

*Born from confidence, idealism, and a desire to increase Sunstone's outreach and improve its financial lot, the Sunstone Review represented a coalescing of all the elements that had prompted the creation of Sunstone in the first place. The story of its rise and fall also contains the many contradictions and tensions that have always made Sunstone problematic.*

## A "MOST OUTRAGEOUSLY AMBITIONOUS PROJECT" THE SUNSTONE REVIEW, 1981–1984

By John Sillito

**I**N A 1981 LETTER TO THEOLOGIAN RICHARD JOHN Neuhaus soliciting his interest in the newly formed *Sunstone Review*, editor Peggy Fletcher called the venture the "newest and most outrageously ambitious project" undertaken by the Sunstone Foundation.<sup>1</sup> Fletcher was correct. Over the next three years, this publication would see successes and failures, high hopes and disappointments. The story of this short-lived publication is more than simply an aside in a larger history. Indeed, the *Review* represented a major coalescing of all the elements that had prompted the creation of Sunstone in the first place, while simultaneously containing all the internal contradictions and tensions that have always made Sunstone problematic.

### BIRTH OF AN IDEA

Time, *the New York Review of Books*:  
"We can do that in the Mormon community, too."

**F**LETCHER OFFICIALLY ANNOUNCED the launch of the *Sunstone Review* in a May 1981 letter to SUNSTONE subscribers. At that time, she described it as a "bi-monthly LDS newspaper" that would be a supplement in the magazine, providing readers with "additional news, book reviews, arts calendar," and other information.<sup>2</sup> By the year's end, however, plans had changed. The *Review* was now to run as a separate publication. In letters to regular contributors to the magazine, then-managing editor Susan Staker noted that the new publication would be monthly and would take all the news/feature columns from the magazine ("One Fold,"

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"Update," "Mormon Media Image," and "People") and run them "only in the *Review*," because to do otherwise would be "too complicated."<sup>3</sup>

While the *Review* was formally announced in 1981, something like it had been in Fletcher's mind for some time. She recalls her thoughts about beginning such a publication as a sort of "revelatory experience" in response to her wondering why SUNSTONE was "not expanding its readership."<sup>4</sup>

Fletcher believed Mormons needed to be involved in, and engaged with, the larger world around them. Mormons needed to examine all kinds of issues and events that impacted on them and their world. Such engagements would be facilitated by a publication like the *Review*, a forum for disseminating information on current events, the arts, and personalities from a Mormon perspective. According to Elbert Peck, who worked on the *Review* staff in several capacities before he succeeded Fletcher as SUNSTONE's editor, Fletcher "looked outward to several national publications, institutions, and forums and said, 'We can do that in the Mormon community, too.'"

First and foremost, the *Review* was to be geared toward a popular audience. Fletcher recalls: "I vividly remember Chris Arrington saying to me, 'Lots of people are taking the *Church News*. Why not create something that would reach a similar audience of interested Mormons?'"<sup>5</sup> The *Review* would also be guided by several questions: "What are Mormons saying? What are Mormons doing? What is happening in the Mormon community?"<sup>6</sup> Staker saw the *Review*'s purpose as seeking to "bring a Mormon worldview and Mormon sensibility to an examination of books, movies, politics, current events—even world affairs. We kept asking: 'How do [Latter-day Saint] values affect the way you see the world, and help you to make connections with it?'"<sup>7</sup>

Some people believed that the best model for the *Review* was *People* magazine, arguing that the venture's success would be directly tied to the number of familiar names in it. While the publication would eventually contain many familiar names, Fletcher remembers being more influenced by *Time* and the *New York Times*. According to Peck, "The scope and format was really Peggy's idea. She had done the research. In addition to *Time* and the *New York Times*, I think another key model was the *New York Review of Books*. Peggy was influenced by, and became friends with, national writers like Ken Woodward, Peter and Margaret Steinfelds and many others. What they were writing, and the kinds of publications they worked for, helped her envision what would eventually become the *Sunstone Review*."<sup>8</sup>

THE KEY TO FINANCING  
EVERYTHING ELSE

*If it is current, and we can  
get enough ads. . . .*

AT THE HEART of the discussions over starting the *Review* was the belief that timeliness was the key to making the new publication successful. "It occurred to me," Fletcher remembers, "why not create a more frequent, cheaper publication that could be distributed free?" Magazine ads were often infrequent and late, but Fletcher felt that if the *Review* were current, ads would follow. Fletcher also believed that with a wider circulation, the *Review* could attract "national ads and others that the magazine couldn't sell successfully." In short, the *Review* became the "key to financing everything else."<sup>9</sup> Staker recalls, "It was basically Peggy's idea to make money, defray overhead of the magazine, and support other Sunstone activities. We were absolutely convinced that if we got enough ads, the *Review* could be profitable even if we gave it away."<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the dream that the *Review* would shore up Sunstone's finances, other motives also drove the publication. As Peck honestly admits, "In some ways, the *Review* repre-

sented an elitist view of the Mormon world. Simultaneously paternalistic and idealistic, it was literally an enlightenment project that would examine the arts, literature, architecture, etc." Peck also acknowledged a further impetus: "The *Review* was clearly generational. I think it was axiomatic and self-evident that this generation of

Mormons who were college educated, reared in a larger American tradition, colored and defined by '60s values, influenced by things like Vietnam and Watergate, and who valued the role of investigative journalism, would want to start something like the *Review*. It reflected the times and events around us."<sup>11</sup>

For *Review* organizers and staffers, the term "critic" was not negative. They believed Mormonism had reached a point where its institutions could be seen as fair game for investigative reporting. As Fletcher phrased it, we were "not intent on being [the Church's] 'watchdog' but simply examining what was happening in the Mormon world."<sup>12</sup> Staker recalls that the *Review* seemed like such a natural thing to do:

I went from the Church Historical Department to Sunstone. It was a logical move. I met Peggy when she was working for Leonard Arrington. In a sense, the *Review* seemed like a logical extension too: same people, same issues. The *Review* was certainly a logical extension of things like the symposium. I think it grew out of the symposium and the idea of starting a conversation, reaching out, finding new writers and new approaches. It was part of our spoken and unspoken commitment to open up the

Mormon world to the wider world, and the wider world to Mormons. Initially, there was no sense that working at Sunstone was a threat. Later, that would change.<sup>13</sup>

Fletcher and colleagues also believed that if the publication



*"I well remember  
the sense of  
excitement ever  
present in the  
Sunstone offices . . .  
the feeling that  
we were making  
history, that we  
were at the center  
of what was  
happening in the  
Mormon milieu."*

—John Sillito

were “flexible and current it could gain a wide, ecumenical audience that attracted more than Mormons.”<sup>14</sup> As Staker wrote at the time, the *Review* sought to “reach a broader audience—not just Mormons and ex-Mormons, but also Mormon-Watchers.”<sup>15</sup> Primarily non-Mormon, these watchers were interested in a series of questions not traditionally part of the Mormon publishing scene, including issues of power and influence, financial dealings, and Church leaders’ attempts to suppress intellectual and personal freedom. When reporting on these issues became an integral feature of the *Review*, it inevitably led to conflict with the Church hierarchy.

NEWS, BOOK REVIEWS, AND MUCH MORE  
*Grandly stretching Sunstone’s boundaries.*

**I**N AN ARTICLE for Sunstone’s twenty-fifth anniversary, Elbert Peck suggested that although the *Review* ultimately “ended up a financial failure,” its final legacy should take into consideration the ways it “grandly stretched the boundaries and vision of both the magazine and foundation.”<sup>16</sup> Even a brief overview of what the *Review* covered shows Peck was correct. Printed on newsprint and magazine-size, the first issue, dated July/August 1981, set the pattern for the issues that followed. Although the first issue carried a cover price of seventy cents, like the others, the publication was distributed without charge.

The premier issue led with news stories about the Sundance Film Institute and a recent First Presidency statement concerning the government’s proposal to base the MX missile in Nevada and Utah. In addition, it initiated coverage of what became *Review* staples: activities of various Mormon associations, the Church’s image in the media, recent movies, and people in the news.

The issue also contained reviews of Mormon and non-Mormon books, often tied in less-than-subtle ways to ads. For example, in the first issue, a review of *Mormonism and the American Experience*, by Klaus J. Hansen, ran on the same page as an ad and order form for the book. This same tie-in also occurred for other titles such as *Arts and Inspiration*, *Heber C. Kimball*, *Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer*, and *On Being a Christian and a Lawyer*. A number of non-book ads appeared as well. Some were public service notes, including ads for the Utah Opera Company and the Utah Arts Council. Many others were for Sunstone products or programs. A few were clearly commercial, including ads for Bennett Paint, Stevens Henegar College, Cosmic Aeroplane Books and Records, and several home storage companies and products. Finally, there were a small number of classified ads at “25 cents per word, paid in advance, with a ten-word minimum.”

The first issue also featured a scriptural commentary by Steven F. Christensen responding to the question, “As a result of being responsible for the murder of Uriah, will David join the ranks of ‘sons of perdition?’” Christensen’s column would continue for only two issues. Christensen was a strong Sunstone supporter. Within a few years, he was dead, tragically murdered by Mark Hofmann.<sup>17</sup>

While the basic format remained the same for several issues, more and more investigative pieces soon began to appear. Bob Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, then working on their important study *America’s Saints*, examined “Zion in Gomorrah,” a two-part series on Mormon involvement with politics, development, and gaming in Las Vegas.<sup>18</sup> Other important investigative stories included an examination of isolation among the Church’s General Authorities and a two-part series by Susan Staker running in the July 1982 issue under the title “Mormon Church: From Cult to World Faith,” and in the August issue as “Are Mormons Christian?” The August issue also included a story that would later prove to be historically significant. Titled “Behind the Scenes: The Joseph Smith III Blessing,” the story included an “account” of the “discovery” of the blessing by Mark Hofmann with responses by RLDS Church Historian Richard Howard and Donald T. Schmidt, director of the LDS library-archives division.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout its existence, the *Review* also covered national stories with a Mormon slant. Peggy Fletcher told Russell Chandler of the *Los Angeles Times* she believed the *Review*’s coverage of Eldridge Cleaver’s growing attachment to Mormonism was “a scoop. I haven’t seen it in any other papers.”<sup>20</sup> Another important story the *Review* covered concerned the activities of Mormon feminist and ERA activist Sonia Johnson. The *Review* dealt with Johnson’s excommunication as well as her efforts to head the National Organization for Women and her 1984 Citizens Party presidential bid.

While hard news stories garnered the most attention, book reviews became an increasingly prominent component. Over time, many titles reviewed were not specifically LDS-oriented, and they often reflected the expertise and interests of the *Review* staff. And book reviews were sometimes problematic. For instance, Doyle Fitzpatrick, author of a study of James Strang, complained in a letter to associate editor Nicole Hoffman that the review of his book was “rather insulting.” He added that he assumed “from your viewpoint, [the reviewer] did say the right things,” meaning he represented an anti-Strang Mormon bias. Fitzpatrick noted that the reviewer must have succeeded “because only two copies of my book were sold, even though I had a one-third page ad in the issue.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to reviews of single books, a number of review essays appeared bringing attention to a particular genre, topic, or author. Lavina Fielding Anderson and Pamela Gillie Carson examined “Mormon Mushies: The Wonderful World of the Sugar Coated,” a four-part series on the “number and variety of [Mormon] romance novels that has multiplied exponentially in the past several years.”<sup>22</sup> Anderson also examined four books on Mormon women in a review essay titled “All Sweetness and Light” in which she observed: “The good news is that publishers for the Mormon market are willing to do books for women. The bad news is that this particular handful is pretty poor stuff and that women, in most cases, would be better off reading Claudia Bushman’s *Mormon Sisters*.”<sup>23</sup> The April/May 1983 issue contained an excellent review article on “Wallace Stegner: The Writer as Seer,” by historian Gary Topping. Another important essay was Peter Wiley’s review of















