

## REVIEW ESSAY

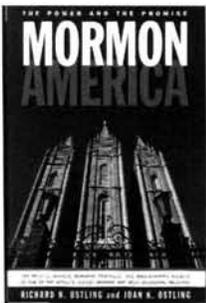
# STILL A PUZZLE—THE MYSTERIOUS PLACE OF MORMONISM IN AMERICAN CULTURE

MORMON AMERICA: THE POWER AND THE PROMISE  
*The beliefs, rituals, business practices, and well-guarded secrets of one of the world's fastest growing and most influential religions*

by Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling  
 HarperSanFrancisco, 1999  
 454 pages, \$26.00 hardback, \$17.00 paperback



*Reviewed by Dean L. May*



*Mormon America compels us as Latter-day Saints to see our Mormonness with our American eyes; something we rarely have to do.*

RICHARD and Joan Ostling have in this book undertaken an enormous task. In four hundred printed pages, they have endeavored to review the one-hundred-fifty year history of the Mormon faith and people. They have described the present Church in some detail, so that nonmember readers can get a sense of its governance and teachings as well as its place and promise among religious societies in America. They have explored virtually every possible question and controversy that has

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arisen since the time of Joseph Smith.

All this they have done with energy and diligence, meeting and talking to many lay members and leaders of the Church—to the committed, the estranged, and the hostile. They have searched far, wide, and deep for every bit of published material that might throw light on the Mormon issues they feel U.S. readers might want to be enlightened about. Theirs is a very impressive achievement, and this is a highly informative and readable book.

There are, of course, a few outright factual errors that picky academics will boggle at. For example, there were twice as many as the hundred United Orders they say were organized in Utah in the 1870s, and they were not

mostly in southern Utah. But, these are minor gaffes, and I doubt that any journalist has ever gone to such pains to explore and explain Mormonism to other Americans, nor has done it so well. I learned much from reading it.

That's the good news. As I read through the book, I had the feeling of being bounced along on a roller coaster, easing comfortably over high passages that seemed accurate, balanced, and fair, and then, often at the ends of chapters, dropping precipitously, rendered queasy by the abruptness of the descent. The content and tone of the more critical, end-of-chapter passages rendered me vaguely uneasy and left a nagging sense of *déjà vu*.

A few selected passages identify and explain what was bothering me:

- From the preface, "mystery continues to surround their church. Though it is hard to imagine when contemplating this placid valley with its prosperous metropolis, no religion in American history has aroused so much fear and hatred, nor been the object of so much persecution and so much misinformation" (xvi).
- For Mormons, "the concept of truth as ordinarily conceived has a lower priority than obedience" (90).
- Mormonism has placed "all areas of human activity within church control, under the all-encompassing authority of ecclesiastical leadership" (92).
- Church finances are surrounded by "a wall of secrecy" (120).
- Mormonism has fostered a "culture of control and personal fealty," and "Mormon micromanagement extends into all sorts of ward business that other hierarchical churches leave up to the local clergy and laity" (155).
- Temple ceremonies are "the most devoutly protected of all the LDS Church's secrets" (192).
- "Anything decided in Mormonism is decided in secret, far away from the eye of the membership, much less the general public and the press" (202).
- The missionary program "operates with military discipline and regimentation" (204).
- The church leaders want a membership "generally highly submissive to ecclesiastical authority, and committed to official orthodoxy as defined by the hierarchy" (237).
- "Some might wonder how an authoritarian and secretive church could maintain appeal within an open democratic culture like that of the United States" (374).

*Concepts like “authoritarian,” “secretive,” “hierarchical,” “unified and orderly,” are pejorative . . . For Americans, there is little difference between the rule of King George III and that of President Gordon B. Hinckley.*

These few passages raise enough issues to quickly fill a volume of Mormon responses. The key question fueling such a flurry is, “why do such descriptions of the Mormon faith and people by outsiders, some of which seem indisputably on the mark, so unsettle us Latter-day Saints?” I believe the Ostlings put their finger on the problem in the last quoted passage about the mystery of Mormonism’s appeal in an open democratic culture.

In fact, we as American Mormons are constantly compelled in our acts of everyday living to mediate between the two cultures that nourish and sustain us: those of liberal, democratic, individualistic America and those of authoritative, consensus, communal, Mormonism—what Mormons understand to be the kingdom of God. And these cultures are in their most fundamental premises antithetical to each other—the first tends toward chaotic, narcissistic materialism; the second toward harmonious, mutually responsible, asceticism.

In real life, rarely is a Mormon fully within one camp. But engaged Mormons are most of the time inclined to emulate in values, in our feelings of what ought to be, the forlorn old hope of the Puritan leader John Winthrop that here in America “every man might haue need of other, and from hence they might be all knitt more nearly together in the bond of brotherly affection.” That “wee must delight in eache other. . . mourne together, . . . alwayes haaving before our eyes our Community as members of the same body.”

Winthrop warned darkly of the dangers of failure. “But if our heartes shall turne away soe that wee will not obey, but shall be seduced and worshipp . . . other Gods our pleasures, and proffitts, and serue them; it is propounded vnto vs this day, wee shall surely perishe out of the goode Land whether wee passe over this vast Sea to possesse it;

Therefore lett vs choose life,  
That wee, and our Seede,  
May liue; by obeyeing his voyce,  
and cleaueing to him,  
for hee is our life,  
and our prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, and in contrast to Winthrop’s view, most Americans are to their bones of the liberal democratic persuasion. They not only

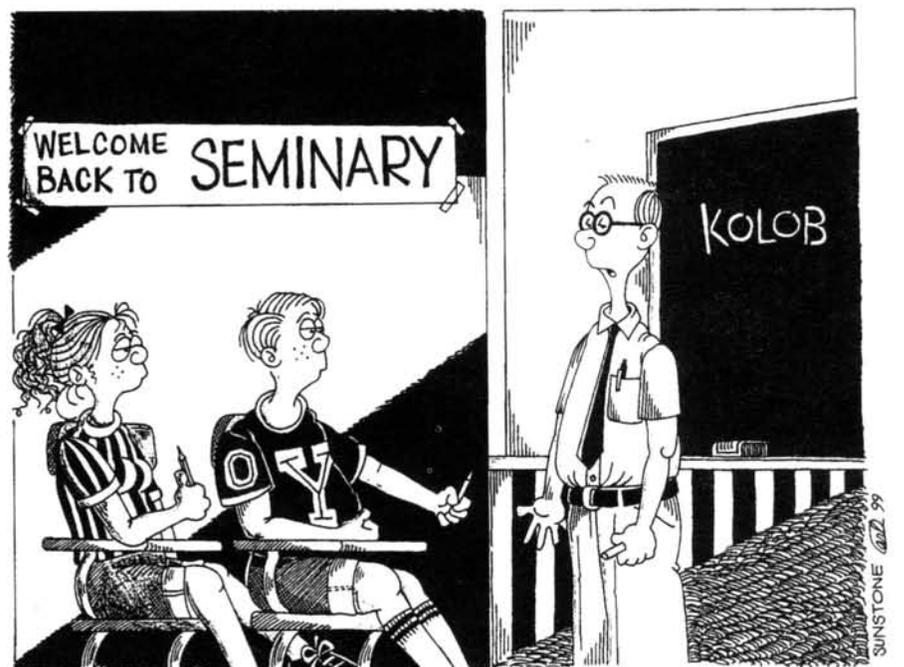
tolerate and work within that philosophy, but they celebrate the “other Gods, pleasures, and proffitts” that Winthrop so feared. But, to our pain, we American Mormons are both Mormons and Americans. Wanting to be respected, admired, and loved by others—pretty basic human desires—in some contexts, we are driven by the American pluralistic paradigm; in others, by the Mormon communal paradigm.

So, why does the Ostlings’ *Mormon America* so unsettle us Saints, including some of the Ostlings’ Mormon friends and informants who feel their openness and friendship betrayed in this book? Because the book is a critique of Mormonism from a liberal democratic perspective. And being so, it compels us as Mormons at some points to see our Mormonness through our American eyes; something we rarely have to do consciously.

In this regard, we get a sense of *déjà vu* from the book because it is hardly different from the litany of critiques of Mormonism that go back a century-and-a-half. Americans will always find Mormons disconcerting, for we walk and talk like Americans, but we are not Americans, or rather, we are not American enough; and the issue has nothing to do with flag-waving and patriotism.

To the liberal American, we Mormons are, as the Ostlings contend time and again, a mystery and unfathomable. The Saints are a mystery because other Americans seem unable to escape their cultural blinders and judge Mormon culture on its own terms. They are stuck in their paradigm, and except for a few, like Jan Shipp, are likely to remain there. From that paradigm, concepts like “authoritarian,” “secretive,” “hierarchical,” “unified and orderly,” are inescapably pejorative terms, the very descriptors of a closed, tyrannical society. Conceptually, for Americans, there is little difference between the authoritarian rule of King George III and that of President Gordon B. Hinckley. In our Mormon mode, Mormons have a whole different set of associations with these terms and see them in a positive light—as elements of a progressive, enlightened, and holy society, a people of one heart and one mind who dwell in righteousness and there is no poor among them (Moses 7:18).

A century and a half ago, in the bitter winter of 1850–51, a group of Mormons were led by Apostle George A. Smith to southern Utah to found the town of Parowan. In the course of building a mill, Smith hired several men as laborers. When



WE’LL START EACH CLASS WITH THE BASICS AND END WITH HEARSAY AND SPECULATION.

he left the settlement that summer to return to Salt Lake City, the men made a gift to him of a thousand dollars' worth of labor they had contributed to the mill. Such devotion to authority was then, and is now, a mystery to most Americans. In the nineteenth century, outsiders could only conclude that Mormons had taken leave of their faculties, were "mesmerized" by some mysterious force that made them slaves and dupes of their church leaders. In the twentieth century, terms such as "brainwashed" or being subjected to "military discipline and regimentation" or "indoctrination" are more common. Whatever the term, for them, something mysterious, incomprehensible, is always at work, turning supposedly open, liberal democratic Americans into perversely unselfish, communal, and loving Saints.

Mormons are different because, at our best, our beliefs and historical experience have helped to form a counterculture that emphasizes harmony, unity, order, clear values, and respect for legitimate authority while de-emphasizing anti-authoritarianism and pursuit of the self and material goods. The very existence of such a society within present-day America is to most Americans an embarrassment, even a reproach, and certainly, as the Ostlings regularly remind us, it is a mystery. 



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## NOTE

1. John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans*, vol. 1, Revised Edition (New York: Harper & Row: 1963), 195, 198–99.



cellphone crackle

his voice warm and Latin—

wrong number

—ADDIE LACOE

## BOOK REVIEW

## TURNING THE TABLES

FAWN MCKAY BRODIE: A BIOGRAPHER'S LIFE

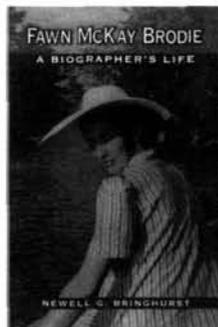
by Newell G. Bringhurst

University of Oklahoma Press, 1999

350 pages, \$29.95



Reviewed by Dennis Lythgoe



*Fawn Brodie, the controversial biographer of Joseph Smith and others, receives a much kinder treatment than she gave her subjects.*

MORMONS who grew up in the 1940s and '50s learned a very bad name they should never say—Fawn Brodie. To most youth, her name was synonymous with Judas Iscariot or Benedict Arnold, but few knew why. By the age of nineteen or twenty, they usually discovered the reason—she was the notorious author of a highly critical biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*. Published in 1945, it labeled the Mormon prophet a charlatan, an imposter, a devious man who organized and led a church on the strength of his personality.

Even though she wrote a literate, carefully researched book, Brodie failed to view Smith as someone with sincere religious convictions, and thus that side of him is conspicuously missing in her portrait. Brodie was excommunicated from the LDS church the

following year, but her name was not blotted out. She has lived on as the embodiment of betrayal in the Mormon culture.

If Brodie thought Smith was a charlatan, most loyal Mormons considered Brodie herself to be a traitor to her church and to the illustrious McKay family, which included her father, Thomas E. McKay, who would become an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve, and her uncle, David O. McKay, an apostle who later served as president of the Church for nineteen years. Fifty-four years after the publication of *No Man Knows My History* seems a good time, historically, to take a hard look at Brodie and her techniques, and Newell Bringhurst provides us with valuable perspective.

Bringhurst takes a fascinating look into this previously enigmatic, private, brilliant product of Huntsville, Utah. While Brodie was known for psychobiography, in which she tried to explain the psychological behavior of her subjects, Bringhurst presents a more conventional biography with ample and instructive footnotes.

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His style is a bit stiff, and he is often repetitive, but Bringhurst has done a masterful job of gathering and organizing the materials of Brodie's life. He paints a compelling picture of a young girl growing up in a rural community, in a drafty house without indoor plumbing, who became a widely known biographer of five of history's major figures. Without even one degree in history, Brodie literally wrote her way to the top: a senior lecturer at UCLA.

Through some enormously revealing letters, most of them between Brodie and her historical mentor, Dale Morgan, and her favorite uncle, Dean Brimhall, Bringhurst paints a portrait of a gifted, energetic woman but one who was perpetually insecure. While writing the Smith biography, she worried endlessly about the potentially adverse affect on her family, and she showed continuing signs of hostility toward the LDS church and its leaders.

Brodie's letters also reveal her consistent brooding about which book to write next and how it would be evaluated by critics. She is always wondering if the finished product will be any good. Given her propensity to depression, it seems as though she tried to fight her way out of it by writing important books.

Bringhurst is just as critical of Brodie's historical method as Brodie was of her subjects' personal morality. For example, Bringhurst tells of a disagreement between Brodie and her cousin Edward about the origin of cobwebs. She asserted they were made from dust, whereas Edward argued they were made by spiders. They bet a root beer on the answer. When Edward consulted a dictionary that proved he was correct, young Fawn stuck with her argument and refused to pay. Bringhurst concludes that "Such stubbornness would manifest itself later as a methodological weakness in Brodie's research and writing," a steadfast refusal to admit error and correct it. This seems a scant bit of evidence to justify such a profound conclusion.

Because Brodie always showed a strong interest in the sexual attitudes and exploits of virtually all her biographical subjects, Bringhurst is naturally interested in Brodie's feelings in this area. Unfortunately, this is one of the weakest areas of the book, for Bringhurst resorts almost entirely to hearsay evidence in suggesting that Brodie and her husband, Bernard, may have had sexual problems of their own. Although Bringhurst assumes that she overcame such difficulties through psychoanalysis, the evidence for both is so scant as to be quite suspect.

In his critique of her historical methods,

Bringhurst also highlights one of the most ominous Brodie statements. In a letter to Morgan upon completion of the manuscript, she wrote: "I finally succeeded in putting five bullets in the prophet." Although this may at first glance seem to be a colorful way for a biographer to indicate the completion of her story, it clearly reveals a woman obsessed with distaste for her subject, a heavily biased biographer who was unable to view Joseph Smith with balance and professional detachment.

Bringhurst's publisher deserves a rap on the knuckles for allowing many errors to go uncorrected in this biography. In an era of spell-check, it is unforgivable for an editor to overlook a dozen or more misspellings. There is also an over-use of several words or phrases, such as "the young collegian" and

"the City of Big Shoulders," and an inconsistency as to whether the subject of the book is referred to as "Fawn" or "Brodie."

Nevertheless, Bringhurst has produced a credible and important book. Some LDS readers may long for deeper explanation and more analysis of Brodie as both lapsed Mormon and prolific biographer. At least one chapter devoted to the aura that Brodie has held over the Mormon culture for the past half century would also have been a welcome addition. Brodie was a woman of such complexity that she is worthy of even more pages. 



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## PICTURE IMPERFECT

(after a painting by Henri Rousseau)

Given the eyes' fondness  
for taking images in, for tumbling them  
like clothes in a dryer  
until the brain retrieves them  
and tries them on,  
given the tongue's urge to repeat  
what the synapses say, like gossip  
working its way through a small town's telephone wires,  
given any explanation for what gets caught  
inside the skull, I'm inclined  
to take a quick step outside of myself,  
admire the whole business  
as if it were framed  
and hanging in the Louvre.  
Then again, what if the world is perfect  
but I'm all wrong,  
just a pale nude figure on a chair,  
a menagerie looking on  
as if the human form  
is nature's experiment with abstraction.  
I don't know how to make this  
any clearer, I keep all my problems  
like pickles in a jar,  
and if for an instant the light is right  
I think that I think I can see.

—DAVID FEELA