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INTERVIEW BY JED WOODWORTH

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THE INTERVIEW

WOODWORTH: You were born in Salt Lake City but raised in Portland, Oregon. You are what you like to call a "diaspora Mormon." What does that mean, and how has it influenced what you do?

BUSHMAN: Portland has been more of an influence than you might think. If I had grown up in Salt Lake City, where the Church is a mighty fortress, where it is mighty culturally and politically as well as religiously, I might have turned out differently. There the Church is a natural target for people who question and resist authority. In Portland, where the Church was a small and obscure institution, where Mormons were a tiny minority with just a few buildings here and there around the city, the Church did not dominate anything. It was an institution to protect rather than to attack. Even after I left Portland, I felt the Church was a frail body under assault. I chose to become its defender rather than its critic.

WOODWORTH: In what ways did you foster and protect the Church in Portland?

BUSHMAN: We had an active ward in Portland. We were always up to our necks in Church activities—dances, Mutual, camping, parties, sports. At my high school there would be maybe six or eight Mormon kids from various places who knew each other. We

were a brave band of brothers and sisters. When Mormonism came up in class or in conversation, we knew what we had to do.

WOODWORTH: Your high school experience suggests that you created a Mormon fortress within that environment. A Mormon a year or two older was elected student body president and then you followed him in the same office. How could Mormons carve out that space when they were so weak?

BUSHMAN: That raises a large question about Mormon mentality. Why do we feel we are responsible for saving the world when we're such a tiny group? When I ran for student body president, I didn't do it because I was popular or even ambitious. I did it because it was my duty to carry on the tradition of Church people taking a leading role in student-body affairs. It was part of my Mormon soul.

WOODWORTH: How did the Great Depression affect your family?

BUSHMAN: I felt the Depression strongest when I was a little kid, under four years old, in Salt Lake. That's when my father could barely make a living. He was a commercial artist, and the department stores were cutting back. I remember sitting at the table with my father and mother, but only one of our plates had a lamb chop on it. I couldn't understand why my mother and father were not eating lamb chops. My father couldn't find enough work as a freelance artist in Salt Lake City, so he applied for jobs all over the country. He received an offer from Meier & Frank in Portland, where we moved in 1935 or early 1936.

WOODWORTH: Let us skip ahead to your college years. Many academics recall the eureka moment when they decide to pursue their chosen profession. Did you have such an experience?

BUSHMAN: I went to Harvard determined to major in science. I started out in physics; then, discontented with the laboratory,

I migrated to mathematics, and I finally lit on history and science. By the time I got back from my mission, I took a greater interest in history. I had learned from a course in my sophomore year that history could be conceptualized. Before that course, I had thought of history as a string of discrete facts without a pattern. But in my sophomore year I took a class from Samuel Beer on the history of Western civilization. We read Weber, Freud, Nietzsche—all sorts of theorists. When I came back from my mission and realized I could do conceptual work in history as well as in science, my interests shifted. I made a mental migration based on that sophomore-year course.

WOODWORTH: There is irony here because your sophomore tutor, I. Bernard Cohen, was an eminent historian of science. He was also the one who insulted your Mormonism to your face. Your interests in history and science and the idea of Mormonism-under-attack were really combined symbolically in Cohen. Did you see yourself at that time as going into history with an intention to defend the Church?

BUSHMAN: I had no religious reasons for going into history. As I say, I migrated from physics to history and science. At that time, I was mainly under the influence of my high school principal, Stephen Smith, who had taken an interest in me. He was very proud that I had been admitted to Harvard. I saw myself as possibly becoming a high school principal like him. When I spoke to Cohen, I told him I wanted a field that combined knowledge to give me a broad perspective. History and science seemed to combine lots of things.

WOODWORTH: Bernard Bailyn, the American colonialist who later won two Pulitzers, became your dissertation advisor. Will you talk about his influence and that of any other faculty members at Harvard who shaped the kind of historian you later became?

BUSHMAN: In my graduate years, the man who influenced me most was Oscar Handlin, who taught a course on social history from the beginning to the present. His reconstruction of the whole

arc of American history inspired me, but my dissertation topic was a colonial topic, the Great Awakening of the 1740s. As the resident colonialist, Bailyn was the logical director, so I chose him as the first reader of the dissertation. When the book was finally published, however, it was in Handlin's series Liberty in America, 1600 to the Present. He read my manuscript and did the editing. I greatly admire Bailyn, but Handlin was of greater importance to my development as a historian. He was a master of the well-posed question. In his seminar, students thrashed about for most of the period, and at the end he would raise one question that opened up the subject. One of his famous questions was "Why did the railroads go east and west rather than north and south when one of the most profitable railroads in the antebellum era went north and south?"

WOODWORTH: We will leave that for readers to ponder! I'd like to turn now to another important influence in your professional life: your wife, Claudia. You once praised what you called "the growing scholarly collaboration" between Claudia and yourself. What has she brought to your work?

BUSHMAN: It begins with writing style. Claudia is an instinctively good writer and has written a great deal herself. She reads poetry and fiction and recognizes a good sentence. My way of writing repelled her at first; certain habits of mine drove her mad! She would grow indignant at some passages. Over the years she has changed my writing style considerably. I can hear things now—awkward passages—that I couldn't hear before.

I also work over her writing. Claudia does not think she has big ideas. She thinks I'm the big-idea person, and she produces exquisitely carved olive pits. Actually she does have big ideas; she loves big ideas. She is an instinctive thinker as she is an instinctive writer. My job has been to point out her argument when she may not recognize it herself. Neither one of us writes a thing that we don't put in the other's hands prior to publication.

WOODWORTH: Give us an example of how she has tempered your writing or altered your writing.

BUSHMAN: Often I open a paragraph with a sentence starting off in a certain direction. Then, instead of continuing, I begin to enter qualifications—in effect I turn in another direction. I think I am balancing the argument, but the sharp turn only confuses readers. I've learned that once I get started, I have to pursue a line of thought and make the turn only gradually.

WOODWORTH: We have seen other husband-wife teams in the profession. Handlin wrote with his wife, Lillian, for example. But Claudia's entrance into history was later in her career. How is it that you have come both to critique each other's work and to collaborate on projects?

BUSHMAN: We haven't really co-written. We split the writing of *Mormons in America* in two; she did her half and I did mine. I don't know if a single chapter was truly a blend. One person would do a draft, and the other would critique it. We did coauthor an essay on cleanliness that she began and I took over. It was so interesting I could not keep my hands off it.

WOODWORTH: I have long thought that the two of you came around at a fortuitous time in Mormon history. The Hollands had put forward a new model for what a husband and wife could be—one flesh in intellectual life. Pat Holland started speaking at devotionals where Jeff Holland was giving speeches as president of BYU. They also wrote together. And, outside of perhaps John and Leah Widtsoe, we had never really seen that in Mormonism. But we see it today in the two of you and in Scot and Maurine Proctor, Richard and Linda Eyre, and others. Do you see this collaborative model as something we will see more of in Mormonism?

BUSHMAN: I hope so. Clayton and Christine Christensen give talks together. They stand at the pulpit at the same time and take

turns talking. I love the model, though not every couple can expect it to happen. Because I was a historian, Claudia gravitated toward history, somewhat against her will, because of her competitive nature; she didn't want to be left out. We can talk about everything together, and that has been good for our marriage. If we've done anything to encourage that kind of collaboration, I say hurrah. Women should take a forward rather than a recessive role in professional and public life.

WOODWORTH: The trend does show, doesn't it, how Mormonism can take a potentially threatening contemporary movement, like feminism, and extract and refine its best insights? None of the women we've mentioned would want to give up so-called traditional roles. They seek to add to them, expanding their reach to become more influential, complete persons.

BUSHMAN: The ideal from a Mormon perspective is the husband-wife partnership. Not just the wife as a crack lawyer and the husband as a skilled medical man, collaborating in rearing the children. The best Mormon partnerships are like a mission president and his wife—a couple joined together in a common effort. That is the best thing you could hope for in a marriage.

WOODWORTH: Ann and Truman Madsen were another power couple, and I want to mention them as a bridge to discussing Joseph Smith. We were all saddened to hear of Truman's passing last spring. He was one of the great popularizers of Joseph Smith of his generation, and he will be sorely missed. I have always said we need many Joseph Smiths for many occasions. Do you agree?

BUSHMAN: That is true of every large historical figure. Think of all the biographies of Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington. No one book, no one biographer, can encompass a figure as complex as Joseph Smith. The various versions may exist in tension with one another, but each has a truth in it. My account is rooted in the original

sources and sticks close to verifiable facts. The idealized Joseph Smith of our hymns, art, and stories is also true. All of us have something wonderful about us that goes beyond the humdrum, tawdry facts of our day-to-day lives. To lose sight of what is glorious in a person just because his nose is running is a huge mistake. I respect those who find beauty and miracle in Joseph Smith's life.

WOODWORTH: When you say your Joseph Smith is grounded in the sources, are you saying that yours is a more realistic portrait?

BUSHMAN: I would say it is more realistic for the world we live in. Every society creates myths. Within the myth of that society certain things are possible. Within the Mormon myth world, the idealized Joseph Smith fits. But when we live in twenty-first century America, with newspaper writers, the Internet, and all sorts of critics who demand fact, the Joseph Smith I write about seems more real. He can survive in our modern world. The idealized version is vulnerable; he may not be able to survive.

WOODWORTH: How do you explain the phenomenon of *Rough Stone Rolling*? It has sold over one hundred thousand copies; its popularity caught even you by surprise. How do you account for the Mormon acceptance of this kind of Joseph?

BUSHMAN: Mormons live in the real world, and they are reassured to find Joseph Smith described in terms that he might be in a newspaper or in any secular book. They are relieved that Joseph Smith can exist in our plain world. But the book also represents a maturation of Mormon culture. In order to counter the highly prejudiced and negative views of the Prophet, we once felt we had to present him as a paragon of every known virtue. Now that our convictions as a people are grounded in a deep foundation of personal and communal experience, the criticisms don't faze us as they once did. A flaw in Joseph Smith doesn't shake our foundation. We are ready for a more realistic Joseph.

WOODWORTH: Doesn't your second point underscore bewilderment in the Internet age? Mormons may have encountered new stories and seen your book as a way of working out the tensions that they were experiencing.

BUSHMAN: Probably only a minority of those who read *Rough Stone Rolling* had encountered the Internet critics. They didn't read the book in search of answers to troubling questions. But they may have had the sense that there was another Joseph Smith we don't hear about in church. They may have feared that if they looked into the corners of his life they would find terrifying things. They were relieved to find someone who had gone into the corners and looked at everything there. Time after time people ask me, "Did you find anything in your researches that shook your faith in Joseph Smith?" I can truthfully answer these uneasy people no. I was disturbed by his temper, I will admit, but nothing shook my faith.

WOODWORTH: An additional factor explaining the book's popularity is the attraction of the human portrait. Mormons don't want their leaders dragged down; they want them lifted up. Mormons want to emulate those who speak with God, those who are entrusted by God with important works. They can more easily do that if the leader looks like a real person. Edward and Andrew Kimball's biography of Spencer Kimball is a great example of this. Its sales went through the roof, and like *Rough Stone Rolling*, it presented a very accessible figure.

BUSHMAN: People have told me that the Joseph Smith of *Rough Stone Rolling* is someone they could emulate. The book gave them hope. We place such high demands on ourselves that we are not sure if we measure up. If the founding Prophet had his flaws and still accomplished a good work, perhaps we can, too.

WOODWORTH: Biographers sit with their subjects so long that it seems as though no secrets can possibly remain. You spent

seven years of your life working on *Rough Stone Rolling* and several years more on *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*. You know Joseph Smith upside down. What do you feel you do not know about him? What about him eludes you after all these years?

BUSHMAN: I must say first of all that there are a number of historians who know more about Joseph Smith than I do; I am the one who wrote what I knew. But there are things I could not find out. When Joseph was on the Zion's Camp trek he wrote Emma something to the effect that "you know how precarious my situation is." I don't know what apprehensions he referred to in that sentence. I don't think he worried about his followers leaving him. At that point he had lots of loyal backers. He had critics but lots of support. More likely, he felt precarious in the eyes of God. He had been given responsibility for establishing Zion but was not succeeding. I would be interested to know what Joseph feared. I think he saw God as a friend, an accessible God, but also as a fearsome and demanding God. Joseph may have feared that he would not measure up to God's demands. I would like to know more about what it was like to be a prophet for Joseph's God.

WOODWORTH: Are you suggesting that the Joseph Smith you came to know was not at ease in his calling, that from the rebuke for letting the 116 pages go to the stories of the angel with the drawn sword, he always felt he was one step away from removal?

BUSHMAN: That may be too strong, but I think he felt heavy pressure to fulfill the Lord's expectations. A lot was demanded of Joseph, and he may not always have felt worthy or been sure he could carry out the commands. Up through section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, recorded in 1843, the revelations repeatedly offer him forgiveness, as if he felt unsure of his worthiness.

WOODWORTH: Near the end of the book tour for *Rough Stone Rolling*, you came to see that you might have written the book

another way, from the strength of your position as a believer. If you were writing the book again today, what would you do differently?

BUSHMAN: I toyed with the idea that the gulf between believing readers and nonbelieving readers was so wide that any attempt to bridge it might be an exercise in futility. I might have said, "I'm going to give you a Mormon Joseph Smith; I think it is the true and better Joseph Smith." I would have been clearly on one side rather than in the middle. But, on reflection, I backed away from that strategy. I do come down on the side of Joseph Smith in that I don't picture him as a fraud or a charlatan or as being insincere. But I also wanted to present a Joseph Smith that a general audience could accept with only a few reservations. If I had gone the other route, the book would have been considered for Mormons only.

WOODWORTH: Your Mormon critics say that you sold out to the world by not coming down stronger on the Mormon side. They want you to attest to Joseph's inspiration, not his genius. Why not just bear powerful testimony like the missionaries?

BUSHMAN: Unfortunately, that powerful testimony would have fallen on deaf ears. Mormons would have liked the book, but other readers would have looked upon it as denominational history. I wanted every reader, if possible, to take Joseph Smith seriously. My book makes it possible to claim there is a Joseph Smith in the sources who is not a fraud. I want all readers to consider that possibility. If I had filled the book with testimony, they would have dismissed it as purely a believer's biography and gone back to Fawn Brodie for the true Joseph Smith. Now, at least, they have to consider two portraits.

WOODWORTH: The first volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers* came off the press in the winter of 2008, and more are on the way. What have you learned as editor-in-chief?

BUSHMAN: I learned two things: one about Joseph Smith, the other about Mormon editing projects. As to the first, I learned there

aren't a lot of new documents. The great new document is the printer's copy of the Book of Commandments, but it offers only modest additions. These offer delightful insights but are not revisionary. All in all I didn't learn much that was new about Joseph, but having worked through those journals at great length and in great detail for ten years, reading them again was still refreshing. I wanted to take notes. "Here's something I could have made more of," I said to myself. The journals are endlessly fruitful.

What I really learned is the Mormon way of doing an editing project. Barbara Oberg, editor of *The Jefferson Papers*, visited the project in summer 2009. With seven employees, *The Jefferson Papers* turn out a volume a year. *The Joseph Smith Papers* has thirty employees, and we turn out two volumes a year. Our volumes are much more complicated than theirs, and our total operation includes a massive marketing effort and more. Even so, we are probably less efficient than *The Jefferson Papers* crew. We have fretted about our inefficiency and have considered drastic measures, but we have not fired the staff and brought in a new team. We have moved people around in the organization until everyone has found a place to work. We function like a beehive. We send lots of workers into the field, and by dint of massive effort the volumes come out. In a way it's more expensive, but it gives each person a place. We have maintained a feeling of brotherhood. I'm happy with the way it has worked out.

WOODWORTH: The staff will doubtless gain valuable experience through working on the Joseph Smith Papers Project, allowing them to become fruitful scholars far into the future. So there are advantages, as you say. But are you not also critiquing bureaucracy and gridlock? Is small beautiful?

BUSHMAN: What I am critiquing is the capitalist system of creative destruction. Capitalism flourishes because it is heartless. A person who does not do his job is gone. Ours is the family way. Just

because a kid ruins the plough or can't bundle hay, he doesn't have to leave. He is part of the family. We work with him.

WOODWORTH: At the Joseph Smith bicentennial conference held at the Library of Congress, you argued for larger, more expansive contexts in which to understand Joseph Smith's place in world history. One could argue that the Joseph Smith Papers Project sends us in another direction by shrinking contexts, not expanding them. What will this series do to the face of Joseph Smith scholarship?

BUSHMAN: The impact on scholarship will probably be limited. All of this stuff has long been available in one form or another. These volumes do make the documents more easily accessible in print or, ultimately, online. People will be able to access Mormon materials more readily. Scholars will use Mormon examples more frequently to make a point. The Joseph Smith Papers Project will likely multiply the instances of Mormon material appearing in scholarly work.

Mormons think that if the public is able to see the real Joseph Smith, the Joseph Smith of the documents, they will find him admirable and no one will deny that he was a magnificent person. That hope is unlikely to be realized. People will find in those documents what they want to find in them, as they have always done. The *Papers* will not reverse the negative images. Brodie would not have written a different book if she had had all the papers of Joseph Smith to work with.

A more significant outcome will be an improved image of the Church as historian of itself. The *Papers* demonstrate that the Church is not afraid of its own history and is willing to open every document about Joseph Smith to public scrutiny.

WOODWORTH: It is remarkable to me how aggressively Deseret Book is marketing these books. This seems like a dramatic departure from the days when we silently cleaned up Joseph Smith's misspellings for publication in the *Ensign*. What will the *Papers* do for Church members?

BUSHMAN: The *Papers* will have a significant effect on Church members. They are buying the first volume of the journals in vast numbers, and as they read they are going to stumble onto things they never heard in Sunday School. They'll be a little surprised but also thrilled and inspired. The net effect, I think, will be to deepen and enrich our perceptions of Joseph Smith. The material we will have from him or from his clerks will be more authentic and textured than ever before.

WOODWORTH: Your work on the *Papers* will continue into the future indefinitely. I'd like to ask you about your day job in the present. While other scholars your age are sitting by the pool sipping prune juice, you take another academic position at Claremont. What drives you?

BUSHMAN: I actually like prune juice, and I don't mind swimming. We all know that decisions should be rational, that they should be based on careful considerations of pros and cons. They rarely are. I was on a bus tour with Joe Bentley, head of the LDS Council at Claremont, a few years ago. Walking along one day, he said, "Would you consider being a candidate for the Howard Hunter chair at Claremont?" The thought had never occurred to me! I said, "Joe, do you know how old I am?" I knew that President McKay was seventy-seven when he started his administration, and the same is true for Thomas Monson and Spencer Kimball and many other Presidents. They are in their high seventies. Still, it seemed incongruous for me to start a new job at my age.

I was complimented that Joe should ask, so as I sat down on the bus next to Claudia, I whispered in her ear: "You'll never guess what Joe Bentley just suggested." I think we made the decision right then and there to put our names in candidacy. Claudia is always looking for something new. As she put it, this could be the next chapter of our lives—which it has proven to be. It has been a rich addition to a life that might well have been over. But it is also a continuation of the

work I've been involved in to bring young Mormon scholars together to reflect on their investigations of Mormonism. Claremont seemed like an extension to a life pattern that we were following even then. It's exciting to be around people who are interested in talking about religion and history. Partly we did it out of duty—I wanted to help out if I could—but it has not been an onerous duty.

WOODWORTH: So you live next door to Hollywood, a place where people work hard to stay young forever. Do you worry about growing old? Do you fear becoming a relic?

BUSHMAN: I don't worry about becoming a relic, but I do wonder about losing my powers. Everyone suffers memory loss in old age. It is embarrassing and inhibiting. I worry more about losing my imagination and critical acumen. Someday while teaching a class I may just go blank. Right now I am not fighting off death; I am more concerned about finishing my books. I look forward to completing our term at Claremont in two more years. Then we will work on the books in whatever time remains.

WOODWORTH: One of those books is on farming, which raises a question about your identity as a scholar. Mormons know you as Joseph Smith's biographer. But outside the Mormon world, you are known primarily as a historian of colonial America or of material culture. Future generations may know you as a historian of early American farming. Where do these seemingly disparate interests intersect?

BUSHMAN: They intersect in my personality and personal circumstances. They don't have an intellectual rationale independent of me. I wrote *From Puritan to Yankee* because I was interested in the religious interiors of ordinary people, like my brothers and sisters in the Church. Then when I got interested in Joseph Smith I wanted to do something that intersected with Smith family lives. Farming was their life, their culture, so I worked on farming. Then when we

moved to Delaware, I was immersed in the material-culture world of Winterthur, the great museum of early American decorative arts. In trying to dope out what those hundreds of rooms at Winterthur meant, I moved into the gentility business. I took up the subject not because it fit into a rational research agenda but because those materials were at hand.

WOODWORTH: Mormonism does bind all the projects on some level. The idea for your first book was generated in testimony meeting, the farming book by the Smith family. Ennobled personhood lurks behind the refinement book. All your projects do seem to tackle practices of large human consequence: the cleansing of the soul, the sustenance of the body, the adornment of everyday life.

BUSHMAN: You speak truth when you say Mormonism and my personality are in those books. Claudia says everything I write is autobiographical. The gentility book is about making peace with my mother and grandmother. But there is something theological about that book, too. No one, I am sorry to say, understands this. In my view, gentility costs people a lot in terms of money and effort. The beautiful house, the lovely person, the costume, the garden, and the planned city require huge expenditures. The aspiration underlying that effort is a desire for something higher. I think that desire is a divine urge. You may say it is materialistic and filled with pride, and I would agree. But the urge to excel, even to gain power, I see as a yearning for something like godhood. So I admire and respect the practitioners of gentility even if the expression of their higher good was in some ways misbegotten.

WOODWORTH: Right. As you are talking I am thinking of Kundera's line about toilets rising like white water lilies from the ugly reality underneath. There is the side of us that aspires to beauty, adornment, something higher. It is partly façade but not only that.

BUSHMAN: Exactly. And I would say the same thing for someone like Kobe Bryant [of the Los Angeles Lakers]. He has a celestial urge to be the best, to rise above. It is a widespread if not universal urge.

The farming book will strike another Mormon note. My argument is that American farming was organized around family and that you cannot understand what American farmers were doing unless you see them as trying to sustain and propagate families, not just to make a profit. It is a complicated argument that I haven't entirely worked out, but I see it as going back to a fundamental theme in Mormonism. I argue that expansion of America, the definition of sections, the political conflicts in the nation were propelled by the energy of families striving to perpetuate themselves.

WOODWORTH: If what you say is true, are you not inserting family and a kind of eternal progression into the center of American development? And is that not then inserting Mormonism into the center of what America is or has become?

BUSHMAN: I would love more than anything to show that the issues at the heart of Mormonism are the issues at the heart of human life. Terryl Givens is doing that with premortal life, and I think the same thing could be done with other beliefs. We glibly propound our Mormon answers without realizing the depth of the questions those answers address.

WOODWORTH: Terryl claims that Mormon culture is best seen in intersection with the universal, a confrontation with tensions inherent in the human condition. What you seem to be suggesting is that Mormons would do well to think about how their particular religious configuration answers the aspirations of all humanity.

BUSHMAN: That's exactly what I would love to see.

WOODWORTH: Do you mean to say that we should be looking for ways of talking about Mormonism that moves beyond seer stones and the frontier rural environment?

BUSHMAN: Yes, I would say that, except I think we have to find the deeper meaning of seer stones and gold plates, too. We don't have to cast off any of these things as trivial accoutrements. I think there is depth below them all deserving of exploration.

WOODWORTH: The search for deep meaning leads us in the direction of Mormon studies, which I would like to talk about now. We seem to be in a very contextual space at the moment where we think we can't make sense of Mormonism unless we go out from it and find the connections and the parallels. There are obviously delights here, but are there not also wild goose chases? Everything comes to look like everything. Where does this search for connections lead?

BUSHMAN: I would not use the word "parallels." I would say "filaments." Any object, any idea—the Urim and Thummim, the gold plates, premortal existence—sits in a network of similar objects and ideas that can potentially illuminate and enrich the original. The filaments may not be visible to everyone who contemplates those items, because they don't have enough knowledge to appreciate them; but to see the total meaning in culture as a whole, you have to trace the affiliations. The connections go off in all directions, probably in numberless directions. One way for us to appreciate our religion is to see it in those multitudinous connections.

WOODWORTH: It seems to me that a search for filaments moves us toward anthropology and away from history. The human condition is placed in the foreground, and the connection to time and place is lost on some level. The quest for meaning emphasizes biology over circumstance as the primary explanation for why a particular phenomenon arises.

BUSHMAN: That is exactly right. We sacrifice change over time, which implies sequence, movement, directionality in geographical proximity. Cultural meaning is timeless. In cultural analysis, as contrasted with historical analysis, finding buried sacred texts in Tibet in the twelfth century is as interesting as finding gold plates next door to Joseph Smith. It is a different way of conceiving meaning. Cultural analysis is not much interested in cause. It isn't interested in change. It is interested in significance.

WOODWORTH: Are you then elevating significance above change?

BUSHMAN: Not quite. Embedding an event, a person, or an object in a causal sequence is an undeniably important form of meaning. We need stories of how things came to be. Mormonism is rife with historical stories, from the plan of salvation to the trek west. We need not give up stories embedded in place and time but rather recognize that tracing out filaments of meaning is a fruitful direction for our research at the moment.

WOODWORTH: I would like to ask you about the endowed chairs in Mormon studies now up and running at the University of Wyoming, Utah State University, Utah Valley University, and Claremont. These chairs were all conceived when the economy was booming. What challenges do these and other projected programs face in bad times? Are they in jeopardy?

BUSHMAN: The chair at Claremont is now endowed in perpetuity. The endowment may lose value with oscillations in the economy, but it is unlikely to disappear. Elsewhere there will be ups and downs in raising the necessary funds, and the economic downturn won't help. It is always hard to raise money when people feel poor. But what must be looked at is not the short-term oscillations, but the long-term commitment to the idea. Is the idea of placing Mormonism in the highest academic circles appealing to

Mormons? I think it is. After firesides on the Claremont program, people come up with tears in their eyes to say, "If there is anything I can do, let me know." The program strikes a chord with Mormons.

WOODWORTH: That reaction could easily be explained by reference to a people who have felt abused and neglected and marginalized in the court of public opinion over many years. Now they are being given respect, and it feels good to be noticed. Why should we take that reaction seriously?

BUSHMAN: For the same reason that there are scores of chairs of Jewish studies in the country. The same holds true for the chairs of Armenian studies. The desire by marginal groups for access drives these endowments.

WOODWORTH: All right, but the usual pathway to recognition is influence. The Jewish studies chairs came out of the widespread intellectual influence of Jews in art, in theater, in literature, everywhere. Islamic chairs emerge from the more recent recognition of Islam's force on the geopolitical map. So it is quite evident that you cannot ignore Jewish and Islamic influence and understand American development. Do Mormons have that same influence?

BUSHMAN: No, we don't. These chairs depend not only on Mormons feeling that they ought to have a place at the table, but on the willingness of those already at the table to admit them to the conversation. No doubt about it, Mitt Romney, Harry Reid, and Bill Marriott make a difference. They persuade people in power that Mormons deserve attention.

WOODWORTH: Does their Mormonness make a difference?

BUSHMAN: It is the combination of their Mormonness and their cultural power. When Mormons are thought of as serious, they will be acknowledged. A few celebrity converts are not enough.

Mormons need to be integrated into the power structure for us to win a hearing.

WOODWORTH: What does the LDS Church's public position against gay marriage do, then, to the integration argument? Does the gay marriage debate damage the standing of these chairs?

BUSHMAN: It has the potential to damage our reputation, but it isn't all negative. The reason there was so much objection to the Mormons in California's Proposition 8 campaign was their power and effectiveness. And it's power, not virtue, that is at stake here. There is now a chair of evangelical studies at the Harvard Divinity School. That would not have happened right after the Scopes Trial, when evangelicals were thought of as backward. Although evangelicals are still demeaned and disliked by the liberal left, they are beyond question a power in today's world. They have to be studied.

WOODWORTH: And in that chair, whether it be Mormon or Evangelical, is there a recognition that one can advocate for the faith?

BUSHMAN: I don't think my Claremont colleagues would like the word "advocate." You can be an adherent to the faith, but you have to be open to all perspectives, including a higher, critical perspective. Advocating understanding or fairness is all right; you can present the Mormon view as freely and fully as you like, but anything bordering on proselytizing is offensive.

WOODWORTH: John-Charles Duffy has been arguing that the chairs disproportionately represent the interests of what he calls the faithful scholars, which include the donor set, cutting out the more skeptical views. How do you respond to criticisms like this?

BUSHMAN: You will never have a perfectly balanced representation in graduate school. Political conservatives, for example, think their point of view is underrepresented. If Mormon skeptics write good books, they will be heard in graduate school. At the moment,

the critical attitude is far from underrepresented. It prevails far more widely than the faithful perspective. The Mormon Studies chairs only slightly right the balance.

WOODWORTH: Islamic scholars write as believers within their own tradition without getting mauled by outsiders. Jewish scholars enjoy the same luxury. Have we reached a point where Mormon scholars will be allowed the same privilege?

BUSHMAN: I think most people would say in principle that believing Mormons are allowed a voice in academic discussion. A fair number of scholars would say *Rough Stone Rolling* is an example of writing by a believer that is acceptable. But on specifics, this leads to trouble. Laurie Maffly-Kipp criticized my book as being too soft on Joseph Smith. Such critics think that Joseph Smith must be depicted as a scoundrel from time to time. Not to do so requires the suppression of facts. I don't think there is evidence for saying that Smith was a scoundrel. This omission leads the critics to say I am not objective. I think that they are at least as biased as I am.

WOODWORTH: My sense is that they don't actually realize how "objective" your account is, because they haven't studied the evidence closely. They don't seem to realize how entrenched gold plates are in the best available sources. The plates may put Joseph beyond the pale, but they cannot be easily explained away.

BUSHMAN: It is hard to imagine what evidence we could present, short of producing the plates themselves, to persuade skeptics.

WOODWORTH: I'd like to ask you about career models in Mormon Studies. You first made a name for yourself in colonial history. Your most important work in Mormon history came later on. Terryl Givens is pursuing another model, writing first on Mormonism and now branching out to the history of ideas. Do you see other models taking hold among scholars with interests in writing on Mormonism?

BUSHMAN: I hope we can reframe the question so there isn't a split between Mormon Studies and non-Mormon Studies. The very name Mormon Studies ghettoizes the subject—there is a realm for Mormonism, and then there is the rest of the world. We shouldn't take an interest only in our people, our times, our organization. Everything should be in our purview. I like the Maxwell Institute's interest in Islamic translations, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Mayan inscriptions. Mormons should think of themselves as caretakers of the world's religion. Why can't we see beauty and godliness in all of them and help preserve and treasure them and involve ourselves in their investigation? In the same spirit, we should think of all history and culture as being ours. When a young Mormon starts out it shouldn't be Mormonism versus New Testament studies, or Mormonism versus abolitionism; we should see all of history as part of God's work and worthy of our study.

WOODWORTH: I am hearing you argue against Mormon exceptionalism. This seems to me to be a tricky proposition. We don't want to make the Protestant move of collapsing religion with world, do we? How do you caretake while maintaining boundaries?

BUSHMAN: An excellent question. Can we sustain the critical differences that distinguish us while appreciating the virtues in all religions? Ideally building trust across religious boundaries allows us to recognize and even underscore differences without threatening friendship. It should be possible to relish differences while rejoicing in commonalities. I hope we can think of ourselves as having a particular mission to the world, but not necessarily being the superiors. We have a particular way of blessing people that others may not have.

WOODWORTH: One way of preserving peculiarity is to use Mormonism as a case study, an example of something larger we all share. In that way we generate more interest among outsider scholars, which we certainly want to do.

BUSHMAN: We need to be more cosmopolitan, and that cannot be done by saying, "I'm going to write on Mormon families, and then I'll insert a little bit about other families into my study." The non-Mormon material can't be an add-on. We have to be deeply enmeshed in the study of families, loving them for their own sakes.

WOODWORTH: What you are saying is that we must find the larger phenomenon in itself interesting and not simply find our own Mormon iteration interesting.

BUSHMAN: Exactly.

WOODWORTH: This discussion points to a puzzle within Mormonism. We talk as if we want to learn everything under the sun, we want all truth. We quote Brigham Young to that end. Yet in actual practice we often fall far short. Why is it that Mormonism is not more interested in the vast compass of all knowledge? We seem to be more prepossessed with teaching our youth to avoid the coarse than to search out and embrace the lovely.

BUSHMAN: For me that is a difficult question. The scripture "Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom" seems to be an injunction to the whole Church, but I mistrust my own emphasis on it because I am a scholar. I've given my life to it. Is it fair for me to say to the dentist in my high priests group, "You ought to be studying and learning," when he has another life? He likes his motorboat, he likes to golf, he likes to garden—all of which are worthwhile. Should every Mormon be a seeker for knowledge out of the best books?

Despite those reservations, I would like to see the temples as schools of the prophets, not just places of ritual but places of learning. I can see something like that in the future because it is so deeply embedded in our scriptures and in Joseph Smith's personality. He hungered and thirsted for knowledge. Like Abraham, he wanted to know things. I am hoping that there will be enough scholars in the Church and that Brigham Young University will become eminent

enough in its educational goals that pleasure in learning can be instilled at every level. We're a long way from it right now.

WOODWORTH: You have done more than anyone I can think of to mentor a rising generation of young scholars in Mormon Studies, most notably through your summer seminars starting in 1997 under the sponsorship of what was then the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and later under BYU, and more recently through a series of academic conferences organized in the interest of graduate students. Participants often talk about their experience with you as a kind of apprenticeship. What skills or habits of mind are you trying to pass on through these interactions?

BUSHMAN: I suppose I have become a mentor. I have brought people together and sat at seminar tables with them. I don't think I'm a mentor in the sense of having an approach or a method that I'm trying to instill. Often mentoring means promoting a particular form of scholarship for students to emulate. Together they become a school. I think the heart of my mentoring is developing confidence that we can confront every problem. I don't like the idea of hiding from our problems. One participant in a summer seminar told me that he had been uneasy about studying Mormonism before the seminar. He feared he would find problems he couldn't deal with. Afterwards, he became confident that he could look at any issue. His change of mind was the supreme compliment.

WOODWORTH: That confidence in confronting problems is more easily manifest in rooms filled with believers. But then the believers have to go out and talk about Mormonism to outsiders. And as we know, for cynics Mormonism represents all that is reprehensible to the modern liberal mind: racism, sexism and immorality, authoritarianism, violence. Do we argue that these so-called problems are not really problems? Do we divert attention by celebrating the greatness in Mormonism, which is our standard missionary strategy? How do we confront problems?

BUSHMAN: One thing we shouldn't do is say we are God's people and therefore God's enemy is sowing these seeds of doubt, implying that questioning is entering the devil's territory. Our young people will conclude that believing means wearing blinders. We should not minimize problems. The Mountain Meadows Massacre book is a model of how to do it. We admit the event was a huge, horrible mistake. We can deal with problems by getting outside them. If we think Mormons submit to authoritarian control, we can ask why. How do Mormons benefit from following Church leadership? We can ask what it is that critics want to accomplish. What drives them? Why is Mormonism so offensive to them? In both cases, we can step back and view problems in a larger framework.

WOODWORTH: There may be an element in Mormon history that allows us to suffer with other people because we ourselves have suffered, both as victims and as victimizers. Our history is redemptive in the end, not only in our priesthood and our ordinances, but also in our comprehension of the pain of anyone who knows what it feels like to be on the outside looking in.

BUSHMAN: I am with you on that. I ask myself, "What is the consequence of having deep, ineradicable guilt in our past, a guilt we cannot erase or eliminate?" We can say, "Well, I didn't do it. It was my ancestors." But we are complicit in it. They were our people. I would hope the result would be a tempering of our triumphalism, a recognition that we need mercy. We need to be forgiven, and therefore we have compassion for all peoples who make mistakes. This is something we should reflect on theologically.

WOODWORTH: But do we really want to temper our triumphalism? We are told we have the keys of the kingdom regardless of our missteps. Isn't the standard of liberty something that will dwarf all problems and rally people around it?

BUSHMAN: An excellent question! Mormon optimism is one of our best features. We refuse to accept defeat. We undertake impossible tasks, like recording the names of every last person who ever lived on this earth, or teaching the gospel to the whole world. However impossible, we don't give up. We have supreme confidence that God is with us. But we must not present ourselves as imperialists. We are simply offering ourselves as humble followers of Jesus Christ, trying to exemplify the way of the Master as we understand it. We deeply believe we can bless people with the restored gospel we have been given. I hope that is enough of a standard.

WOODWORTH: There is always the danger of our inadvertently feeding the duplicitous stereotype by preaching two Mormonisms. The accusation has been made. We know as temple-going Mormons we can't talk about the Mormonism we learn there. It raises the question of whether the larger public will ever understand or appreciate the heart of Mormonism, either because they are not given access to the space or because Mormons simply talk about themselves differently with each other than when they are with outsiders.

BUSHMAN: I don't like that idea of two languages. I don't mind secrecy. It preserves the sacred; in some ways, it creates the sacred. But I object to insider and outsider languages. We sometimes use insider language in priesthood quorums and Sunday School when we make snide comments about other religions. We would never speak that way in the presence of a neighbor. We would use tolerant and respectful language, which should prevail everywhere. I like the idea—I call it "caretaker"—that we truly value all people who believe in Christ or even believe in God. They are our friends, our allies, our brothers and sisters! We cannot think of them as part of a denominational competition. We should join arm in arm with these people.

WOODWORTH: Perhaps arm in arm with other marginal groups. The Pew Forum recently found that "Mormons"—it's hard

to say what people understand by the term—are disliked more than liked by Americans on an average of four to one. Do polls like this suggest that overriding political concerns might come to dictate the research agenda in Mormon studies the same way negative perceptions have driven other oppressed groups to highlight their commonalities with the larger society?

BUSHMAN: I taught a course at Claremont with Armand Mauss, and as you know he believes there is an ongoing tension within Mormonism between assimilation and differentiation. I suppose that is true; we are always going to have to speak both of those languages. But right now the tendency to blend and make friends with everybody, to avoid being offensive, may have gone too far. In a truly deep friendship, we don't have to be the same. We celebrate and love our differences. We should be able to point out our differences with others and then make disagreement not only acceptable but an act of love. Some cultures show their affection by arguing. We don't. We choose perfect harmony or enmity. We should find a middle ground where we permit our differences to shine.

WOODWORTH: How do we do that?

BUSHMAN: Practice. We need to be better missionaries, but you may know that my mantra now is "Every member a conversationalist." We have to find a way to talk naturally about our own lives, including our Mormon lives, not with the goal of manipulating people to get them to church or into the clutches of missionaries, but to tell them about ourselves. And then, in turn, invite them implicitly or explicitly to tell us about themselves. In that atmosphere we can naturally discuss our distinctive beliefs.

WOODWORTH: You're talking friendship, which is the more generous meaning of the interaction, and not a calculating attempt to bring others into our quarters.

BUSHMAN: Once we develop friendship, we can talk about everything. Some of our friends will join the Church; most of them won't. But open-hearted friendship and conversation is the best way for people to see what Mormons are.

WOODWORTH: Does Mormon literature play a role in this meeting of minds? Fiction is a great social lubricator. Mormons devour their own historical fiction. I wonder if non-Mormons might encounter our depths through great Mormon novels yet to be written.

BUSHMAN: Some excellent Mormon fiction is coming out these days—the novels of Dean Hughes, for example. Claudia is reading a compelling trilogy by Lael Littke and two of Littke's friends about Mormon women and their problems. These writers tell the story as it is. And yet it is lovely to see these Mormons struggling with nightmare events. Their kids get divorced, their daughters get pregnant, and their fathers and sons go over the hill. All these things happen, and yet they struggle along together, pulling in the Church to help them. We ought to be able to do that with our history, showing Joseph struggling along his way, and Brigham, too, rather than portraying them as these never-failing prophetic dispensers of wisdom. In the long run, that's going to ring hollow. Sentimentalized books will disappear from the scene. We've got to show the struggle.

WOODWORTH: But struggle is not the end. We want to show that revelatory power can emerge from weakness; that all people can feel God's balm in their hour of need and that human effort alone will never be sufficient in conquering our problems.

BUSHMAN: There has to be underlying optimism and hope. But the story will not always end triumphantly. We may be blessed with courage rather than success—just as in real life.

WOODWORTH: You mentioned the prophets, and I'd like to start with them as we transition into discussing Mormon history proper. How can believing Mormons be true to their own convictions without

incurring trouble with the authorities? It seems to me that a tradition of loyal dissent is not well developed in Mormonism. The strong poles are defensive history and apostate history. There is little in between. Defense is associated with loyalty, which is an extremely powerful virtue and one we all want to cultivate. But defense can also be false and wooden. Evidence is seen not for what it is but for what we want or expect it to be, twisting the past and blunting our own best instincts.

BUSHMAN: The word "defensive" implies that criticism is threatening and that a barrier has been thrown up to keep out the opposition. A defensive posture does not help people whose faith has been undermined and are uncertain which way to turn. Our defensiveness only confirms their fear that believers simply stop their ears. We should always be open. We can't deny criticism, or we've lost the battle. People will think we don't understand the problem.

But in acknowledging problems, some people think we are disloyal. They think we have given ground to the enemy. One experience convinced me otherwise. *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* was much criticized because a footnote questioned the date of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Most Mormons had fixed the date in 1829; I tried to make the case that we don't have enough evidence to know for sure. I got letters from people at BYU saying, "I loved your book, except for . . . "—the footnote about Melchizedek Priesthood restoration being the objection. Strangely, Neal Maxwell said he liked the book precisely because of the way it dealt with the priesthood question. His reason for liking it was that I had not gone about it in an iconoclastic spirit. I had not said, "Aha, I got you! The evidence does not support the standard story." I simply discussed the issue with its problematic evidence. What troubles people most is not raising questions but appearing to attack. Adopting a modest tone is not inconsistent with historical method. The aim of scholarship is not to condemn but to explicate. I believe that explication of anything is possible if we are fair-minded. Elder Maxwell did not object to airing issues if the aim was not to undermine the Church.

WOODWORTH: Jack Welch taught me that a believer can write about any touchy subject in Mormonism if he writes with charity. Do you agree?

BUSHMAN: When I first got to Columbia, the LDS law students asked me over to talk about history as a believer—as a Christian and as a Mormon. They wanted to know if there was some view of history, some set of questions, that springs from my Mormonism. In the talk, I explored various possibilities and finally came to the conclusion that the governing principle is to take all people seriously, to respect them on the grounds that ultimately we may actually meet these historical actors. We have to write history as if we were writing in the presence of our subjects. That requires us to speak with tact and fellow feeling, trying to understand their point of view. Respect for the people we write about is the essence of writing as a Mormon. Charity protects us in dealing with problematic issues.

WOODWORTH: Elder Dallin H. Oaks justifies closing some archival records on similar grounds. Church leaders who held closed-door meetings long ago are still alive today in the spirit. We ought to respect their privacy then and now.

BUSHMAN: I would agree, but with the caution that holding back records for fear of hurting someone's feelings can lead to unnecessary restrictions. Historians will naturally ask, "What is going to hurt them? What is being hidden?" People writing family histories often come across episodes they suppress because they think they are embarrassing. Usually that is a mistake. We need to know our ancestors for what they were, not for what we think they should be.

WOODWORTH: Besides respect for all, do you see any other distinguishing methodological features within the Mormon historical profession? A Mormon plumber doesn't practice his craft any differently than does an American plumber. The same goes for a Mormon accountant. Is there an argument to be made for why a believing

Mormon historian should practice his or her craft differently than other historians do?

BUSHMAN: Practicing the craft, of course, has many dimensions. There are parts of the historical discipline—finding evidence, treating it fairly, evaluating sources—that are common to all historians. Don't suppress evidence, watch for bias, and so forth. Beyond these common principles, I think two things come out of a Mormon perspective. One is a set of questions that Mormons might ask that others might not. We've talked of examples: the stress on family, interest in revelation, premortal existence, and so on. Mormons bring many questions to the table. The other is the attitude we have been discussing: We may see these people one day. They are living now. We must treat everyone of every race, every age, every gender, and every social situation with the same respect as if we were speaking face to face.

WOODWORTH: What about storytelling? You made an argument at Yale in 2003 that Mormons more often than not theologize by telling stories. We don't systematize. Does this inclination toward narrative indicate a naïveté about us, something we will want to outgrow, or are you more inclined to think of it as useful to developing our own way of talking about the Mormon past?

BUSHMAN: I think we should certainly do narrative theology. We want to explore our natural resources, to recognize that anything we do or value can be translated into a fruitful scholarly inquiry. But I am not averse to bringing in other ways of doing things—like systematic theology and philosophy—and trying them out on Mormons. I have been watching Claremont students doing philosophy of religion and theology, meandering around in very abstruse questions. Usually there is a serious human issue at the center of their inquiries, an issue that involves us all. Whether or not philosophizing should be done, whether or not it is going to help the Church, they are going to do it and, I believe, to good effect. If we ask questions that come out of

Calvin or Spinoza or Karl Barth and bring them to Mormonism, we will find something that we did not know before. It's a "many flowers bloom" philosophy.

WOODWORTH: The more connections made, the more discussions had, the better. The idea of bonding or welding all people, all knowledge, together, makes sense to us. It may service us to find as many interconnections as possible.

BUSHMAN: In that passage in D&C 88 where we are enjoined to seek wisdom out of the best books, we find "teach one another," a very democratic mode of instruction. Everyone can bring something to the classroom. As with our idea of testimony, we don't rely on a single preacher; everyone testifies. We believe that a few of these little bits and pieces will stick and in the end improve us. As a democratic exercise, we are saying that ordinary people have wisdom that learned people can benefit from.

WOODWORTH: What about humor? Are we too serious? British history is notable for its playfulness, its wit, its irony. There seems to be little of that in Mormon history writing.

BUSHMAN: There has always been some humor and more of it recently. We love to have the prophet of the Church crack jokes in general conference. We are careful not to demean the sacred or slight those in authority, but we have room for jokes. We need not let the sobriety of our message prevent us from being lighthearted.

WOODWORTH: Historians have long debated the objects of history. At one time they fashioned themselves physicists who uncovered the forces determining the social world. The move from scientific history to philosophical idealism shifted the ground to "ideas," "mind," and, under the influence of the French, "mentalités." More recently, historians have thought they were recovering ideology, class bias, or interest. Where do you stand? What is Richard Bushman's philosophy of history?

BUSHMAN: I spent a lot of time in my first twenty-five or thirty years of teaching reacting to Marxism. The Left dominated the intellectual life at universities as I was coming up, but I always felt that Marxism profoundly distorted historical truth. I especially disliked the demeaning of working-class people. Many Marxists valued the working class only as it resisted power. Anything else was false consciousness. I kept searching for some other mode of conceiving the world and offering a different view. The closest I came was to divide the world into two sides. One side thinks the issue is power and freedom; the other side is concerned about chaos and order. I am in the latter camp. I agree that power easily becomes oppressive; this can be carried to an extreme, as in Foucault's writings, for instance. In his view, it is impossible to act without dominating or submitting to dominance. That doesn't seem right to me. I think of the world as blooming, buzzing confusion out of which the self seeks to create order. Oppressive systems can be understood as ways to give meaning, purpose, and order to life. Rather than disrupting and casting down the systems of power, we should ask their purposes—what satisfactions are there in these systems?

WOODWORTH: Isn't the outlook you have just articulated dangerous? It seems almost like a Hegelian view of the world that justifies the slaughterhouse of history for the sake of some abstract principle that seeks resolution. Of course, such idealisms destroyed countless lives in the twentieth century.

BUSHMAN: I think understanding ordering systems requires a measure of sympathy for their aims. Communism is moved by the utopian dream of a classless, stateless society. We have to start there. But all ordering systems bring oppression of various sorts. There is a deep irony built into social orders. They fall short of what they set out to do, even arriving at the dead opposite. We can't blind ourselves to the abuses, but we want to begin with an understanding of their aims. We cannot break down power in the utopian expectation of arriving

eventually at absolute freedom. Some interpret democracy as seeking to flatten all hierarchy. Mormons don't want to go there. Our object is to reach a middle ground where we balance order and freedom, critical of all systems—even those we believe promote human flourishing.

WOODWORTH: So in short, you would say your philosophy of history is a search for order out of chaos?

BUSHMAN: I am searching for the ways people create order and even hierarchy. In the case of gentility, I was interested in the yearning to create an ideal of the good life—a polished, urbane, genteel life. The key word is "refinement." The refined life was an endlessly appealing idea; a person of pure refinement has stood as an inspiring ideal for five centuries in the West. At the same time, the ideal led to class conflict, to the demeaning of plain people, to snobbery, and to materialism, making a person's possessions the source of arrogant confidence. That paradox drove my study.

Similar paradoxes occur with farmers. They were, we can see now, responsible for the eradication of the Indians. The farmers' need to provide land for their children pitted them against the families of the Indians. While military men, trappers, traders, and everyone else could exist in that middle ground between Europeans and Indians without either side vanquishing the other, the farmers had to take over. They forced out the Indians because they had to control the land—all for the purpose of providing for their children. American history is not a melodrama. It is not the conquest of a victimized people by greedy, imperialistic colonists. It is a tragedy: two ways of life competing with one another, each side battling for family preservation.

WOODWORTH: Then there is no clear resolution in your view. The end of the tragedy is forced choice, in conflict. As the saying goes, "Everything that ends, ends badly. Otherwise it wouldn't end." Does your tragedy end badly?

BUSHMAN: I don't know what the theological implications are. We hope for perfect reconciliation in God. But within human life the paradoxes and tragedies remain. As Terryl Givens says, even the best systems contain irreconcilable tensions.

WOODWORTH: Earlier we talked about the human aspiration toward something higher. In our reaching, we suppose we are learning as we go, always improving, getting better as we go along. Progress is one of the most powerful engines in American history. Yet your view of order and chaos ending in tragedy may call into question the idea of progress.

BUSHMAN: Progress is another paradox: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Certainly Mormons are divided on that issue. When Mormons look at the world, we say our generation of kids have it harder than any generation before them because of all of the temptations. On the other hand, they have it easier than any generation before them because of the immense wealth and the opportunities available to them.

Such thoughts have led me to reconsider the Order of Enoch. We can say the expulsion from Jackson County and the termination of the Order of Enoch was a failure. The Saints couldn't pull it off in Jackson County, barely tried it at Far West, and didn't even try in Nauvoo. Later efforts at a United Order sputtered out. Yet the thought of a future time when we will all put our money together and be equalized underlies a sense of stewardship to this day. The idea inspires our willingness to pay tithing and give our all to the kingdom. As an ideal it motivates us to sacrifice and service. Failure bears within it the seeds of unanticipated success.

WOODWORTH: "One heart and one mind" is more conceivable on a domestic or village scale than on the scale of cities or nations. What happens to individuality and personality? A basic fact of our existence is that any two people having different pasts, different

parentage, and different traumas will differ on any number of viewpoints. Righteousness isn't the issue.

BUSHMAN: A harmony based on homogeneity is not what we want. We don't want everyone to be the same. We will never achieve perfect harmony—and never should. I'm working with the possibility that religion exists between the real and the ideal. The ideal is something we perpetually reach for, not something we ever get to. Religion helps us negotiate this tension, helping us to accept that we always fall short of our communal and personal ideals—we are never where we hope to be—and yet we never stop striving. This is true for God as well as for us individually. God isn't satisfied to live in perfect holiness. He is always creating worlds with human sinners. He works to raise them to a higher level, over and over, as if creating tension between what people are and what they are seeking to be is what makes the universe go.

WOODWORTH: Your two poles make sense to me. The history of Western thought can be seen as an oscillation between realistic and idealistic systems. Humans are not content to settle on the real but cannot sustain the ideal either. We are constantly tussling within ourselves, like a sine curve rising, only to fall back again.

BUSHMAN: Our hopes for the ideal are very strong, but that is part of the story. Religion does that for us. We hope for a fulness that we can be whole and righteous, our bodies filled with light.

WOODWORTH: This seems like a good place to ask you about the grand narrative. Over the last forty years or so, we have seen a leap in the number of detailed monographs in the historical profession but far fewer large-scale interpretations. One of the concerns with this trend, as your mentor Bernard Bailyn has pointed out, is that no one can keep up with the research in his or her own area, let alone have time for reading in other areas so fertile to one's thinking. There is no time to synthesize. Meanwhile, as monographs burrow deeper into

a ground, few rise above the forest to see what it all means. So is the grand narrative dead? Did postmodernism kill it for good?

BUSHMAN: The grand narrative suffered its demise partly because of too much information, as you suggest. The narrative couldn't take into account all the things that were happening. But more fatal was the recognition that it was an instrument of power, a way of vaulting one group, one social class, one gender above another. It became intolerable because it was destructive. But the urge to comprehend the meaning of the past or the meaning of our lives is so ineradicable that something like a grand narrative will reemerge. Eric Foner has a book on the history of the United States as a history of liberty. That is a phrase we are willing to use because for our generation "liberty" is a good word. Other grand narratives will likely return, only this time in a chastened form. We will be more alert to the groups that are being hurt and oppressed and include them in the picture. The new narratives won't be stable, however, because the groups we are inadvertently suppressing now will, later on, reveal the limitations of our thinking.

WOODWORTH: And how do you see that return taking place? At the moment, many books give each group their own chapter. Race, class, and gender become the transcendent categories. The direction you are suggesting would have to subsume the group under a category that everyone shares.

BUSHMAN: The race-class-gender typology cannot sustain itself forever. It is very powerful but too parochial. We want a larger category. It may be the nation again. Most American history has been written about the democratic American nation. But more likely some global synthesis will emerge. I wouldn't mind if it were based on the family.

WOODWORTH: It could be the citizen. We seem to be moving into a post-ethnic moment where figures like Barack Obama and Tiger Woods transcend race. They are world citizens.

BUSHMAN: "Citizen" is a good word. Someone has to write the book, and you may be the one to do it. I was going to propose family and the dynamics of the family as something that holds for all of these people—everyone is involved in family in some form. I don't know what form the grand narrative would take. It could be the history of family strategies.

WOODWORTH: Where there are families there are children, and I would like to move now into a discussion of your own scholarship and the historical craft as you have practiced it. It has been said that an author's books are like children—he loves them each for different reasons. Do you love any of your writings more than others?

BUSHMAN: I loved writing *The Refinement of America* because I was surrounded by riches. Everywhere I turned I found material on refinement and its vicissitudes. I don't think it's my best book. It's too long, too cumbersome. It would have been better if it were a little more tightly argued. But I was determined to demonstrate the reach of the refined-life ideal and the many applications of it. I enjoyed writing that book as much as any because it unfolded more or less effortlessly. I spent a year at the Smithsonian, and everything I took off the shelves had relevance.

WOODWORTH: Do you think the enjoyment had something to do with your own urbane aspirations? Did the book unfold as it did because the habits of mind and behavior you were seeing were those to which you yourself aspired?

BUSHMAN: I certainly felt, and still feel, the power of refinement. At the same time I was also aware of its meretricious nature. It is superficial—very worldly, very thin. The book is critical of refinement, especially in the last chapter. Claudia said that I was doing battle with my mother. My grandmother worked in a shoe factory but was born of a German artist father. She tried to restore refinement to her family's lives. She took a little tiny house in the Avenues in Salt

Lake City and turned it into a palace—at least it looked so to me. My mother inherited that fascination and tried to spread it to her children. She wanted me to wear knickers as a boy because aristocratic children in England wore knickers. And so in criticizing gentility, Claudia said I was showing ambivalence towards my mother's culture. Certainly there was a fascination. I loved the sense of people striving for something higher—fitfully, partially, and inconsistently—but still having a sense that there was a better life available to them if they could just reach out.

WOODWORTH: You say *Refinement* is not your best book. Which one is, then?

BUSHMAN: I am not in a position to say. The most disappointing book was *King and People*. I felt I had revealed a deep truth in that book, but it didn't register. It seemed like a repeat of what Bailyn had already written or what Gordon Wood was about to write. The book seemed like a small entry among more massive studies. I felt that *King and People* was a critique of Bailyn's *Ideological Origins* and that it probed something very deep. Gordon Wood and I thought very much alike on those issues, but because of timing and the way I presented the material, the book never connected in the way I thought it deserved.

WOODWORTH: Your reference to disappointment reminds me of a challenging time in your scholarly life, in the 1970s. You were stuck. What happened?

BUSHMAN: After *From Puritan to Yankee* won the Bancroft Prize, I thought I knew how to write history. At that time I had a sense of some deep structures in society grounded in the ideas of tyranny and freedom and guilt. I saw it in Jonathan Edwards's theology. I saw it in Sam Adams's and John Adams's political philosophy. I collected scads of material, but when I started to write, it wouldn't work. I may have told you how I would write for a month, and then the whole

thing would peter out. I couldn't figure out what was going to happen next. I lost confidence in my ability to write a book. Leonard Arrington called about that time to offer a position in the Church Historian's Office, and I very seriously considered accepting the offer. I felt I had lost it. I couldn't write another book.

Then the bicentennial of the Revolution came along, and I had to give lectures. Every colonial historian in the country was invited to speak that year. In making preparation, I tried to extract the essence of the projected book. Out of that experience, I was able to publish *King and People* in the mid-1980s. By that time, I thought I had a pretty good book. When I sent it off to the Institute of Early American History and Culture for consideration, Norman Fiering, a good friend, flatly rejected it. I was crushed. After about six weeks, Norman called and asked, "What do you think about your manuscript?" I said, "I feel betrayed." I realized afterward that he had wanted it all along; the rejection was his way of shaking me up. He simply wanted major revisions. Still, I realized from that point on that I wasn't connecting. I thought I had a real winner. I expected a second Bancroft Prize, and it didn't happen. The book got good reviews—a few truly excellent—but it was not a blockbuster.

WOODWORTH: Many historians might be content just with getting their books published with esteemed presses, but you were looking for something more. You wanted a slam dunk, something that registered. Was it always that way with you?

BUSHMAN: I always had confidence in my ideas. If they were important to me, I believed they would be important to others. I felt that way about *The Refinement of America*.

WOODWORTH: But what you have just described is a downward arc, not an upward, perpetually confident arc. You said you lost all confidence in the 1970s. By the time you got the reply from Fiering, your confidence must have sunk even lower. How did you break out of that funk?

BUSHMAN: I can get depressed, but I also have an ebullient nature. Once I get an idea and start to test it, I feel better. Many ideas don't work. Usually, first formulations are wrong. But when I listen to the primary materials, they suggest what they mean. Once I get on the right track, confirmation comes in from every side. Then I know I am on to something. When I began working on something new—in this case *Refinement*—I came back to life.

WOODWORTH: Claudia once said that you write your books in an armchair. What did she mean by that?

BUSHMAN: She thinks that a large part of the book is my thinking about the material rather than collecting big piles of stuff. But the thinking has to be based on the sources. I believe in what I call grazing. That is, when starting a new project, I don't like saying, "here are five bodies of knowledge, I'll start with body one and make my way through it and so on down the line." I like to skim all of the bodies quickly and get a feeling for what is there. Quite soon I have all this stuff hanging in my head. Then I think about it and begin to form hypotheses in the form of narratives. I form them fairly quickly, which is dangerous because of the temptation to hold on even when the ideas are wrong. If I keep going back to the sources, however, eventually there'll come a moment when I'll admit I've got this wrong and reverse myself.

WOODWORTH: As you recall, C-SPAN used to have a program called Book Notes in which host Brian Lamb interviewed historians and journalists about their latest works. The authors often talked about the objects and routines that put them in the writing mood and got their creative juices flowing. It might be a special pen, a chair, a time of day, a wooded place. What gets you in the mood to write? What sparks your imagination?

BUSHMAN: I like writing better than reading. I have to drive myself to read. I have a great deal of difficulty reading a book all the

way through. I get impatient. I will read half a chapter, and it will get my mind going, and I have to get to the computer and start writing. If I am sitting at a desk and I have a choice between writing and reading, I'll always choose writing. To answer your question, I would say exposure to good source materials sparks my writing. Once I am in the stuff and the ideas begin to flow, I can't wait to get them down.

WOODWORTH: This is a gift that would allow a person to get many, many things done professionally.

BUSHMAN: The danger is that a quick writer will be superficial and not careful enough. On the whole it works for me, however, because once I write I get a vested interest in my ideas. I keep looking for support or disaffirmation. Once my ideas are formed, I read with deep purpose in all sorts of stuff. I can read it fast, or I can read it slow, but I have purpose.

WOODWORTH: Are you inclined to say that writing early, writing quickly, writing by free association is a style you would advocate?

BUSHMAN: I've actually moved more and more in that direction. I used to write intricate, detailed, multipage outlines so that I had every move in my head before writing. I don't do that nearly as much anymore. I read and read and read until I have a take, and then I start writing. If I can get the right first sentence, I write it down, and once that sentence is on the page, the others come. Oftentimes, the natural flow of the writer's mind is close to the natural flow of the readers' minds. Writing with a minimal outline often provides the information readers need when they need it. Sometimes after I have written a passage, I have to go back and outline to be sure I know what I am trying to say.

A rather perverse outcome of my writing method is that I believe that one's productivity as a historian is in inverse proportion to the amount of research assistance available. If research assistants are collecting the material, the author is not experiencing those materials

in all their complexity. The sources are not given the opportunity to spark the imagination. When the writer sits down to write, he or she has nothing to say. Books are written not at the end when all the facts are in, they are written while the research is being done. That's when I get the ideas that ultimately turn into the book.

WOODWORTH: Let's return to reading. Coleridge said there are four kinds of readers: the hourglass, the sponge, the jelly bag, and the golconda. In the hourglass everything that runs in runs right out again. The sponge gives back all it takes in, only a little dirtier. The jelly bag keeps only the refuse. The golconda runs through a sieve and keeps only the diamonds. Which kind of reader are you?

BUSHMAN: I suppose I am the golconda. I am not very good at retaining everything I read. Some people's minds are encyclopedic, storing whole libraries of material. When I take notes, I often begin personally; that is, I explain why I started reading the book, what my mood was at the time, and then move on to what I think is most important or interesting. My notes are a little essay to myself about the experience of reading the material—all the ideas it sparks in my imagination. Then I will follow with pages where I find an excerpt, a quotation, or an isolated fact that is going to be useful. I put all those things together in my notes file. The notes are an attempt to grasp the thrust of the book, where it is heading, and where it should be placed in the literature, and then my experience with the book.

It took quite a while to learn to take notes. Now, in subjects that are new to me, I take extensive notes, something from virtually every page, just to get the information into my head. Once I have done that with a new subject, the issue is how the standard pattern is changed by this book. What is the heart of the book? Claudia and I use the phrase "Rip the guts out of the book," which is appropriate in two ways. One is that you go to the heart of the thing. The other is being merciless in casting aside whatever is uninteresting. It is really an act of disrespect to rip the guts out of

the book, as if everything else were dross. Unfortunately that is the only way to keep up.

WOODWORTH: And you do this rather quickly. You are looking for the essence of the book within, say, the first fifteen minutes of reading it?

BUSHMAN: It always pays to read the introduction very closely, to understand where the author is going. Reading the introduction too rapidly leads to subsuming the book into your own familiar patterns and missing the author's point. Once I have the introduction in mind, I read the conclusion and then try to fill in the gaps.

WOODWORTH: So you read, you graze, and then the patterns or logic begins to emerge. I'd like to ask you to reflect on this last step because in it we find one of your gifts as a historian. Conceptualization may be your strongest suit. You once described the patterns that came during the writing of *Rough Stone Rolling* as figures walking into the light from the dark as if you were sitting near a campfire. Surely these patterns cannot be forced any more than insight can be, but take us through what you do to put yourself in a position to identify them. Can the process of identification be taught?

BUSHMAN: I have no idea where ideas come from. The process seems miraculous to me. It doesn't even seem like smarts. I'm sure it is aided by years of experience—all the conceptual, theoretical, factual stuff in my head. I think the best thing I could say is that history requires an instinct about where to start. What is the entry point into a body of material? The first step is to read a few documents very closely, as if you were reading scripture, where you ask, "What are the implications?" I try to absorb all the feelings and thoughts in the words. I want to know where that passage heads. It is so easy to absorb a document into my own system and make it go in the direction I want. That may work for a moment, but after a while the evidence isn't there anymore. When I am on the right track, the

evidence keeps falling into place. Once the little patches of evidence are in my head, I trust my mind to work its miracle.

WOODWORTH: One of the words you just used stands out to me, and that is "implication." It seems to me that Mormon historians are starting to frame arguments more than they have in the past. History is not taking a photo. So instead of staring at a source and seeing facts and being in love with facts, we now are starting to look beyond the facts to ask what they mean, what larger story they connote. That seems to me to be a maturation.

BUSHMAN: To see those implications not only leads to what is going to happen in the future—events are moving according to some logic—but it also leads outward to how other minds are thinking and how they interact with each other. Once we get the sense of implications, we can enrich our narrative immeasurably.

WOODWORTH: What we are talking about here may have important implications for the way the Mormon story is told. Historians at the pinnacle of their craft are not just fine narrativists or profound conceptualists. They are close and careful readers, capable of recreating a thick mental world. But if Mormonism is already inclined toward narrative and valuing every detail—like the way we treasure every little piece of pioneer life—then we should be able to write some profound history.

BUSHMAN: I think so. We have the material; we need to tell the story better. We have to learn that sentiment is the bane of good narrative. A writer repels readers by loading stories with sentiment. We need to tell raw stories in their full power.

WOODWORTH: Many historians write essays as though they are standing before a board of medieval examiners. They state their thesis up front and then spend the body of the paper proving it. You write more as a belletrist, unfolding layers as you go. Why keep people in suspense?

BUSHMAN: Sometimes people want and need a big idea, and stating it bluntly at the beginning grabs their attention. But it is somewhat mechanical, a little sophomoric, to open with a thesis statement. Our students write that way at the beginning, to make everything clear. But the most sophisticated writing worms its way into the central argument. It is better to begin with an engaging story than a thesis statement.

WOODWORTH: We have talked about how reading and writing work together for you. You are a great believer in carrying on outside reading that is unrelated to one's main project. How does this reading function in your academic life?

BUSHMAN: A scholar may be an excellent technician but lack scope and depth. Outside reading is essential to becoming an intellectual who tries keep up with what is going on in the intellectual world. *The New York Review of Books* is one good way to do it. I also read *Books and Culture* because I think this Christian journal can be a model for Mormons. The journal's evangelical writers apply their religious beliefs to the culture at large, and Mormons should do the same. It is also very well written. We read the *New Yorker*, though it has been disappointing recently. I don't know what has gone wrong. The writing, however, is terrific, worth reading just to get the cadences of good sentences in mind.

WOODWORTH: You mentioned the responsibility of intellectuals. They once played a hugely influential role in churches in the West, and they still do to a large degree in all the major faith traditions, even as their authority is challenged in the culture at large. Does Mormonism need intellectuals?

BUSHMAN: We say we need scholars. Mormons don't often use the word "intellectuals," which should come into more common usage. I don't think we will ever plumb the depths of our own culture if we don't view it from a broad perspective. Intellectuals have the

broad view and are aware of the large issues occupying humankind throughout history. We need more people who can appreciate the philosophical power of Mormonism.

WOODWORTH: After they abandoned faith in God, intellectuals in the Western tradition took on an avant-garde role, in at least two ways. They criticized inconsistency and hypocrisies among the dominant powers—stirring up bourgeoisie complacency, for example, or fighting against totalitarianism, and they advanced the cause of human freedom, typically by standing up for oppressed individuals or groups. Do you see either of these two roles for intellectuals in the LDS Church today?

BUSHMAN: Personally I am not attracted to the role of provocateur. The combination of priesthood and mind may produce another kind of intellectual whose purpose is more to comprehend and deepen than to reform. The self-appointed mission of intellectuals in the West may be one reason Latter-day Saints avoid the label.

WOODWORTH: Between serving in the Church and raising six children, how did you make time for your scholarship? What advice would you give young scholars trying to juggle all these balls?

BUSHMAN: The important thing about writing is to develop momentum. If a person wants to write, he or she will find the time to write. If writing seems like a burden, it is very hard to get around to it. The key is sufficient input for the mind to work on. If I can get enough source material to start my mind working, I can write quickly and at least get something down. The real need is to keep the mind working on the subject. A person who is worried about kids or problems at the office or problems in the marriage will have trouble writing. The distractions are more significant than the time barriers. Theses take so long to write because people get bored with their work.

They don't believe in it anymore; they don't think they have anything to say. Then it becomes a horrible burden.

WOODWORTH: So, by momentum and interest are you suggesting that large chunks of time a couple of days a week are to be preferred more than, say, an hour every day?

BUSHMAN: Regular blocks of time help. An hour is tough. That length is better for editing than composition. A writer needs two or three hours to get rolling. If he can write three mornings a week for a couple of hours, he can make real progress.

WOODWORTH: Do you have a favorite writer or historian? Whose scholarship outside Mormon history do you most admire?

BUSHMAN: I like William Cronon about as well as anyone. He writes beautifully. He is profound in his conception, and he writes grand narrative—the story of city and country in American history. I kept *Nature's Metropolis* on my desk when I was writing *Rough Stone Rolling* just to get the sound of his writing in my mind. I think Alan Taylor is a wonderful writer and a clear thinker too. Then there is an older historian named W. G. Hoskins, who wrote a book, long out of print, called *The Midland Peasant*. It's a gritty story of life in a midlands village. Perhaps because I am into farmers, I could read that book day and night. I love it.

WOODWORTH: You once said you feel like you are a B-minus soul who depends on the power of God to make you far greater than you could ever make yourself. Would you care to elaborate?

BUSHMAN: I believe that we have a huge resource in the Spirit of Christ. It can enlarge our intelligence in the broadest sense. The Spirit does more than enhance our cleverness and facility; it illuminates the whole picture, directing us to the heart of things. If we don't erect obstacles between that Spirit and ourselves, he will magnify our powers. For all practical purposes, we can increase

intelligence beyond our native ability. To be a scholar, especially a scholar of Mormonism, is a calling. We need all the help we can get. I would be a much better historian if I could cleanse my soul and let the powers of heaven flow through me.