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## Marvelous Ripples through Time and Mind

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# MARVELOUS RIPPLES THROUGH TIME AND MIND

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**Brant A. Gardner**

Review of Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). 264 pages, \$34.95 (hardback).

**Abstract:** *The gold plates were only a physically present artifact for a brief time and only for a select few people. Then they were gone, but the effect of their original presence echoes and reverberates through the history of how people have reacted to the reports of the plates. Bushman's cultural history examines a wide range of responses, covering not just the familiar apologetic and critical responses, but also the way literature and art have represented them.*

When you drop a rock straight down into still water, the rock disappears in the blink of an eye, accompanied by a brief but visible splash. Then, after the rock is no longer part of the picture, the aftermath is a series of ripples that move away from the now-missing center event in ever-expanding rings. *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* is a description of the ripples the plates generated in the greater community. Where previous discussions of the gold plates might be easily categorized as apologetic or critical, neither term fits comfortably with what Bushman has done. This book stands apart from such concerns.

Of course, the claim that there were gold plates has led to both apologetic and critical responses. That is part of the purview of Bushman's project. However, he isn't interested in supporting or denying either position (though he stakes out his own claim to faithfulness), but rather the fact that the original plates dropping into the religious scene in early nineteenth-century America caused reactions. In their absence, they

were yet emotionally present. Both apologetic and critical responses to the plates are simply ripples that continue to emanate from that original portentous event.

The early chapters of this book are close to what one might expect of an historian. They deal with the events in time, beginning with Joseph Smith's family and extending to the descriptions of the translation and on to the witnesses. However, those stories are told from a slightly different perspective than usual. For example, the discussion of translation in Chapter 2 (pp. 8–26) focuses on stories *about* the translation rather than speculation on how the translation was accomplished. That particular issue (how the translation was accomplished) is treated in an appendix (pp. 175–82) because, while important, it is tangential to the discussion of the effects of the translation on the community. Thus, one of the topics treated as part of the chapter on translation is the issue of treasure digging and the use of seer stones. Treasure digging is one of the ripples that appeared as part of the external explanation for the existence of the gold plates. Seer stones played their own role in the translation and Bushman takes the time to deal with the way in which “Urim and Thummim” came to be the more accepted label for a seer stone (pp. 24–25).

As Bushman moves from translation to publication, he examines how the presence of the book (as perhaps the daughter of the plates) worked to make scripture. Continuing the new perspective on old discussions, Bushman tosses in the Documentary Hypothesis (pp. 31–33) in order to place the Book of Mormon as a transitional text that combined the sacralization of a text with its human creation. The Documentary Hypothesis returned the Bible to the processes of history. The Book of Mormon may have arrived in a sacred context, but internally it adamantly describes itself as the project of human hands, so much so that Moroni warns that any mistakes would be due to those men who had produced the text (and this prior to translation).

The chapter entitled “Rationalism: Apologists, Critics, and Imitators, 1832–1860” (pp. 59–80) continues the unexpected grouping of topics. The theme holding these three topics together is that they all represent a response to the plates. While apologists and critics are self-explanatory, it is the imitators that show the way in which describing the ripple effect on the greater community creates interesting historical bedfellows. In this case, an imitator is James Strang who founded a religious community based on his own translated plates. Side by side, however, are those who created the Kinderhook plates and the effect of those forged plates.

The ripples from the original event have led to different types of responses, and Bushman is interested in all of them. He discusses the presence of the plates in literature and in artistic representations (pp. 98–118). For the artistic representations he deals not only with the representations as art, but also as illustration, including the controversies over how the illustrators have been influenced by certain concepts that then perpetuated those concepts through their art.

Chapter 8 (pp. 119–34) introduces the didactic use of both art and instructional texts such as *Preach My Gospel*. Chapter 9 (pp. 135–56) discusses what Bushman titles “Scientific Approaches, 1900–2023.” The inability to examine the plates themselves has led to numerous ways to place those physically missing plates into a more understandable artifactual context. In this chapter fit the examinations of how what the composition might have been as well as critical hypotheses attempting to provide a way to understand plates that were described as real and present even though modern non-believing academia reconciles them as not real while perceptually present.

The book ranges through so many topics that it is difficult to capture the breadth in any terms short of Bushman’s subtitle—a “cultural history.” It is a different perspective on the gold plates that stands outside of the apologetic or critical responses that traditionally dominate discussions. As Bushman so aptly demonstrates, the ripples extend far beyond, and into more interesting territory, than the narrow way the topic has typically been treated. It is that fascinating range of topics and new perspectives that makes this an important book. More than that, it is an enjoyable book.

**Brant A. Gardner** (M.A., State University of New York Albany) is the author of *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* and *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, both published through Greg Kofford Books. He has contributed articles to *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* and *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community*. He has presented papers at the FAIR conference as well as at Sunstone.

