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Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1805-1830

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Joseph Smith survives today as one of nineteenth-century America's most controversial religious figures. He claimed visions of angels, dictated a lost record of the ancient inhabitants of the New World, announced new revelations from heaven, and restored what he believed was an ancient yet more complete form of Christianity, over which he presided as prophet, seer, and revelator until his death in 1844.

A child of impoverished Yankees, raised in rural New England and New York, Smith grew up in a hardscrabble frontier culture that embraced a spectrum of competing folkways, religious fervor, and intellectual thought. He was both a product of his times and a syncretic innovator of a compelling vision for God's people. Perhaps more importantly, he was the self-proclaimed herald of Christ's imminent return, called by the Father to reveal the fullness of the Christian gospel for the last time.

As prize-winning historian Richard S. Van Wagoner narrates the first twenty-five years of Smith's life, the young seer struggled with his family through a series of roller-coaster hardships, eventually securing work as a scryer of lost treasure and money digger. In the wake of successive failures, including run-ins with the law, Smith's glass-looking activities gave way to more religiously oriented pursuits, especially after a heavenly messenger showed him the location of buried golden plates containing a pre-Columbian story of the Americas and charged him with the record's decipherment and publication.

Smith also learned, following another extraordinary vision, that his sins had been remitted, that humanity was in a state of apostasy, and that Jesus would soon return to the earth. After eloping with Emma Hale, much to her skeptical father's chagrin, the couple settled down to complete work on what would appear for sale in early 1830 as the Book of Mormon. By this time, Smith had begun to shoulder more fully the prophet's mantle, issuing proclamations in God's own voice, and on April 6, 1830, organized the Church of Christ, known today as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"I treat the early years of the Mormon prophet as I would approach an archaeological dig," Van Wagoner explains. "The deepest levels, those deposited first and least contaminated by subsequent accumulates, are of primary interest in my pursuit of the historical Joseph. Mindful of the prophet's controversial reputation, I try to remain sensitive to the impact that some of the more problematic elements of his behavior may have on believers. But truth is often best evidenced in the detail."

Van Wagoner's meticulously researched study offers more detail than any previously published biography of Smith, and provides what may be the most culturally nuanced analysis ever attempted of the early years of the American prophet.

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