

[Page 63]Review of Lofte Payne. *Joseph Smith the Make-Believe Martyr: Why the Book of Mormon Is America's Best Fiction*. Victoria, BC, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2006. xxi + 331 pp., with appendix and index. \$23.10 (paperback).

Abstract: *The faith of Latter-day Saints is rooted in Joseph Smith's recovery of the Book of Mormon, which presents itself as an authentic ancient text and divine special revelation. Book-length efforts to explain away these two grounding historical claims began in 1834, and have never ceased. They are often the works of disgruntled former Saints. In 1988 Loftes Tryk self-published an amusing, truly bizarre, seemingly countercult sectarian account of the Book of Mormon. In 2006, now under the name Lofte Payne, he again opined on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. He discarded the notion that Joseph Smith was a demon. He now claims that the Book of Mormon was Joseph's sly, previously entirely unrecognized covert effort to trash all faith in divine things. In this review, Payne's explanation is compared and contrasted with books by Alan D. Tyree, a former member of the RLDS First Presidency, and Dale E. Luffman, a recent Community of Christ Apostle, as well as that of Robert M. Price, a militant atheist, and Grant Palmer, and also the Podcraft of John Dehlin, all of whom have in similar ways opined that the Book of Mormon is frontier fiction fashioned by Joseph Smith from ideas floating around his immediate environment.*

The notorious Doctor Philastus Hurlbut in 1834 set in motion book-length explanations of the supposed mundane origin of the Book of Mormon¹ and also thereby began a long tradition of deeply disgruntled former Latter-day Saints making war on their former faith. Hurlbut's [Page 64]controversial "affidavits," along with the previously published letters written by the disaffected Ezra Booth, formed the basis of Howe's famous book, which also established the once popular but now moribund Spalding-Rigdon explanation of the Book of Mormon.² These endeavors, often but not always generated or promoted by former Latter-day Saints, are a staple of both secular and sectarian criticisms of the faith of Latter-day Saints.³ I will examine one recent attempt to explain the Book of Mormon away as nineteenth-century fiction. And I will provide some additional context for and critical commentary on these endeavors.

Some "Secrets" and the "Perils of Innovation"

In 1988, Loftes Tryk (b. 7 May 1945) self-published a book entitled *The Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon*.⁴ For somewhat addled, shadowy reasons, which is to say that they are not entirely unclear,⁵ after having been baptized at age thirteen and then for a decade or so appearing to [Page 65]be at least a nominal Latter-day Saint, Tryk suddenly went missing. His rather secretive career is somewhat, though not entirely, shrouded in mystery. What is clear is that in 1988 he self-published a swarm of truly bizarre explanations of the Book of Mormon and of Joseph Smith, whom he pictured as its deviously devout but also presumably Satanic author. Some of these were included under the title *Best Kept Secrets*, while other explanations, coupled with evidence of their author's troubled past, were circulated in leaflet form under the generic name *Jacob's Well Reports*.⁶

In 1991, in a spunky and genuinely amusing review of Tryk's *Best Kept Secrets*, Daniel C. Peterson pointed out that "even in anti-Mormonism, tradition may well have a legitimate place." He illustrated this point by calling attention to the many truly bizarre assertions made by Loftes Tryk, which provide "a spectacular illustration of the perils of innovation."⁷ How so? A portion of Professor Peterson's concluding assessment of *Best Kept Secrets* reads as follows:

Loftes Tryk may well have written the worst volume ever published on the Book of Mormon. His arbitrary textual readings, his wholly unjustified dogmatism, his Luciferian obsessions, his rambling and impressionist style, his lack of interest in anything that can truly be termed evidence, the utter absence in his book of rigor or discipline, all of these appear to put him in a class with the infamous fifteenth-century manual for the persecution of witches, the *Malleus maleficarum*.⁸

Two years later, Massimo Introvigne, a Roman Catholic expert on sectarian countercult antics, placed Loftes Tryk

among some truly outlandish “New Age” sectarian anti-Mormons — a category in which he included Ed Decker, William (Bill) Schnoebelen, and James Spencer.⁹ Each of these critics of the faith of Latter-day Saints seemed to Introvigne to have been heavily impacted by some version of Pentecostal “spiritual warfare” struggles against what are considered instances of demonic [Page 66]possession. Earlier I had tentatively placed Dean Helland in this same category.

However, partly as a result of an exchange of correspondence with Tryk, it became clear that he did not really fit neatly into what Introvigne considered the most bizarre branch of the countercult camp. Instead, I argued that, despite pretensions and much additional confusion, and still with a taste for Satanic explanations, Tryk actually operated within an essentially cynical, secular religious ideology; he only pretended to be a Protestant countercult critic of the Book of Mormon in the hopes of attracting an audience for his opinions.¹⁰ Tryk was essentially a secular humanist who merely posed as a Christian.

The by now petulant reader must be wondering why I have begun with this extended digression on Loftes Tryk. The reason is that the one now publishing under the name Lofte Payne is actually Loftes Tryk, who after an extended leave from public view is now back opening under a new name.

Loftes Tryk Assumes a New *Persona*

After disappearing for a spell, the enigmatic and elusive Loftes Tryk surfaced again in 2005 under a new *nom de guerre* — Lofte Payne — and this time with another self-published secular sequel to his *Best Kept Secrets*.¹¹ In *Joseph Smith the Make-Believe Martyr*¹² he has now shed both his former name and his sectarian countercult *persona*. He has dropped the *s* from his given name because, he insists, it is silent, like the *s* in the French name *Descartes*, and hence is confusing to English-speaking [Page 67]readers of his work. And he has also dropped Tryk, his original Danish surname. But these technicalities are of minor concern.

What is now clear in Lofte Payne’s most recent self-published book is that his is an overtly secular reading of the Book of Mormon. He pictures Joseph Smith not as a demon-infested monster but as a devious religious skeptic who packed the Book of Mormon with hidden double messages, including disguised biblical satire, wonderful fiction, presumably clever New England humor, and so forth. Primarily, Payne insists that his “Joseph Smith” had a secretive but profoundly secular distaste for belief in God. Lofte Payne’s “Joseph” is a projection of his own world.

Payne’s proclivity for sly, secretive tomfoolery gets him into difficulties. For example, he even attributes to his “Joseph” a truly remarkable prescience, since the secretive one now calling himself Lofte Payne claims to have found autobiographical hints carefully hidden throughout the Book of Mormon. Drawing upon what he insists are previously entirely unnoticed clues, Payne insists that Joseph Smith created a previously unnoticed and hence entirely untapped sketch of what would eventually happen to him — a terrible tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. Payne’s “Joseph” actually scripted his own end in the Book of Mormon, since “Joseph” worked hard to become a “make-believe martyr.” (But the fact is that the actual Joseph Smith was shot and killed by a real mob; there was nothing “make believe” about his death.)

Payne’s “Joseph” even planned it that way right down to the small details. According to Payne,

His most amazing feat of all, and which, curiously, has never previously been detected, is shown in elaborate preparations for setting himself up as the church’s foremost martyr, initially by establishing a blueprint and exact timing for his dramatic exit, in ink a full fourteen years prior to the event. Along the way he generated volumes of public correspondence that generously substantiate his superhuman struggle to capture immortality.¹³

Planning to get himself murdered was Payne’s “Joseph’s” way of keeping his name alive for future generations — perhaps as a kind of symbolic “immortality” appropriate to an entirely secularized extension of Payne’s own secularized religious imagination.

[Page 68]None of this, according to Payne, has “previously been detected.” Why not? His novel explanation is that “all of this would have been common knowledge by now except for Joseph’s peculiar strategy of convincing followers and critics alike that he was an unlearned backwoodsman who had been visited by angels.” From Payne’s new wholly secular perspective, the Book of Mormon “never acquired respect as serious fiction; it wastes away — read occasionally, misunderstood invariably. His work has been excluded from every anthology of American Literature, even after being translated into 45 languages, worldwide.” But Payne has now presumably corrected this unfortunate literary lacuna. Hence, he proclaims: “No more. I’ve spent the past couple of decades researching and reconstructing Joseph’s original intent. His work is examined in my new non-fiction literary biography, *Joseph Smith the Make-Believe Martyr*. I unmask his deceptions, solve his riddles.” Now, read the Lofte Payne way, the Book of Mormon, among other wonders, “reveals a legacy of Deist enlightenment that influenced American religion well into the 19th century.”¹⁴

Payne seeks to be taken seriously. Much like Loftes Tryk, his original *persona*, he offers his words as a guide to presumably profoundly confused readers of the Book of Mormon. In doing so he is again eccentric, but much more pedantic than he was in *Best Kept Secrets*. Unfortunately, he is not more accurate, and much less amusing. Payne now claims that the Book of Mormon is a literary nostrum — a kind of panacea now known only to those who are inclined to accept Payne’s wild speculation set out in his second self-published book. Is his “Joseph,” and hence his reading of the Book of Mormon, fresh and insightful? *Make-Believe Martyr* is merely a overtly secularized version of his original truly amusing *Best Kept Secrets*, this time set out in even more pretentious, extravagant language.

Secular Naturalistic Explanations of the Book of Mormon

If I am even close to being right about Payne, why give *Make-Believe Martyr* any attention? At least part of the reason is that Lofte Payne’s most recent effort is in some important ways similar to some other recent secular efforts to find nineteenth-century literary sources for the Book of Mormon, as well as the story of how Joseph Smith came to recover the [Page 69]Book of Mormon.¹⁵ One crucial similarity between these secular (and hence essentially atheist) accounts and Lofte Payne’s account, is that they both recognize that the explanation of Joseph Smith must be such that it also accounts for his being able to fashion the Book of Mormon out of presumably readily available nineteenth-century literature. Sectarian accounts must make the links between the Book of Mormon and the sources Joseph is thought to have used in fashioning his fiction.

Explanations of the Book of Mormon by dissident or cultural Mormons make essentially the same move by rejecting even the possibility of the Book of Mormon being an authentic ancient text and in that sense a genuine divine special revelation, and thereby also the Word of God. Some may, however, strive to see something in the Book of Mormon that might perhaps be “inspiring” when it is read as nineteenth-century fiction, while not overtly ignoring the implications of such a reading on how one must understand Joseph Smith, and divine revelation, as well as Priesthood keys. One simply cannot read the Book of Mormon as his frontier fiction without thereby unraveling Joseph Smith’s place as Seer and Prophet.

Some Sectarian Endeavors

One deeply flawed and also truly bizarre bit of woolly speculation about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon can be found in Grant Palmer’s effort to find a previously unknown literary source for Joseph Smith’s story of his encounter with a heavenly messenger who made possible his recovery of the Book of Mormon. In 2002, Signature Books published a much polished and refined version of Palmer’s earlier claim that the bizarre tale entitled *Der goldne Topf* (“The Golden Pot”) written by E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776–1822) — a famous polymath German Romantic fantasy writer, music composer and critic — was the actual source for Joseph Smith’s story of his encounter in 1823 with Moroni. Please note that Hoffmann’s tale, which was first published in German in 1814, was only available in an English translation by Thomas Carlyle in 1827, long after the Moroni story was already circulating.¹⁶

[Page 70]Palmer was captivated by Mark Hofmann’s forged “Salamander Letter.” And also by the fact that E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tale invokes a Salamander (standing for fire). Without that forged letter, Palmer’s appeal to E. T. A.

Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot" is absurd. Nothing else links Joseph Smith with the obsession of high European culture with such things.¹⁷ Salamanders in fire are not part of folk magic. In addition, Palmer was unable to find anything in the Book of Mormon that he could attribute to E. T. A. Hoffmann's influence.

Palmer is not, however, a secular atheist. Sectarian critics of Joseph Smith, as Palmer's central argument and his one original idea, illustrate, could easily have been fitted snugly into an essentially secular, functionally atheist criticism of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, since both seek to challenge Joseph Smith's prophetic truth claims by trying to explain how he fabricated the Book of Mormon. The fact is that authors with sectarian religious sentiments, including cultural Mormons with revisionist proclivities, also strive to explain the Book of Mormon away by turning it into nineteenth-century fiction authored by either Joseph Smith (or others) out strictly of nineteenth-century literary sources.

Two Other Sectarian Examples

In addition to Grant Palmer's seriously flawed endeavor, popular with both secular and sectarian critics of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, there are other sectarian efforts to read the Book as nineteenth-century fiction. Two books published in 2013 by authors who represent the Community of Christ, the new name for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), are intended to train the professional ministry of that denomination. Both books provide different but closely related examples of this same proclivity. One was written by Alan D. Tyree, a retired former member of the RLDS First Presidency,¹⁸ while the other was written by Dale E. Luffman, recently a Community of Christ Apostle.¹⁹ Both argue vigorously, though in somewhat different [Page 71]ways, that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient history — that is, that there were no Lehitites, and hence no Moroni acting as a heavenly messenger making available to Joseph Smith engraved metal plates and Interpreters (seer stones).

These accounts also logically entail that the Witnesses to the plates either fibbed because they witnessed nothing out of the ordinary or were hallucinating. The Book of Mormon in these accounts is strictly nineteenth-century fiction fashioned by Joseph Smith, though it is still part of the RLDS/Community of Christ canon and can even be read as "scripture," if one is so inclined. The argument in both books is derivative, relying very heavily upon discredited literature and seriously flawed arguments. For example, while Tyree ignores Grant Palmer, Luffman describes him as "a most credible scholar, extremely competent in Book of Mormon research, and a man of faith."²⁰

There is, it seems, a certain close affinity between secular and sectarian efforts to explain the Book of Mormon away as merely nineteenth-century fiction, perhaps for some possibly "inspiring" but certainly not genuinely inspired by God, and radically secular treatments of the Book of Mormon such as offered by Lofte Payne who flatly denies that anything can be genuinely inspired. There are, however, a number of even more radical versions of this kind of literature.

When the Price is Clearly Not Right

The Reverend Dr. Robert M. Price provides a remarkable example of a secular atheist fundamentalist who brushes aside all genuine belief in divine things. Though he came from a Protestant fundamentalist background, he has become what he describes as a radical atheist. Price does not share Lofte Payne's secretive background, but both came from similar fundamentalist grounding ideologies. Price eventually began [Page 72]arguing that, in addition to there being no God, there never was a Jesus of Nazareth, and hence Christianity is a raw fabrication. There is no sin and no divine mercy or ultimate hope beyond the grave. Price has made a living out of preaching this ideology. In addition, he has also made an effort to explain, from the same set of secular grounding assumptions, how Latter-day Saints ought to understand Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.²¹

John Dehlin: Podcraft ...

In a time where the attention span seems to have decreased, and virtually any persons, no matter how uninformed

or inarticulate, deem themselves both authorities on whatever even momentarily draws their attention, and hence also “authors,” there are now a host of even less plausible, careful, accurate accounts of the Book of Mormon being advanced on the Internet, where there is exactly no quality control. These are often less plausible, even amusing efforts to brush aside the Book of Mormon for mercenary and/or personal reasons.

Such critical ideologies are now being spread by “bloggerati,” one of whom has even managed to make a living both servicing and generating crises of faith among the Saints by engaging in what can be called Podcraft, which is now popular among Internet critics of The Church of Jesus Christ. One of these, without knowing it, has even managed to imitate the Reverend Price by finding no reason for believing that there was a Jesus of Nazareth or God and thus also ridiculing as rubbish the atonement for sin as well as trashing the Book of Mormon.

... and Revisionist History

Even some LDS scholars oppose and condemn efforts to defend the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. They neglect to explain how Joseph Smith could have fashioned it out of strictly nineteenth-century sources, which they may insist must be the default position of Latter-day Saint historians, despite such accounts being highly implausible. Such opinions are not grounded in an understanding of [Page 73]historical method, and hence are even less intellectually interesting than the most recent effort of Lofte Payne.

Some suggest that it is not now proper to set out reasons for the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. They may believe that efforts to do so have failed or that it cannot be done. Or they sense that they are not themselves able to contribute much to such an endeavor, and want to change the direction of relevant historical endeavors. Some assume that defending the Book of Mormon may offend non-LDS historians with whom they seek to court credibility. They tend to write in cautiously set out, naturalistic, secular terms in the hope that this will earn credibility and thereby open professional doors.

For these and other similar reasons they refuse to defend the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. They have become ardent apologists for explaining it as a nineteenth-century work of fiction fashioned by Joseph Smith out of bits and pieces found in his immediate environment. They sometimes begin with the dogma that real historians must exclude divine things — defined as the miraculous — from their accounts of the past, except perhaps as the illusions or delusions of those about whom they write.

Not entirely unlike Payne, there are, I believe, some who now seem to me to have chosen to become cynical self-appointed delineators who mark and show the way to a currently fashionable form of what I also believe is a secular soul-destroying darkness quite bereft of faith or hope, and so also of genuine love.

1. See E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: or, a faithful account of that singular imposition and delusion, from its rise to the present time. With sketches of the characters of its propagators, and a full detail of the manner in which the famous Golden Bible was brought before the world. To which are added, inquiries into the probability that the historical part of the said Bible was written by one Solomon Spalding, more than twenty years ago, and by him intended to have been published as a romance* (Painesville, OH: By the Author, 1834).

2. See Matthew Roper, “The Mythical ‘Manuscript Found,’” *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 7–140. This is a devastating review of a recent attempt to breathe life back into the moribund Spalding theory written by Wayne L. Cowdrey, Howard A. Davis, and Arthur Vanick, entitled *Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Spalding Enigma* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005). See also Roper’s essay entitled “Myth, Memory and ‘Manuscript Found,’” *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 179–223.

3. The first such collection of these items was made by Francis Kirkham. See *New Witness for Christ in America*

vol. I, enlarged third ed. (Independence, MO: Zion Publishing Co., 1951). Kirkham was able to locate and reproduce about forty-five items published during Joseph Smith's lifetime that were critical of the Book of Mormon. The entire inventory of items published on the Book of Mormon during this same period has been assembled by Matthew Roper and is now available under the title "19th-Century Publications about the Book of Mormon (1829–1844)" (<http://lib.byu.edu/collections/19th-century-publications-about-the-book-of-mormon/>) to those interested in its immediate reception history. See Matthew Roper, "Early Publications on the Book of Mormon," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18/2 (2009): 38-51.

4. Loftes Tryk, *The Best Kept Secrets in the Book of Mormon* (Redondo Beach, CA: Jacob's Well Foundation, 1988). Hereafter cited as *Best Kept Secrets*.

5. For some additional biographical details on Tryk, see Louis Midgley, "Playing with Half a Decker: The Countercult Religious Tradition Confronts the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 116–71 at 145–58. In this essay I review Dean Maurice Helland's 1990 Oral Roberts University doctoral dissertation entitled "Meeting the Book of Mormon Challenge in Chile." Dr. Helland had somehow encountered Loftes Tryk's writings and accepted them uncritically, since they seem to have fit his own understanding of demonic things.

6. This also explains Tryk self-publishing his first book in 1988 with what he called the "Jacob's Well Foundation," which seems to have existed only in his imagination.

7. Daniel C. Peterson, "A Modern *Malleus maleficarum*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 260. This is a review of Loftes Tryk's *Best Kept Secrets*.

8. Peterson, "A Modern *Malleus maleficarum*," 260.

9. See Massimo Introvigne, "The Devil Makers: Contemporary Evangelical Fundamentalist Anti-Mormonism," *Dialogue* 27/1 (1994): 153–69.

10. For some juicy details, see Midgley, "Playing with Half a Decker," 150–58.

11. Lofte Payne's "publisher" indicates that, "added to more than a dozen continuous years of study" of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, "Lofte also claims benefit of two previous decades as past member of the Latter-day Saint community. His experiences include extensive ward leadership, graduation from the church's Institute of Religion, and earlier missionary service." See <https://bookstore.trafford.com/Products/SKU-000132213/Joseph-Smith-The-MakeBelieve-Martyr.aspx>.

12. There is confusion over exactly when *Make-Believe Martyr* was first self-published. It is sometimes advertised as having been issued either on 4 March 2005 or on 18 March 2005 but with a somewhat different title. The printed version I have indicates that it was issued on 30 June 2006. Print-on-demand publishers seem to facilitate even major changes in books without listing new editions. There are, it seems, no editorial standards in place in much of the currently flourishing electronic self-publishing ("vanity press") industry.

13. This is Lofte Payne's own description of his book. See <https://bookstore.trafford.com/Author/Default.aspx?BookworksSID=SKU-000132213>.

[14. http://bookstore.trafford.com/Author/Default.aspx?BookworksSID=SKU-000132213.](http://bookstore.trafford.com/Author/Default.aspx?BookworksSID=SKU-000132213)

[15.](#) For a detailed critical assessment of attempts to view Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon — from an essentially secular humanist (atheist) perspective, see Louis Midgley, “Atheist Piety: A Religion of Dogmatic Dubiety,” *Interpreter* 1 (2012): 111–43; accessible at mormoninterpreter.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/midgley-atheists-v1-2012-pg111-143-PDF.pdf.

[16.](#) For details, see Louis Midgley, “Prying into Palmer,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 365–410 at 368–71.

[17.](#) A frog is not a Salamander and hence not artistically a symbol for fire. It was once popular in high culture literary circles to draw upon presumed elementary categories or powers of nature (fire, air, water and earth), each represented by a figure: Salamander, Sylph, Undines, and Gnomes. But doing this was artistic entertainment and hence neither science nor folk magic.

[18.](#) See Alan D. Tyree, *Millions Call It Scripture: The Book of Mormon in the 21st Century* (Independence, MO: Seminary Press, 2013).

[19.](#) See Dale E. Luffman, *The Book of Mormon’s Witness to Its First Readers* (Independence, MO: Seminary Press, 2014).

[20.](#) Luffman, *Book of Mormon’s Witness*, 165. In addition to my own essay, cited in note 16, above, for devastating reviews of Palmer’s *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, see Davis Bitton, “The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn’t Tell Us),” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 257–72; Steven C. Harper, “Trustworthy History?,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 273–308; Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A One-sided View of Mormon Origins,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 309–64; and James B. Allen, “Asked and Answered: A Response to Grant H. Palmer,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 235–86. Luffman, unfortunately, seems either unaware of the critical responses to Palmer’s *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, or has chosen to ignore them. This is typical of his work; he draws on only the critics and carefully ignores the competing literature.

[21.](#) For a detailed account on how Price has become a player on the fringes of the LDS scholarly world, see Midgley “Atheist Piety,” 123–30. For Price’s effort to explain the Book of Mormon, see his *Latter-day Scripture: Studies in the Book of Mormon* (Self-published e-book, 2011 (<http://www.eBookIt.com>)), and my review of this collections of essays in Louis C. Midgley, “Book Review: Latter-day Scripture: Studies in the Book of Mormon, by Robert M. Price,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 145–150.