

RODGER I. ANDERSON, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined*, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990. 178 pp. Appendixes, index. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Marvin S. Hill, professor of history at Brigham Young University.

There are those who are champions for what is called "traditional Mormon history," who contend that such history should always be faith promoting; that historians should be selective in what topics they treat and what evidence they will accept. The assumption here is that we cannot finally know the past and that all historical interpretations are entirely subjective. Since one interpretation is as good as another, Church members should be careful to write the kind of history that will bolster faith and help the missionary effort abroad. Rodger I. Anderson has written a book which thus characterizes some of the work of two of BYU's most honored historians: Hugh Nibley and Richard L. Anderson. He concludes that such work has little value for those who seek historical truth.

Rodger Anderson has criticized Nibley's *Myth Makers* and Richard L. Anderson's article "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised,"¹ for being too selective in their use of evidence. Rodger Anderson maintains that the testimonials collected against Joseph Smith and the Smith family by Philastus Hurlbut and Arthur B. Deming in the nineteenth century "are in fact largely immune to the attacks launched against them by Nibley, Anderson, and others," (7) and that the Hurlbut and very late Deming reports provide an accurate representation of the "general opinion of his [Smith's] neighbors in their true, essential form" (7). He adds that he will let others decide whether the conclusions of these neighbors of the Smiths are justified.

Rodger Anderson allocates a chapter of his study to an evaluation of the argument of Hugh Nibley in his *Myth Makers* that the testimonials against Joseph Smith and the Smith family collected by Hurlbut in Palmyra are so contradictory as to cancel each other out. Anderson quotes Nibley: "'The whole structure of the anti-Mormon scholarship rests on trumped-up evidence'" (11). Nibley held that stories of money digging were so widespread in New York that they provided a source for Joseph's enemies, who applied them to the Prophet. Rodger Anderson argues that the standardization of money-digging stories only proves that Joseph Smith followed approved methods of treasure hunting. Nibley said that there were so many witnesses brought forward by Hurlbut that they could hardly all have known the Prophet well. Rodger Anderson replies that an individual did not need to know Joseph well to

have heard him expound money digging lore. Nibley contended that if Joseph Smith were a disreputable character, those who claimed to know him must have been so as well. Anderson responds that one did not have to participate but only observe. Anderson holds that Nibley foregoes scholarly standards of evaluating sources to juxtapose contradictory statements. Some of Nibley's quotations are far too late to be considered eye witnesses and are in fact "non-witnesses," since some are historians, not observers. Nibley, he argues, cared more for refutation than for truth and thus failed to consider Mormon sources which lend support to much of what the Hurlbut witnesses said.

But Rodger Anderson reserves most of his criticism for Richard Anderson and his piece on Joseph Smith's reputation in New York. While Rodger Anderson concedes that Richard Anderson's work is "superior . . . to Nibley's . . . in method and scholarly apparatus" (27), he contends that this work misrepresents the contents of Hurlbut's affidavits, oversimplifies the possible interpretations of the evidence, and draws "invalid conclusions based on faulty premises" (28).

To Richard Anderson's insistence that similar phrasing throughout the testimonies indicates Hurlbut's wording rather than that of the witnesses, Rodger replies that similarities of phrasing may only mean that the witnesses were asked similar questions so that their answers were automatic. Rodger affirms that the affidavits accurately represented the views of these witnesses since they frequently swore to their accuracy before judges or justices of the peace. Jesse Townsend, who was one of many Palmyrans to provide a general statement against Joseph Smith, expressed similar views to Phineas Stiles in December 1833, so there is no question as to his negative perception of Joseph Smith (31).

Richard Anderson rejected conversations attributed to Joseph Smith by the Hurlbut witnesses because they may have been garbled. Rodger Anderson responds that it is equally likely that they were recalled accurately. Rodger Anderson finds support for Willard Chase's recollection that being without financial means, Joseph had gone to Samuel Lawrence, one of his money-digging companions, saying that he knew of a silver mine in Pennsylvania on the bank of the Susquehanna River and that Lawrence might share in the profits if he would accompany him. Since Joseph had no money, Lawrence paid Joseph's way, but the two found no silver mine when they arrived. Joseph's expenses were paid, and he gained an introduction to Emma Hale. Rodger Anderson quotes Lorenzo Saunders (1884) in confirmation: "Sam Lawrence took . . . [Smith] over into Pennsylvania and introduced him to Emma

Hale. . . . Joe told Sam Lawrence that there was a silver mine over in Pennsylvania told him he might share in it with him; but behold he wanted an introduction to Emma Hale is the way it turned out. Sam Lawrence told me so" (47). Rodger Anderson criticizes Richard Anderson for rejecting the accuracy of Hurlbut's testimonies recalling events nearly ten years before, while Richard himself accepts Wallace Miner's recollections of events two generations earlier (50). Rodger Anderson admits that Hurlbut was biased but doubts that another investigator would have produced testimonies any different (57).

Rodger dislikes Richard Anderson's arguments based on the interviews of William H. Kelley, an RLDS member who collected testimonies from Palmyrans in the 1860s. Richard Anderson found much in these testimonies that was more favorable to the Smiths than Hurlbut's. Rather than seeing a shiftless Smith family who were devious and dishonest, Kelley's interviewers recalled a poor but hard working family who were also good neighbors. Although Father Smith was described as a drinker, it was acknowledged that "every body drank them times" (92).

Rodger Anderson shows that Kelley distorted some of the interviews, since several witnesses subsequently corrected his version of their testimony in other publications. Rodger Anderson also contends that Kelley performed his own editorial revisions, since his cryptic notes at the time differ from his published account.

Thus Rodger Anderson raises some serious questions regarding Hugh Nibley's and Richard Anderson's total rejection of the Hurlbut testimonies, yet he may be too harsh in his assessment of their work. I would agree with Rodger Anderson that neither Nibley nor Richard Anderson gave sufficient attention to witnesses such as Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Knight, and others who confirm Joseph Smith's involvement in money digging. Now, most historians, Mormon or not, who work with the sources, accept as fact Joseph Smith's career as village magician. Too many of his closest friends and family admitted as much, and some of Joseph's own revelations support the contention. Rodger Anderson is likely to be right that Hurlbut represented the general views of the people he interviewed correctly, although I would question whether we can be certain that he was always careful in recounting details.

The real issue for Mormon scholars is how reliable Hurlbut's, Deming's, or Kelley's witnesses are. There is the problem of lapsed time, which everyone has acknowledged. Just how Chase or Saunders, etc., can recall detailed conversations with people eight to fifty-five years afterward is a weighty question that cannot be brushed aside no matter how many of these late testimonies seem to

corroborate each other. That Lorenzo Saunders confirms Chase on the Samuel Lawrence story may be of no value. Most likely Saunders reread Chase in E. D. Howe's book to get the details correct. At a Sunstone Symposium some years ago, Mark Hofmann spoke to me briefly regarding my support for the authenticity of one of his manuscripts. Several months later, Attorney Robert Stott wanted me to repeat what Hofmann had said on that occasion. I was only able to reply in a general way as to the substance of the conversation. I could remember none of the details after a lapse of only months. Richard Anderson rightly questions the dependability of belated testimonies gathered by Joseph Smith's enemy several years after the events had transpired. However, Rodger Anderson correctly notes that Richard also made use of belated testimonies when they favored his point of view.

But there is another problem with these witnesses that Rodger Anderson tends to slight. Rodger is well aware that Hurlbut was sent to New York by anti-Mormons in Kirtland to get something on Joseph Smith. Yet he argues that Hurlbut faithfully carried out this assignment and came up with reliable evidence. To some extent this may be so, for even Richard Bushman makes rather extensive use of some of this testimony. Nonetheless, I would want supporting evidence from those closer to Joseph Smith in time and relationship before employing much of it. For the most part I have minimized its use in my work because of the enormous difficulties involved. I am not certain that Hurlbut's witnesses were always in a position to know. Take, for example, the fifty people who make a general statement as to the doubtful reputation of the Smiths. Did they know the family well, and were they inclined to provide a fair appraisal? If the Smiths were so reprehensible, why did the Presbyterian church to which many of these witnesses belonged admit Lucy and her children to membership in 1824? There was nothing negative said about their character when they chose to leave the church in 1828. William Smith was probably right when he said that his family did not learn that they were bad folks until after the Book of Mormon appeared.

At least eleven of the fifty Palmyra witnesses—Roswell Nicholes, George Beckwith, George Williams, Peletiah West, Robert Nichols, Nathaniel Beckwith, Giles Ely, Durfee Chase, and the Reverend Jesse Townsend—were members of the Presbyterian church in Palmyra. They would be unlikely to speak kindly about the Smiths after they left the Presbyterian church. One must recall rumors that sometimes circulate in Utah regarding those who appear out of favor with the LDS church.

It should be noted too that Hurlbut collected testimonies from many of the town fathers far above the Smiths in social rank and

community status. George Beckwith was a wealthy merchant; Thomas Rogers, a banker; John Hurlbut, one of the first settlers; Joel and Levi Thayer, merchants who did a thriving business; George Williams and Giles Ely, storekeepers; Henry Jessup, a shoemaker; Thomas Baldwin, C. E. Thayer, Thomas Rogers, and William Parke, village officials. I would not interview these people if I wanted to learn firsthand about Joseph Smith, Sr., and his family. Some might have encountered Lucy and some of her children in church, but not the two Josephs, both of whom disapproved of the Presbyterians. Nonetheless, these Palmyrans affirmed that the father and son were “considered entirely destitute of *moral character and addicted to vicious habits*” (148). They may have been considered immoral for not coming to church and addicted to vicious habits for their drinking, to which Mormon sources attest. The Word of Wisdom had not yet been received, and most people drank. Yet these Palmyrans indicated that they could speak only of what the Smiths were “considered” to be. They probably did not know them well.

Thus, Rodger Anderson demonstrates that Hurlbut did not “trump up” all his evidence and that he accurately represented the views of a selected group in Palmyra. Yet Kelley’s counterinterviews may also represent the more tolerant opinions of some, even though Kelley did distort their comments at times in his published version. This slant only establishes his strong pro-Mormon bias, which is not surprising. If we had the benefit of Hurlbut’s original notes, we might find that he, too, allowed his bias to influence what he remembered. Lacking shorthand, both men very likely fleshed out their brief notes with what they could or would recall.

NOTE

¹Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reappraised,” *BYU Studies* 10 (Spring 1970): 283–314.