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Their Portrait of a Prophet

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In the past year (1977) two full-length biographies of Joseph Smith have appeared, both more of the same with a little more added. They all continue to miss the point: Why is Joseph Smith worth writing about? Only, apparently, because the Mormons are still going strong. He was once thought interesting as a picturesque, even fantastic, frontier character; but now that it has become the fashion to explain him away as a perfectly ordinary guy, even that has been given up. But do ordinary guys do what Joseph Smith did? It is as if the biographers of Shakespeare were to go on year after year digging up all the details of his rather ordinary life, omitting only that, incidentally, he was credited with writing some remarkable plays. The documents which Joseph Smith has placed in our hands are utterly unique; if you doubt it, please furnish an example to match the books of Moses, Abraham, any book of the Book of Mormon, or for that matter, Joseph Smith's own story. No one since Ed. Meyer has pointed out how closely Joseph's productions match those of the prophets of Israel; no one but he and E. A. W. Budge have had the knowledge to detect familiar overtones from ancient apocryphal writings in Joseph Smith's revelations and his autobiography. From the first deriding of the Book of Mormon before 1830, to the latest attacks on the Book of Abraham, the approach has always been

the same: "Considering who Smith was and the methods he used, it is hardly worth the trouble to examine the writings which he put forth as holy scriptures and ancient histories." And so his work remains unread, by his critics, and the greatest of all literary anomalies remains not only unexplained but unexamined. But why should his critics not see in Joseph Smith only what they choose to see, since the Mormons themselves do the same?

(*Scene:* — The assembly hall of a public school in Palmyra, N.Y., at the turn of the century. The hall is empty save for the presence of the chairman and his clerk, who is gathering papers together preparatory to departure. It is obviously late at night.)

Chairman: Before you go, Mr. Beckmesser, there are some things I would like to talk over with you. Since this is not a trial but only an investigation, I would like to get your reaction to Mr. Tucker's portrait of the youthful Smith. A sulky, taciturn, evil-minded brat gains a loyal and devoted following simply by telling wild and wonderful stories — how does it strike you?

Clerk: A bit odd, sir. But then, didn't a mischievous boy in East Side New York have a million people in a high state of religious excitement a few years back by announcing that the Virgin had appeared to him in a back lot?

Chairman: Yes, I recall the case. But how long did that kid's glory last — five days? A week, maybe? That only shows what a different sort of thing we are up against here. By the way, have you got that material for a portrait of Smith?

Clerk: You mean all those intimate descriptions of what he looked like? Yes, sir, I collected them as you asked. Here they are.

Chairman: Do they present a uniform picture of the man? I mean, did Smith make a consistent impression on people?

Clerk: If you mean, do they all think he is a scoundrel the answer is yes; otherwise their books would not be classified as anti-Mormon. His friends praise him, his enemies hate him, but aside from hating him they don't seem to be able to agree on a thing. Here is one, for example, who writes: "I can see him now in my

mind's eye, with his torn, patched trousers held to his form by a pair of suspenders made out of sheeting, and with his calico shirt as dirty and black as the earth, and his uncombed hair sticking through the holes in his old battered hat. . . ."[1]

Chairman: Very picturesque. The "mind's eye," indeed. Is this the child Joseph Smith?

Clerk: By no means, sir. This is supposed to describe the man "when he was about twenty-five years old," — that would be after the publication of the Book of Mormon and the founding of the Church.[1]

Chairman: But does anybody take this seriously?

Clerk: Mr. Linn accepts it as an accurate portrait. Here is a homey touch that gives it an air of simple honesty: ". . .Joe had a jovial, easy, don't-care way about him that made him a lot of warm friends. He was a good talker and would have made a fine stump-speaker."[2]

Chairman: A sloppy tramp with the gift to gab.

Clerk: So it seems, sir. But here is another eye-witness description from the same period: "He was always well dressed, generally in black with a white necktie. He looked like a Reverend. . . . Joseph was no orator. He said what he wanted to say in a very blundering sort of way. . . ."[3] So now he's a well-dressed gent who can't talk at all. And that is typical. Mr. Tucker said taciturnity was one of Smith's most conspicuous characteristics, and here another witness says, "Joseph did not talk much in society, his talk was not very fluent, he was by no means interesting in company. . . ."[4] S. S. Harding says, "Young Joe was hard to approach. He was very taciturn, and sat most of the time silent as the Sphinx."[5]

Chairman: Silent Smith, eh?

Clerk: That is what some say, but others say the opposite: ". . .very voluble in speech, having great self-confidence. . . ."[6] "endowed with great cunning and volubility. . . ."[7]

Chairman: But isn't that the later Smith?

Clerk: No, sir, this is the boy of Palmyra, who used to attend "revival meetings, praying and exhorting with great exuberance of words. . . ."[6] ". . .used to help us solve some portentous questions . . . in our juvenile debating club, and subsequently . . . was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings. . . ."[8] Here is another: "At times he would be very active in a religious revival, and exhorting with unusual fervor, in that exuberance of words which he had wonderfully at his command."[9] It is rather puzzling — a blundering, stammering, taciturn Sphinx with a wonderful exuberance of

words. "His address is easy," wrote Mr. Howe himself of this stammerer, "rather fascinating and winning, of a mild and sober deportment, though at times inclined to jest and be exceedingly merry."[10] This is the boy whom Mr. Tucker says "was never known to laugh." And while Mr. Tucker also assures us from the most intimate experience that everything Joe and his family did proclaimed their sordid atheism, the other neighbors report him as zealously active in religious circles.

Chairman: So somebody is lying.

Clerk: At least they can't all be right. You remember Mr. Tucker said Joseph Smith was of a "plodding, evil-brewing mental composition," that "he seldom spoke to anyone," and above all that "he was never known to laugh."[11] And Mrs. Eaton, taking the cue, says "he rarely smiled or laughed. His looks were always downward bent."[12] Yet one high authority says that "a deep vein of humor ran through all he said and did,"[13] and Charles Dickens declares that "the exact adjective for Joe's religion is — jolly!"[14] The poet Whittier speaks of Smith's "rude, bold, good-humored face,"[15] and even some of the most damning "witnesses" tell us "...Joe had a jovial, easy, don't-care way about him," and that "he used to laugh from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, it shook every bit of flesh in him."[16] Also, while Mr. Hendrix assures us that "he made a lot of warm friends," other neighbors say "he was shunned by the boys of his own age," and that he was "...an awkward and unpopular lad."[17] Here is a nice empasse: Chase and Ingersoll and Stafford, who knew him so well, describe him as a brawler, who "frequently got drunk, and when intoxicated was very quarrelsome,"[18] while Tucker and Harding, who knew him just as well, assure us that "Smith was noted as never having had a fight or quarrel with any other person...."[19] Whom are we to believe?

Chairman: It might be easier to check up on his physical appearance. What do they say to that?

Clerk: He is described by eye-witnesses in 1830 as being "tall and slender — *thin favored*...."[20] Dogberry calls him "spindle shanked";[21] here is a remarkable description by Stephen S. Harding, one-time governor of Utah Territory, who claims to have known Smith personally in Palmyra and "describes him as having been a tall, long-legged and tow-headed youth, who seldom smiled, hardly ever worked and never fought, but was hard on truth and bird's nests."[22]

Chairman: At least we know that Smith was tall and skinny.

Clerk: But do we? Thurlow Weed's description of Smith from

that time is of "a stout, round, smooth-faced young man...."[23] Tall he may have been, but how he could have been "thin-favored" and stout and round at the same time is not so obvious. And just two years later another eyewitness who claims to have known Smith very well says he is "a man of mean and insignificant appearance, between forty and fifty years of age."[24] Later on we are told that "the gait of this person was heavy and slouching, his hands were large and thick, his eyes grey and unsteady in their gaze...."[25] A year after this was published another opus describes the prophet as "a tall, elegant-looking man, with dark piercing eyes, and features, which if not handsome, were imposing."[26] Another calls him "a man of commanding appearance, tall and well-proportioned...." "...a noble-looking fellow," says another, "a Mahomet every inch of him."[27] Josiah Quincy says "he was a hearty, athletic fellow with blue eyes standing prominently out upon his light complexion.... *'A fine-looking* man' is what a passer-by would instinctively have murmured...."[28] Another visitor says Smith had dark hair and eyes and "a strong rugged outline of face" with features exactly like those of Oliver Cromwell.[29] Charles Francis Adams described him as "a middle-aged man with a shrewd but rather ordinary expression of countenance."[30]

Chairman: So far we have shifty grey eyes, prominent blue eyes, and dark piercing eyes.

Clerk: Yes, and while one illustrious visitor says he could not see Smith's eyes since the man refused to look people in the face,[31] others speak of his "penetrating eagle eyes."[32] Some think Smith's huge, fat, enormous, awkward hands worthy of special mention,[33] while others comment on the remarkably *small* size of his hands.[34] One says that he had "a Herculean frame and a commanding appearance,"[35] another that he was sloppy and slouching, "very lank and loose in his appearance and movements."[36]

Chairman: A portrait artist would have a wonderful time depicting him from these honest firsthand descriptions. How do you account for the discrepancies?

Clerk: I think the report of the celebrated Mr. Conybeare, the foremost literary critic of the mid-nineteenth century, can help us out there. His classical description of Joseph Smith's appearance is warranted solely by the contemplation of a small wood-engraving of the prophet, the work of neither a sympathetic nor a skillful hand. This has been reproduced in numerous anti-Mormon books as the official non-Mormon portrait of Smith. As he views the small and clumsy drawing, Mr. Conybeare gives forth: "It is inexplicable how

anyone who had ever looked at Joe's portrait, (it was not really a portrait, of course, since Smith did not pose for it), could imagine him to have been by possibility an honest man. Never did we see a face on which the hand of heaven had more legibly written rascal. That self-complacent simper, that sensual mouth, that leer of vulgar cunning, tell us at one glance the character of their owner. . . ."[37]

Chairman: Dear me, all this from a crude wood-cut the size of a postage-stamp! Our artist must have been a supreme caricaturist.

Clerk: Not at all. If you will look at the picture you will see that it is a perfectly ordinary performance — typical of the nineteenth-century school of engraving at which Robert Louis Stevenson poked fun in his *Moral Emblems*. All that consummate viciousness is simply what Mr. Conybeare reads into it. Yet a Dutch scholar has taken Conybeare's interpretation of this grotesque little vignette as solid psychological evidence for the character of Smith.[38] You get the same sort of thing when you deal with Joseph Smith's intelligence and knowledge. Here we read of "a natural genius, strong inventive powers of mind, a deep study, and an unusually correct estimate of human passion and feelings. . . ."[39] "a retentive memory; a correct knowledge of human nature. . . ."[40] "a great shrewdness and worldy wisdom . . . boundless energy and intrepidity of character, of most fearless audacity. . . ."[41] "great powers of reasoning were his natural gift . . . and a deep vein of humor ran through all he said and did. . . ."[42] "a strong mind [says Quincy] utterly unenlightened by the teachings of history. . . ."[40] "Joseph was the calf that sucked three cows. He acquired knowledge very rapidly . . . He soon outgrew his teachers. . . ."[43] "His own autobiography shows him well studied at an early period in the nice shades and differences of modern sectarian creeds, and . . . well-read in the history of Mohammed and other religious imposters."[44] ". . .a fertile and highly imaginative brain. . . ."[42] ". . .an ever-inventive and fertile genius. . . ."[43] ". . .an omnivorous reader . . . of 'buckets of blood' literature. . . ."[44] "the skill with which he carried out his imposture . . . his eloquence, rude but powerful . . . his letters, clever and sarcastic — the manifold character and boldness of his designs — his courage in enterprise — his perseverance despite great obstacles — his conception and partial execution of the temple of Nauvoo — these and other things mark him as a man of more than ordinary calibre. . . ."[45] ". . .highly original and imaginative . . . an audacious and original mind. . . ."[46]

Chairman: A sort of superman. And on the other hand . . .?

Clerk: On the other hand, the same Smith in 1830 is "that

spindle-shanked ignoramus, *Joe Smith*. This fellow appears to possess the *quintessence* of ignorance . . . having but little expression of countenance other than that of dullness; his mental powers appear extremely limited."[47] One of the earliest says, ". . .I thought the fellow either crazed or a very shallow imposter. . . ."[48] ". . .his knowledge was slight and his judgment weak. . . ."[49] ". . .he was lounging, idle; (not to say vicious), and possessed of less than ordinary intellect. The author's own recollections of him are distinct ones."[50] "He was as self-indulgent as he was ignorant. . . ."[51] ". . .a dissolute unprincipled young rake, and notorious only for his general wickedness. . . ."[52] "Jo from a boy appeared dull and utterly destitute of genius. . . ."[53] "his untutored and feeble intellect had not yet (in 1830) grasped at anything beyond mere toying with mysterious things. . . ."[54] "I mention these things . . . to show the weak-mindedness and low character of the man."[54] ". . .we can discover in his career no proof of conspicuous ability . . . his chief if not only talent, was his gigantic impudence. . . ."[55] He was never "noted for much else than ignorance and stupidity, to which might be added . . . a fondness for everything marvelous. . . ."[56] "Joseph was unkempt and immoderately lazy. He could read, though not without difficulty, and wrote a very imperfect hand, and had a limited understanding of elementary arithmetic. . . ."[57] "Ignorant and ill-prepared, as he confessedly was for such a work, he made no special effort to qualify himself. . . ."[58] "He had neither the diligence nor the constancy to master reality . . . a completely undisciplined imagination . . . not to be canalized by any discipline. . . ."[59] ". . .he was not liked, the young people of the town considered him not quite full-witted, and with the cruelty of youth made him the butt of their practical jokes. . . ."[60]

Chairman: So it was the village idiot who wrote the Book of Mormon. This brings up a little question of motive. Surely there are easier ways of fooling people than by composing a large and complex book which, as the book itself foretells, simply invites persecution. How do these people explain the colossally exhausting and dangerous task of writing, publishing and spreading it abroad as the enterprise of the laziest man on earth?

Clerk: There are two schools of thought. One holds that Smith was sincerely religious, the other that he was not; the latter is the larger faction by about one hundred to one. We are to believe that he undertook the writing of the Book of Mormon out of sheer impudence, "his only talent." According to Mrs. Brodie, this silly, sneaky, shallow, prevaricating boy dictated the whole Book of

Mormon as a sort of practical joke on his parents "to carry out the fun." This is her idea of fun. Here are some other verdicts: "That he was a religious enthusiast we cannot grant... one principle... actuated him through life, and that was — selfishness, which makes his religion one of the most unfounded and abominable systems that ever sprung from the depths of human or Satanic depravity."[61] His Book of Mormon is "but a wicked, silly, filthy romance, founded in ignorance, nay, the quintessence of ignorance; even the ignorance of Joseph Smith, got up for speculation, in order to gull the American Indians, and dupe the English!"[62] "You have not even the poor merit of either talent or originality," wrote Professor Turner to Joseph Smith, "...you have at once outraged and disgraced human nature itself...."[63] "If there is one fact in American history that can be regarded as definitely established it is that the engaging Joe Smith was a deliberate charlatan...."[64] "...the camel-driver of Medina was probably a sincere fanatic, whereas the seer of Palmyra was almost certainly a cunning imposter."[65] "His only object at that time was to play upon the credulous, earn applause from the debased, and extort money from the simple, under the plea of divine mission...."[66] "He was very vain of his notoriety, although it was that of a notorious liar. Indeed he had no conscience...." "The effrontery of the fellow was really superb.... Probably his well-grounded contempt for his early followers caused him to justify his methods...."[67] "He was one of those indolent and illiterate young men... who hope to shun honest labor, and who have imbibed the pernicious doctrine embraced in the phrase: 'The world owes me a living.' "[67] "...a shrewd schemer whose ethical sense was poorly developed...."[68] "Colossal egotist, ribald wit, handsome giant, ruthless enemy, loudmouthed braggart, religious charlatan, great administrator, master politician, cheap exhibitionist...."[69] "Smith was a bank-note forger... shifty, illiterate and credulous."[70] "Their leaders are evidently atrocious imposters, who have deceived a great many weak-minded but well-meaning persons, by holding out to them the promise of great temporal advantage...."[71] Joseph Smith's "own character gives no shred of prestige for his pretentious claims. Yet, most individual Mormons are sturdy, sincere, honorable, and fine citizens."[72] Mormonism grew from "the pure rascality of the Mormon prophet...." "...an uneducated youth, without wealth or social standing; indeed, without a prestige of common morality (for the founder of Mormonism is said to have been a dissolute, unprincipled young rake, and notorious only for his general wickedness)...."[73] "...a greedy speculator without

conscience, and without shame...."[68] "...I have yet to find anybody, or any book, not Mormon, that has a single good word to say of Joseph Smith."[74] For Mrs. Brodie, Joseph Smith was "utterly opportunistic." Conybeare calls him "...a profligate and sordid knave, making the voice of heaven pander to his own avarice and lusts."[75] And so on and so on, you get the idea: Smith was the last word in depravity, but he wanted power and money, and that explains everything. His success can be attributed either to audacity or cunning or both.

Chairman: So I ask myself, Why would a cunning and ambitious rogue too lazy to do any work invariably choose the hardest, the most dangerous, and the least rewarding ways of getting what he wanted — especially since he is supposed to have had an uncanny insight into the foibles of human nature? Or is he?

Clerk: He is, all right. E. D. Howe himself says Smith has "a natural genius, strong inventive powers of mind, a deep study, and an unusually correct estimate of the human passions and feelings."[76] He knew his public — no doubt about it. And so he proceeds to make and keep himself the most unpopular man of the century.

Chairman: Does that strike you as being believable?

Clerk: Historians admit the inconsistency, but they won't discuss it. Here is one who admits that it is "marvelously strange that... a dissolute, unprincipled young rake... should excite a revolutionary movement in the religious world... and that, too, in an age of refinement and scientific intelligence."[77] By admitting that this is "marvelously strange," this author seems to think he has relieved himself of any further responsibility of explaining the paradox. Mrs. Brodie has her own characteristic solution of the problem. She explains away all her whopping contradictions by what she calls "the unusual plasticity of Joseph's mind."[78] By having him sufficiently "plastic" you can have one man take any form you want to.

Chairman: But again the word simply *describes* the phenomenon — it does not *explain* a thing. Does a biographer or a portrait painter when his picture fails to resemble anything human have a right to introduce new and unexampled dimensions into his art, and attribute the weird results not to his own creativity but to the "plasticity" of his subject? Here we have a young man producing large and difficult books by his own efforts, converting thousands of deeply religious people to a willingness to give their lives for what he teaches, leading great migrations, founding many cities and

societies — structures of solid and enduring quality — and all the time enduring persecution and opposition of great persistence and ferocity. And this young man is not only a complete cynic but incredibly tactless and silly; he is in fact the most unprincipled, irresponsible, shallow, undisciplined, lazy young man alive. Does it make sense to you?

Clerk: I would feel much better about it if there were some historical parallels to match this, but I know of none. In real life lazy loafers do not write big books, opportunistic charlatans do not risk their lives in hard and exhausting projects when by changing their tune they could become rich and respectable, and ambitious men with keen insight into human nature don't insist on doing and saying just the things that are bound to offend the most people the most. Here is one authority who confesses that "a mere imposter would have broken down under such a tempest of opposition and hate as Smith's preaching excited. Smith must have been at least in part honest in his delusion."[79]

Chairman: Now *there* is a generous concession — he "must have been at least *in part* honest." That explains everything; he's going to have his cake and eat it. But is anyone going to tell us in which "part" he is honest? Where was Smith's real genius?

Clerk: I think Mrs. Brodie answers that in a passage that takes all the prizes. She assures us that "the facility with which profound theological arguments were handled is evidence of the unusual plasticity of Joseph's mind. But this facility was entirely verbal. The essence of the great spiritual and moral truths with which he dealt so agilely did not penetrate into his consciousness. . . . He knew these truths intimately as a bright child knows his catechism, but his use of them was utterly opportunistic. . . ."[80]

Chairman: A remarkably revealing statement. It was Theodore Schroeder the rabid anti-Mormon who once observed that psychological studies of Joseph Smith only reveal the minds of those who make them and leave Smith untouched. Mrs. Brodie might as well have discoursed on the qualities of silent music, invisible etchings, or odorless perfume as to talk of dealing in "great spiritual and moral truths" without grasping anything of their "essence" — without such a grasp there is simply nothing to talk about; how on earth can one know things "intimately" or at all unless they do somehow "penetrate into one's consciousness"? They exist nowhere else. Since "Mrs. Brodie's intense atheism . . . actually determines . . . the content of her book,"[81] it would be interesting to

know what are the "profound spiritual truths" which *she* grasps so well and which so completely escaped Joseph Smith.

Clerk: Here are some more: ". . .a shrewd schemer whose ethical sense was poorly developed. . . ." ". . .an ever-inventive and fertile genius," who succeeded because he had no scruples whatever. It beats me how such a clever man bent on deception could be so clumsy at the same time. Josiah Canning laughs at Smith's "school-boy tact,"[82] and Peter Cartwright calls him "clumsy Joe."[83] Kidder is amazed that a "miserable plagiarist . . . had the unaccountable stupidity" to include extensive Bible passages in the Book of Mormon, which was designed to fool a public that knew the Bible better than any other book.[84] A classic example of his shrewdness is the oft-repeated story of how the youthful Smith went around town singing the song of his hero Captain Kidd, whose autobiography "he eagerly and often perused. . . . He chanted it at play, quoted it over and over at the village store until it became indelibly associated with him in the minds of the people of Manchester and Palmyra,"[85] who incidentally never mention the fact in the early period. Not a very sly way to begin a life of religious deception.

Chairman: To say the least. Yet that Captain Kidd story is a great favorite with twentieth-century writers on Mormonism. I wonder where they got it.

Clerk: I think I have a pretty good idea. In 1830 a Rochester newspaper recalled that back in 1815 there had been considerable interest "among a certain class" of people in western New York in searching for Captain Kidd's treasure. The article makes it clear that there is no necessary connection between this mania and any of Joseph Smith's activities.[86] Taking up from here, E. D. Howe reports that the Smiths went around "pretending to believe that the earth was filled with hidden treasures, buried there by Kidd or the Spaniards."[87] From there on it is easy: Joseph Smith soon emerges as the unique disciple of the terrible pirate. It is fascinating to see how Smith's critics can turn anything and nothing into direct evidence against him. But we are going to look into the treasure-digging stories in the morning. They should be good.

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