
FAWN BRODIE: *the*

A personal look at Mormonism's best-known rebel

RICHARD S. VAN WAGONER

ALMOST as much as we love to love our folk heroes, we Mormons love to hate our heretics. We lick our chops at the thought of John C. Bennett spending his autumn years raising chickens in Polk City, Iowa—so far a fall for the once-proud Brigadier General in the Invincible Light Dragoons of Illinois and member of Joseph Smith's First Presidency. We remember with delight millionaire Sam Brannan of California gold rush fame, once high and mighty enough to refuse to give up Church tithes until Brigham Young sent a "receipt signed by the Lord," dying of a bowel infection, wifeless and penniless. We retell with relish the sad tale of stroke-ravaged Thomas B. Marsh, the man who might have been Church president upon Joseph Smith's death, returning to the Church in 1856 "a poor decrepid [sic], broken down old man . . . one of his arms hangs down."

Mormon women have given us few rebels. Fanny Stenhouse, said to be the only woman Brigham Young feared, took on the Church hierarchy because of her hatred of polygamy. Well-educated and a gifted writer, she penned what most Mormon women of the day dared not even think: "To doubt one doctrine was to doubt all, and I soon felt that my religion was rapidly crumbling away before my eyes, and that I was losing confidence in everything and everybody. I was like a ship at sea without a compass, not knowing where to go or what to do." Resolving to "walk into the jaws of death" through disobedience, Mrs. Stenhouse and her polygamist husband Thomas joined the spiritualist "New Movement" of Mormon heresy. Fanny later authored two scandalous books, *A Lady's Life Among the Mormons—A Record of Personal Experience as One of the Wives of a Mormon Elder* and *Tell it All—The Story of A Life's Experience in Mormonism*, both of which delivered scathing attacks on Mormonism in general and polygamy in particular. Retrospectively analyzing her actions, she mused:

Little did I imagine at that period that any such mission as that which I have since realized as mine, was in the providence of Time awaiting me, or that I should ever have the boldness, either with tongue or pen, to plead the cause of the Women of Utah. But, impelled by those

unseen influences which shape our destinies, I took my stand with the 'heretics'; and, as it happened, my own was the first woman's name enrolled in their cause.

The most recent name enrolled on the list of women heretics is Sonia Johnson. Trading barbs with Utah's Mormon Senator Orrin Hatch, Johnson quickly rose to prominence as a fervent spokeswoman for "Mormons for ERA." Her outspoken opposition to Church political activism over the Equal Rights Amendment resulted in national press attention, loss of her Church membership, and delicious hissings from Church members in general.

The best-known Mormon rebel of all time, however, neither led a protest movement against polygamy nor chained herself to the gates of the Seattle Temple. Fawn M. Brodie wrote a book. *No Man Knows My History* is a psychobiographical study of the life of the founding father of Mormonism, Joseph Smith. Mrs. Brodie, irreverently exposing the Mormon Prophet's feet of clay, committed the cardinal sin of Mormonism. Devout Mormons quickly relegated Fawn M. Brodie to outer darkness with other such purveyors of godlessness as Attila the Hun and Madeline Murray.

Looking at her life, it's hard to understand quite why. Fawn grew up Mormon in the small Utah hamlet of Huntsville. Her father, Thomas E. McKay, was a brother to future Church President David O. McKay, and her mother, Fawn Brimhall, was the daughter of Brigham Young University President George H. Brimhall. After graduating from Ogden's Weber High School, Fawn earned a degree in English at the University of Utah at the precocious age of eighteen. The years at the "U" proved pivotal in her religious life; it was at the university that the threads binding her faith in Mormonism began to unravel. In a 1975 interview with Shirley E. Stephenson of the Cal-Fullerton State University History Program, Fawn remembered:

I was devout until I went to the University of Utah. Then is when I first began to learn important things . . . my field was English literature. . . [and] one began to move. . .

woman and her history



out of the parochialism of the Mormon community. At least I did by being exposed to the great literature of the past. This was a very quiet kind of liberation; there was nothing very spectacular about it. There was no active trauma. It was a quiet kind of moving out into, what you might call, the larger society and learning that the center of the universe was not Salt Lake City as I had been taught as a child.

Miss McKay decided to pursue a master's degree at the University of Chicago, where the English department stressed historical methods of study as opposed to strictly literary criticism. Here she began to understand "how much of a liberation the university experience in Salt Lake City had been, because then the confining aspects of the Mormon religion dropped off within a few

weeks." As she had said before, "It was like taking off a hot coat in the summertime."

To support her graduate studies, Fawn worked in the Hutchinson Commons student cafeteria. There she met her husband-to-be, Bernard Brodie: "Because I was tall [5' 10"] and could be easily seen, . . . I carried a big coffee pot and poured second cups of coffee. When I poured an extra cup for Bernie, he gave me two red carnations. He brought me flowers every day for the next six weeks, when we were married."

The marriage of a Mormon girl from rural Utah and a sophisticated Jew from Chicago was bound to be complicated—a Jew marrying a gentile; a gentile marrying a Mormon. Friends relate that theirs was "never a placid marriage." Maimon Leavitt called them a

“complementary pair, very different, sometimes even conflicting. They reinforced one another in their likes and differences, sometimes striking illuminating sparks, more often harmonious music, or rather prose, because of course their writing was one of their strongest bonds. There were other bonds, intellectual, people, art, *joie de vivre*, but most particularly their children.”

Bernard knew very little of Mormonism but he wanted to know more. His intense interest in the foundation beliefs of his new wife’s people probed the very core of Mormonism. Fawn, never satisfied with

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easy answers, began a systematic search not only for answers to Bernard’s questions but also to resolve deep concerns in her own mind: Could Joseph Smith have written the Book of Mormon by utilizing local New York sources and his own creative genius? “If the Book of Mormon came out of his own background in Western New York, which he insisted came from golden plates, then what kind of *man* was this? The whole problem of his credibility, I thought, was crying out for some explanation.”

Employed in the University of Chicago library, she initially intended to write a short critique about the Mormon prophet. But as she determined that an objective biography of Joseph Smith did not exist, she decided to go whole hog on the biography.

Fawn described herself as gripped by fascination with Joseph Smith during the seven years that she took to research and write the book. She would later experience the same infatuation with Thaddeus Stevens, Sir Richard Burton, Thomas Jefferson, and Richard Nixon. But Joseph Smith was exceptional in one important aspect. Though Fawn described herself as “baffled by the complexities of this man,” she had long since come to believe that he was “not a true prophet—to use an old Mormon phrase.” When perceptions of deeply-held truths crumble, the confusion and sense of loss can be overwhelming. *No Man Knows My History* became an emotional compulsion with Fawn, an exorcism of the Mormonism of her youth.

After completing a few chapters, Fawn sent the manuscript to the Alfred Knopf publishing company in

New York. They awarded her their 1943 Fellowship in Biography—a \$2500 grant. Prior to the announcement of the award, Fawn sought to cushion her parents from the publicity she knew her book would excite in Utah:

It is only fair to you both that I tell you quite frankly and honestly in advance that the book is likely to get a good bit of hostile criticism from the authorities of the Church. Certain things which I feel should be included to tell the whole story of the man, you will feel should better have been left buried. You will probably be criticized for having raised a wayward daughter.

For this reason I must caution you not to advertise to anyone the fact that I have received the fellowship. It will be announced in the papers anyway, but it is better to have the news get out that way than to have you announce it yourself, since parts of the book are certain to be disapproved of by many in Utah. When someone mentions it, you’d better say, “Well, I don’t know what the girl is up to. It’s all her own doing you know, and she’s always been inclined to be a little headstrong,” or something like that.

Her predictions proved to be entirely correct. *No Man Knows My History* became the most controversial work ever written about Mormonism. The work proved to be unsettling to many Mormons because she adapted psychobiographical techniques which analyzed Joseph Smith’s experiences and motivations through psychological interpretation. She used the same techniques in all her biographical works but came under the greatest criticism for her books on Joseph Smith and Thomas Jefferson.

It is significant that both the Church president and the United States president are “sacred cows” within their circle of adherents. In both books, by refusing to omit, minimize, or gloss over incidents which some consider embarrassing or controversial, she evoked the wrath of faithful her worshipers. This hackle-raising was not deliberate on her part but rather reflected her pursuit of the man behind the image. Though she often approached her biographical projects with a preconceived notion, she was not naive about the pitfalls of her profession. In a 1970 lecture, “Can We Manipulate the Past,” she remarked that “even the most dispassionate historian, trying to select fairly with intelligence and discretion, manipulates in spite of himself, by nuances, by repudiation, by omission, by unconscious affection or hostility.”

Many Mormons would disagree that Fawn was a dispassionate historian, claiming instead that she had an ax to grind. But interpretation of Mormon history often depends on one’s perspective. Fawn effectively summed up the difficulties when she declared: “Mormon historiography is a swamp. You get up to your neck right away; it is so complicated. What is a fact? That is a big question. No devout Mormon and non-Mormon can agree on what is a fact.” In her pursuit of facts about her biographical subjects from Joseph Smith to Richard Nixon, she followed the philosophy of Julian Boyd quoted in the frontispiece to her *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*: “History, long after the passions and polemics of the time have been quieted, requires that any barrier be probed, whatever the cost, when persons have been defamed or truth injured or questions not asked.”

Fawn approached her research by asking such questions—questions she felt were crying out for answers. In *No Man Knows My History*, the pursuit of these answers often became compulsive, a compelling quest to resolve her inner conflicts. After reviewing the first ten chapters of this book, Fawn's close friend Dale Morgan astutely commented:

I have an idea that you haven't come full circle yet in liberating yourself from the church. You have an intellectual but not yet an emotional objectivity about Mormonism. You are still in certain of a mood of rebellion, and you sometimes give vent to a sharp intellectual scorn for the Mormon way of life which practically speaking is an intolerance for it. I suspect that you won't begin to have really generous feelings, a live-and-let-live philosophy, until you have finished disentangling yourself from the religion. Your intellectual detachment is only a way-station in your development—it aligns you with another culture, that of the world outside, but does not yet equip you to come to terms with the Mormons on the emotional plane. I am inclined to believe that this reflects a sense of emotional insecurity which may require several more years to overcome. You feel a need to maintain yourself in a status of rebellion, sharp, constant, and unequivocal, and on an unassailable intellectual plane, argument held within the limits of reason, and the quicksands of emotion fenced out. Your Achilles heel, of course, is your feeling about your father, and being conscious of that vulnerability you defend it at all times. After a while, I think you will no longer feel the need of fortification, back into the Mormon complex. When you reach that stage, you will feel more comfortable about Mormonism generally and your critical reactions, I think, will be softened with a wide acceptance of some of the human values.

Fawn's compulsion to rid herself of the hooks that Mormonism had embedded in her soul centered on her defrocking Joseph Smith. Her published efforts shocked the Church's orthodox. Some found it difficult to believe that a devout Mormon girl, one from Utah yet, could write a book defaming the founder of the faith. Others suggested the work was in fact the brainchild of Fawn's Jewish husband, Bernard. To counter both accusations Fawn replied:

Many people have misunderstood my thanks to him [Bernard] in the preface of my book. The volume would have been a harsher indictment of Joseph Smith had it not been for his influence. I was angered by the obvious nature of the fraud in his writing of the *Book of Mormon*; I felt that his revelations all came out of needs of the moment and had nothing to do with God, and I thought the frantic search for wives in the last four years of his life betrayed a libertine nature that was to me at the time quite shocking. My husband kept urging me to look at the man's genius, to explain his successes, and to make sure that the reader understood why so many people loved him, and believed in him. If there is real compassion for Joseph Smith in the book, and I believe there is, it is more a result of the influence of my husband than anyone else.

Mormon historians, failing to see compassion, were critical of Mrs. Brodie on several fronts. Their most consistent regret was that she had not used the excellent collection of primary documents in the LDS Church archives—a criticism that, while valid, was hardly fair.

Fawn did attempt to gain access to Joseph Smith's diary, but the Church archives were restricted, and access was difficult even when your uncle was a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles. Apostle David O. McKay received word from the Church librarian that his niece had requested restricted materials and after a "very long, and very difficult interview," at Mrs. Brodie's parents' apartment, Elder McKay gave her permission to see the diary. Because her "family situation had become so delicate" by this time, however, she refused to further strain the relationship between her father and his

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brother. Though she did use a few periodical sources from the LDS facility, the majority of her research centered in the University of Chicago Library, the New York State Historical Society Library, and the archives of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Chief among Mrs. Brodie's Mormon critics was Dr. Hugh Nibley of Brigham Young University. Nibley's booklet, *No Ma'am, That's Not History*, argued that many of the facts used by Mrs. Brodie were not in fact factual. Fawn remained unimpressed with Dr. Nibley's criticism of her work. In a May 27, 1946, letter to her parents she wrote:

Thank you for sending the Hugh Nibley pamphlet. I had expected better things in this "scholarly reply to Mrs. Brodie." It is a flippant and shallow piece. He really did me a service by demonstrating the difference between his scholarship and mine. If that is the best a young Mormon historian can offer, then I am all the more certain that the death of B.H. Roberts meant the end of all that was truly scholarly and honest in orthodox Mormon historiography.

In addition to Dr. Nibley's criticism, Mormon missionary groups attempted to amend difficulties caused by what was viewed as *No Man Knows My History's* heretical attack on Joseph Smith. Public libraries in Mormon communities often refused to carry the book. Some that did required the library patron to check out the Nibley work simultaneously. Even today, more than thirty years since the book was first published, readers can still find included in their library copy of *No Man Knows My History* such missionary-placed messages as:

Dear Reader:

Be sure to read the brief review of Mrs. Brodie's book written by a well known literary intellect—Hugh Nibley. His review is vitally informative though but 62 pages in length, and is entitled: "No, Ma'am, That's Not History."

Though the Mormon church has traditionally allowed men and women to voice private dissent from the party line, it will not tolerate public disputation. This is officially viewed as a breach of ethics, integrity, and morality. George Q. Cannon, a member of the First

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Presidency in 1868, first voiced the Church position in a *Deseret News* editorial:

We could conceive of a man honestly differing in opinion from the authorities of the church and yet not be an apostate; but we could not conceive of a man publishing those differences of opinion, and seeking by arguments, sophistry and special pleading to enforce them upon the people to produce division and strife, and to place the acts and counsels of the church, if possible, in a wrong light, and not be an apostate; for such conduct was apostasy as we understood the term.

Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* red-flagged her personal heresy. On May 23, 1946, six months after the book's publication, William H. Reeder, Jr., President of the New England Mission, sent a letter to Fawn—who was then residing in New Haven, Connecticut, where Bernard was teaching at Yale University—which instituted Church proceedings against her to investigate

alleged wrongdoing and to show cause, if any you have, why you should not be excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for apostasy, in this among other matters: That in a book recently published by you, you assert matters as truths which deny the divine origin of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the Priesthood and of Christ's Church through the instrumentality of the Prophet Joseph Smith, contrary to the beliefs, doctrines and teachings of the Church.

Mrs. Brodie did not attend the bishop's court convened in her behalf. Choosing instead to write a letter, she "simply told them . . . that I would not go because, after all, I was a heretic." With this letter, her

thirty-one years as a Mormon abruptly and officially came to an end. Though she was totally disaffected from Mormonism by this time, she never associated with another religion. In a 1967 letter to Monseigneur Jerome Stoffel, she wrote: "For me religion is only a complication in my life; abandoning religion altogether has been a wholly liberating experience. We have brought up our three children without any religion whatever, assuming total responsibility for their ethical behavior and thinking."

Fawn did not deny the "agony of disillusionment" but related it only to the pain she had caused her family. She explained that her

father never understood the nature of my break with my past. I think he has tried to but it was always very painful for him and he was always pulling me, trying to pull me back into the Mormon community, the Mormon society, back into the brotherhood. But he couldn't. . . .

Mother was a kind of quiet heretic which made it much easier for me . . . her heresy was very quiet and took the form, mostly, of encouraging me in a quiet way to be on my own. But that made for some family difficulties, too.

Cherishing "the freedom from theological disputation of any sort," Fawn's world by 1946 had become the university, the world of academics and ideas. Though she was a woman scorned in the Mormon world, she received national recognition for her prolific writings. By 1951, she had given birth to the last of her three children, and the Brodies moved to California, where she creatively juggled her life between her family nurturing and her career. During the next thirty years she wrote *Thaddeus Stevens, Scourge of the South* (1959)—the life of a radical Republican leader of Civil War Reconstruction; *From Crossbow to H-Bomb* (co-authored with her husband, 1962); *The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton* (1967)—Nile explorer, translator of the *Arabian Nights*, soldier, and poet; a second edition of *No Man Knows My History* (1969); and *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974). She also edited *The City of the Saints* (1963), an account of Sir Richard Burton's 1860 trip to Utah, and *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake* (1963), Frederick Piercy's 1853 narrative of a visit to Utah, as well as publishing more than forty book reviews and articles.

Fawn did not always find the relationship between her personal and professional life an easy balance to make. In a 1977 interview with the *Los Angeles Times* she explained:

Motherhood is easy. Housework is a breeze. Cooking is a pleasant diversion. Putting up a retaining wall is a lark. But teaching is like climbing a mountain. I struggle with teaching and I struggle with writing . . . everything I've done is easier than research or writing.

Yet she continued to teach and write—to pursue new ideas that intrigued her. Bernard described her restless intellect with a reflective phrase, "history is alive with mysteries, and Fawn is always in busy pursuit of the answers."

Fawn did not confine her activities to academics, writing, and mothering, however. She was also a political activist, more liberal and far more closely identified with student causes than her political scientist husband. In a 1970 essay she wrote: "Ronald Reagan is not lacking in political talent and has emerged also as a

political force menacing the intellectual institutions of this state. Under his administration, there've been released an enraged anti-intellectual police energy that resulted, in a single day last spring in Berkeley, in one death, one blinding, over a hundred injuries, and four hundred arrests, the arrests followed by threats, humiliation, and actual physical torture in Santa Rita Prison."

She was a fervent environmentalist who fought to defend the Pacific Palisades area she lived in from the encroaching hand of developers. Lamont Johnson, a neighbor, declared that Fawn

attacked civic problems, she attacked political problems, she was a wonderful letter writer to the Times [Los Angeles]. We always felt joy when we felt a letter coming on, seeing it snap in her dark eyes before she would attack the typewriter. We . . . could always feel a sense of excitement, a raciness in the blood when you'd see Fawn stalking the moors like Boadicea out on a Roman charge. She was really a warrior lady about our hill; she was a fierce defender of it. And when she saw something evil creeping up on us, in the way of either a civic injustice or some pollution that was in the offing, she fought. She was a wonderful fighter.

In 1977 she left the security of her position at UCLA to research a book on former U.S. President, Richard M. Nixon, a man who simultaneously "fascinated yet repelled her." In an interview that year with the *Los Angeles Times*, she provides us with some valuable insight into her compulsive drives to write:

Now, you might wonder why I keep driving myself, a compulsive woman racing around frantically, tracking down trivia to build a biographical mosaic. Why do I do it? Because I'm unhappy when I'm not doing it. Show me a character whose life arouses my curiosity, and my flesh begins crawling with suspense. I simply cannot stop until I piece together all the baffling bits of evidence and solve the puzzle. Then and only then, the clouds part, and I'm surrounded by sunshine.

Though the clouds parted, and the sun shone through, it was to be only for a short time. She had just started the Nixon project in earnest when Bernard was diagnosed to be suffering from terminal cancer. He died in 1978. Fawn, resolving to overcome her grief through her work, plunged ahead into her research. But in 1980 she discovered that she also was suffering from cancer. Determined to complete her work, she refused pain medication for as long as possible in hopes of getting the Nixon work finished. Death overtook her gallant efforts January 10, 1981, after she had completed her final draft. *Richard M. Nixon: The Shaping of His Character*, was published just prior to the first anniversary of Fawn's death.

Not even death had the power to bring her back into the Mormon fold. She was cremated in California, her ashes scattered to the wind over the Pacific Palisades area she loved.

Fawn Brodie, though without honor in Mormondom, received many prestigious awards during her lifetime, including the 1959 Commonwealth Club of California Literature Award, the 1967 Utah Historical Society Fellow of the Year Award, the 1974 University of Utah Alumni Emeritus Award, and the 1975 *Los Angeles Times* "Woman of the Year" Award. She was appointed Senior

Lecturer in the Department of History at UCLA even though her academic credentials were in English. This last appointment somewhat cemented her previously unresolved feminist viewpoints: "I am a feminist, yes. I am all in favor of everything they are agitating for, I really am, because I see definite discrepancies in pay. I get paid about one-third less than my husband. We are both full professors and my publication record is as good as his . . . There are very real discrepancies in pay, in the system."

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Shortly before she discovered she had cancer, Fawn and Sonia Johnson met for an hour over ice cream cones. Fawn commented to Sonia during that short visit, "I think you usurped my place as the leading female Judas Iscariot." Thus Fawn M. Brodie passed on the mantle of the proverbial Mormon "hiss and byword." Dale Morgan had predicted thirty years previously that the mantle was destined for Fawn: "The gossip about you is getting interesting! Now 'adopted,' and perhaps in due time, as you suggest, 'bastard.' Let's hope it doesn't reach the stage where they start to call you a bitch! Enough is too much!"

Fawn McKay Brodie was a self-proclaimed Mormon heretic. She was also much more than that. She was a warm human being. She was a remarkably free-thinking woman of unflinching courage. She was a respected teacher, historian, and biographer. Most notably perhaps, she believed in what she did—ultimately her only allegiance was to the truth. Though we may disagree with her assessment of the truth respecting Mormonism, *No Man Knows My History* may be the major impetus in the quest for a less apologetic, more objective Mormon history.

Note

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