard. Immediately following Claudia’s remarks, Richard will have the last word.

[Claudia extemporaneously gave a few comments about Richard.]

RICHARD LYMAN BUSHMAN

My thanks to Grant Underwood for conceiving this panel and go-