



On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author's Diary

Richard Lyman Bushman

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After living with Joseph Smith for seven years, biographer Richard Lyman Bushman went "on the road" for a year. After delivering the final proofs of his landmark study, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* to Knopf in July 2005, Bushman crisscrossed the country from coast to coast, delivering numerous addresses on Joseph Smith at scholarly conferences, academic symposia, and firesides. This candid memoir concludes eleven months later with an article written for *Common-Place* in August 2006.

Bushman confesses to hope and humility, an unexpected numbness when he expected moments of triumph, and genuine apprehension as he awaited reviews. He frets at the polarization that dismissed the book as either too hard on Joseph Smith or too easy. He yields to a very human compulsion to check sales figures on amazon.com, but partway through the process steps back with the recognition, "The book seems to be cutting its own path now, just as [I] hoped." His favorite review was "not . . . filled with praise, but it seemed to understand what I was up to."

For readers coming to grips with the ongoing puzzle of the Prophet and the troublesome dimensions of their own faith, Richard Bushman, a temple sealer and stake patriarch but also a prize-winning scholar, openly but not insistently presents himself as a believer. "I believe enough to take Joseph Smith seriously," he says. He draws comfort both from what he calls his "mantra" ("Today I will be a follower of Jesus Christ") and also from ongoing engagement with the intellectual challenges of explaining Joseph Smith. "I personally think it is never good to let problems like this swim vaguely around in your head," he encourages one disturbed reader. "Take the top three and write them down. . . . Be sure you get all the facts right. . . . Ask yourself, Why does this seem contrary to what a prophet would do? . . . At the same time, . . . be fair. . . . Don't let your feelings swamp you." Bushman sets the example of how to do it.

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