

Dear Diary: Joseph F. Smith's Mission Journals

Nathaniel R. Ricks, ed. *"My Candid Opinion": The Sandwich Island Diaries of Joseph F. Smith, 1856–1857*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011. 168 pp. Notes. Hardcover: \$100; ISBN: 978-1-56085-219-3

Reviewed by Steve Evans

Many examples of missionary journals are available from early days of the Church. (See, for example, the diaries collected in Brigham Young University's online archive collection <http://lib.byu.edu/digital/mmd/>). In reading through them, one finds that they often share a remarkable number of common themes: the depraved state of the locals, the horrible food, slacker companions, and the struggles with competing missionaries of other faiths. It would seem that little has changed in the contents of these journals over time. Indeed, there must be some ur-text for missionary journals, some platonic form for writing of the mixture of doldrums, panic, and interpersonal struggle that seems common to all who embark on the Lord's errand while in their youth.

While the original missionary pictographs may be on some cave walls somewhere near Spring Hill, Missouri, this book provides a new and extremely valuable set of missionary diaries: the Sandwich Island diaries of Joseph F. Smith, tracking his mission in the Hawaiian Islands from January 1, 1856, to October 21, 1857, the last two of his three-year service on the islands. These diaries cover twenty-two months; two earlier volumes, spanning presumably from his arrival in September 1854 to the end of 1855, were destroyed in a fire in June 1856. Transcribed with great attention to detail by Nathaniel Ricks, who received his master's degree in history from Brigham Young University, the diaries trace the day-to-day acts of Joseph F. through an extremely formative time. Ricks occasionally includes historical background at key points, as well as biographical detail for individuals whom Joseph F. encounters or with whom he corresponds. On the whole, the diaries are invaluable—they provide unique insight into the adolescent days of the sixth president of the Church, as he complains of

bad food and ignorant natives, as he quarrels with mission companions, and writes to potential future wives.

At age fifteen, Joseph F. departed from Salt Lake City shortly after being ordained an elder in April 1854 and spent the next three years traveling between Hawaii, Oahu, and other Hawaiian islands, at first learning the language, then presiding over various areas. Already known as something of a firebrand, Joseph F. had a headstrong personality that shines through the journals; he is unafraid, bold in declaring the messages of the Restoration and of the gathering, and brash at times in his judgments of native Hawaiians and his fellow Saints. Nonetheless, there is much that these diaries do not include. Those who are looking for the original occurrence of legendary JFS stories like that of his Hawaiian “Ma” (<http://www.scienceviews.com/photo/library/SIA2838.html>), the “True Blue” story (<http://lds.org/manual/teachings-joseph-f-smith/chapter-12?lang=eng>), or his “Dream of Manhood” (<http://lds.org/general-conference/2007/04/i-am-clean?lang=eng>) will be disappointed, for there is nothing in the diaries to suggest that any of these experiences ever took place. These omissions may be due to the limited time span covered by the diaries, but they still leave us without an original record about these landmark events in Joseph F.’s life. As a result, these diaries do little to corroborate the formative stories told by Joseph F. himself.

That said, the diaries themselves have some great moments of their own that have previously been unknown—nothing perhaps as grandiose as the Dream of Manhood, but a few interesting themes of note emerge:

- *Joseph as hothead.* One particular highlight is that of JFS getting into a fistfight with a missionary companion who calls him a “Damn Shit Ass” and charges that Joseph F. purposely misplaced the companion’s scissors. But Joseph F. regularly loses his temper, shouting at Saints in his sermons, hotly debating local preachers, or berating natives for hoarding food instead of feeding him.
- *Joseph as racist.* His view of the native islanders ranges from love and appreciation, to expressed confidence in the eventual white skins that righteous Hawaiians will achieve, to condemning them as fundamentally lazy and dishonest. It’s unclear how or whether his

view of the people evolved during the course of his mission; by my own estimation more praise is given to native islanders in the early parts of the diaries.

• *Joseph as omnivore.* Yes, a great deal of the diaries describes Joseph's reading a wide variety of texts and continually applying himself intellectually, but he didn't just hunger intellectually. A surprising amount of the diaries is composed of descriptions of food—or lack thereof. I daresay Joseph F. never ate another sweet potato, and it's clear he lost his taste for poi before he ever acquired it. A typical entry reads: "we have Been with out anything to ear [sic], having nothing this morning but about a half a pint of goats milk, and a little Boiled squash! we had nothing els[e]. no! not so much as Salt!! hard times." I estimate that at least half of the diary entries include complaints about the food.

• *Joseph as teenager.* Like any good missionary, Joseph F. spends a good deal of time loafing. Many days are spent in reading the *Deseret News*, mending his shoes, hiking in the jungle, or watching ships come in to the harbor at Lahaina. To his credit, however, there is little indication in the diaries that Joseph F. got trunky as the time of his return home approached.

To summarize: Joseph F. was a seventeen-year-old on a mission in Hawaii, and behaved like one.

Joseph F. served in Hawaii during a very interesting time in LDS history: The gathering of the Hawaiian Saints to Lanai had scarcely begun, the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57 would soon be in full swing and the specter of the Mountain Meadows Massacre in September 1857 was just around the corner. Hints of these themes are seen throughout the diaries, both in Joseph F.'s own writings and in the letters he receives. Ricks helpfully includes portions of such letters when Joseph F.'s diaries indicate having received them, although they are provided selectively and perhaps not as uniformly as more voracious readers might prefer. But despite living in such tumultuous times, Joseph F.'s diaries are reassuringly familiar; he was desperate for word from home, living among a people who seemed utterly foreign to him, while trying his best to live up to his birthright. As a result, the Sandwich Island diaries are immediately recognizable as an LDS missionary

experience and yet retain an intensely foreign quality, both because of cultural shifts over time and because of Joseph F.'s unique character. The diaries are helpful and engaging, both as a resource and as a reminder to us that, when it comes to missionary work, the more things change the more they remain the same.