

Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds.  
*The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839.*  
 Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2008

Reviewed by Thomas Coens

Joseph Smith's journals for the years 1832 to 1839, published by the Church Historian's Press, constitute the inaugural installment of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, an ambitious documentary editing project that is projected to contain upon completion at least thirty-two volumes. Founded in 2001 as a collaboration between Brigham Young University and the archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Joseph Smith Papers Project aims to produce critical, annotated texts of virtually every word written or dictated by Joseph Smith (xl). In addition to Smith's journals, the project will produce five additional multivolume series: Documents (consisting of "correspondence, revelations, reports of discourses"); Revelations and Translations ("earliest texts of foundational documents"); History ("early histories and the official history of the church"); Legal and Business ("court, land, and business papers"); and Administrative ("minutes and other official records").<sup>1</sup>

The volume at hand is the first of three that together will constitute the project's Journals series. Between 1832 and 1844, Smith maintained ten journals. The first volume includes the first five journals, which respectively cover the time periods 1832–34, 1835–36, March–September 1838, September–October 1838, and 1839. "Journals" as a term to describe these writings is, as the editors explain, something of a misnomer:

By the end of Smith's life, he and his scribes produced ten volumes of Joseph Smith journals comprising over 1,500 manuscript pages. Of the total, only about 35 manuscript pages contain autograph writing, where Smith put his own pen to the paper. Internal evidence suggests that he dictated another 250 or so pages. The remaining pages—about 1,300, or more than 80 percent of the total—were primarily the work of five men who were appointed to keep Smith's journals: Warren Parrish, George W. Robinson, James Mulholland, William Richards, and William Clayton. (xliii–xlv)

Consequently, "only a tiny proportion of Smith's papers were written by Smith himself, meaning that in most of the documents we come at Joseph

Smith through another mind. . . . Extensive as the papers of Joseph Smith are, they do not afford readers unobstructed access to his mind and heart” (xxxvii–xxxviii).

In accordance with prevailing documentary-editing standards regarding transcription, the editors have replicated the original spelling and punctuation of the journals, while only occasionally including bracketed words to improve readability or to clarify otherwise ambiguous proper names. A typical entry from the journals, chosen virtually at random, is for October 6, 1833, and written in Smith’s hand: “6<sup>th</sup> arrived at Springfield [Pennsylvania] <on the sabbath> found the Brotheren in meeting Brother Sidney [Ridgon] spake to the people &c—and in the [p. 5] <Evening> held a meeting at Brother Ruds [John Rudd Jr.’s] a had a great congregation paid good attention Oh God Seal our te[s]timony to their hearts Amen” (12). Smith’s indifference to punctuation and frequently shaky orthography is preserved intact; bracketed insertions clarify the references to Springfield and to Brothers Sidney and “Ruds”; the angled brackets indicate that “on the sabbath” was an insertion; “[p. 5]” marks the start of a new manuscript page; and the cross-out over “Evening,” of course, indicates that Smith struck the word out.

The subject matter of these journal entries are the Prophet’s day-to-day activities in the 1830s. For the time period covered by the first two journals, Smith resided mostly in Kirtland, Ohio; Smith’s third and fourth journals were composed in 1838, when he spent most of his time in Missouri; and the last journal, written in 1839, finds Smith in southwestern Illinois, where he lived the remainder of his life. Most entries describe Smith’s efforts to build up and consolidate LDS congregations in Ohio and Missouri.

By far the best and most interesting of the five journals is the second (1835–36), which is also the longest. It covers, as the editors explain, both “institutional and spiritual developments and provides revealing glimpses of Smith’s relationships with his family” (lii). Unlike the other journals, which are in large part “fragmentary” (li), the second journal’s entries are longer, have fewer gaps, and thus provide “a connected and much fuller narrative” (lii). Especially interesting are the accounts of Smith’s encounter with Robert Matthews, also known as the Prophet Matthias (87–95), and a falling-out between Smith and his brother William, in which the two came to blows (120–42). The second journal ends with a dramatic description of the completion of the Kirtland Temple, the ceremonies for which were capped on April 3, 1836, with Smith’s vision of the resurrected Christ (219–22).

Truth be told, Smith’s journals do not make for exciting reading. Those hoping to find in Smith’s journals the readability of Samuel Pepys’s diaries or the thoughtfulness of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journals will be

disappointed. Only occasionally do the journals yield quotable quotes, but there are some. I was especially struck by Smith's entry for September 1, 1838, when the Prophet declares that he and his people will no longer passively suffer persecution at the hands of Missourians:

But in the name of Jesus Christ the Son of the Living God we will ~~do~~ it endure it no longer, if the Great God will arm us with courage, with strength and with power, to resist them in their persecutions. We will not act on the offensive but always on the defensive, our rights and . . . our liberties shall not be taken from us, and we peaceably submit to it, as we have done heretofore, but we will avenge ourselves of our enemies, inasmuch as they will not let us alone. (312)

Such stirring passages, unfortunately, are the exception rather than the rule. The true value of this volume lies in the painstaking annotation and the historical essays introducing each of the five journals. Preceding the texts of the journals are 66 pages of introductions, and following them are another 146 pages of reference material, including a timeline, maps, a "Geographical Directory," a "Biographical Directory," and a glossary. Accompanying the texts of Smith's journals are exhaustive footnotes, which explicate context, identify people and places, and point readers to related manuscript sources and printed secondary literature. One could easily quibble that the volume contains too much information and annotation, as many facts appearing in the various introductions are repeated in both footnotes and in the reference material at the volume's end. However, this information overkill—if it can be called such—is deliberate policy on the part of the editors, who explain on the project's website:

Each volume is designed and will be used principally as a reference work, not as a narrative to be read straight through, cover to cover. For that reason, a modest amount of 'friendly redundancy' is not only tolerated but expressly built in. For example, a theme introduced in the volume introduction might be treated briefly again in a document introduction so that a reader who goes directly to the document will have the essential information at hand.<sup>2</sup>

Because of his status as a prophet within the LDS religion, the audience for an authoritative edition of Joseph Smith's utterances should be both large and grateful. As the editors of the present volume freely confess, "The motivation to engage in this vast project comes from the great respect in which Latter-day Saints hold Joseph Smith as the church's founder and a modern prophet. We believe Joseph Smith will be better understood and appreciated if the documents he produced are available for all to examine" (v). Given Smith's stature as a historical figure, however, interest in Smith's papers should extend far beyond the ranks of the LDS faithful, regardless

of how one takes Smith's claims to prophethood. Historians of antebellum America and American religion and culture have just as much reason to celebrate the inauguration of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Smith, after all, can lay claim, in Josiah Quincy's famous estimation, to having been the "historical American of the nineteenth century [who] has exerted the most powerful influence upon the destinies of his countrymen."<sup>3</sup> A critical edition of his writing is long overdue.

Both LDS and non-LDS scholars, in short, will wish to use this and future volumes produced by the Joseph Smith Papers. Though the editors acknowledge being LDS adherents, they have done their work according to the modern standards of documentary editing and are at no point guilty of preparing or presenting their texts in tendentious ways. "Although the revelations have religious meaning to us as Latter-day Saints," the editors state in the volume's preface, "we present them in these volumes without comment on their ultimate source. In the tradition of documentary editing, our aim is simply to reproduce the documents and their historical setting so far as we can reconstruct it" (v). To be sure, one can detect, if one is looking for it, a certain predisposition in the editors to treat Smith favorably. For example, they marvel at the Book of Mormon and the speed with which it was written (xxi) and claim that the scriptures Joseph Smith produced "exceed anything one would expect from a poorly educated rural visionary" (xvii). They also treat Smith's forays into treasure-seeking, wildcat-banking, and plural marriage with leniency and merciful brevity (xix, xxx, 227, 253 n. 92). But, in fairness, if the editors betray a certain sympathy toward their subject, it is no more pronounced or intrusive than that evinced by most documentary editors. Familiarity seems inevitably to breed affection in editors for their subjects.

All in all, the volume is an impressive achievement, and it is to be hoped that future volumes in the Joseph Smith Papers Project will match its quality of scholarship.

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1. The Joseph Smith Papers, available online at <http://josephsmithpapers.org>.
2. The Joseph Smith Papers, "About the Volumes," available online at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/AboutTheVolumes.htm>.
3. Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past: from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 376.