

The Un-Hagiography

Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 544 pp.

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The term “hagiography” refers to writings indicating that an individual is worthy of sainthood. Chiefly produced by Catholics during the Middle Ages, hagiography takes many forms. The most common is the vitae—biographies that document the saintly miracles their subjects performed and the love their subjects inspired in all the good people they met. Mormons don’t really need hagiography, since everyone is—theoretically—a saint already, but Mormon biographers have produced fine examples of hagiographic vitae recently. Most biographies of General Authorities published for a mainstream LDS audience strive to document their subject’s worthiness to be seen as the Lord’s anointed. While serious historians or cultural critics may not enjoy these books, they serve the needs of their audiences well. After all, people who already believe that, say, Gordon B. Hinckley is the only person on Earth authorized to speak for God want to read a life story that presents him in as saintly a light as possible.

Given this popular genre, it is difficult to write an intellectually responsible biography of an LDS General Authority that would also be commercially viable in the LDS market. If the work evidences too much kinship with its hagiographic cousins, it will be dismissed by serious thinkers within and outside of the Church. If the work is too critical or reveals too many of the subject’s human failings, the author risks alienating a relatively large potential audience.

This is the rhetorical tightrope Wm. Robert Wright and Gregory A. Prince walk in *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism*. An account of McKay’s tenure as president of the Church from 1951 to 1970, it deals with a time of rapid growth and an increasing, albeit controversial, national and international reputation for the LDS Church. A close look at the administration of a Church president during such times necessarily reveals decisions made and opinions held that would, if exposed, create a less than flattering portrait. But instead of glossing over controversial information or adopting the shrill tone of exposé, Prince and Wright employ argumentative strategies that allow the biography to appear both faithful and intellectually honest, both hagiographic and probing. While this combination may strike some as an impossible contradiction, the biographers have come close to realizing their vision and have crafted a biography of an LDS prophet accessible to as broad an audience as possible.

Before examining its rhetorical project, however, *David O. McKay and the Rise*

of *Modern Mormonism* deserves to be evaluated for its contribution to Mormon historiography. As a synthesis of previously unavailable primary documents and original interviews, this book is impressive. It is the first distillation of the extensive papers kept by Clare Middlemiss, McKay's personal secretary and Wright's aunt. These papers, which were in Wright's possession and have since been donated to the University of Utah, consist of 40,000 typescript pages of diary entries and 10,000 pages of transcripts of addresses given by McKay. Of further interest are more than two hundred interviews that the authors conducted with people who worked with McKay during his presidency. Strikingly, these interviewees include Gordon B. Hinckley, Thomas S. Monson, and Boyd K. Packer. With this magisterial assembly of previously untouched primary source material, it would be difficult not to produce an interesting volume. The biographers' careful synthesis of their data has surpassed the imposing nature of their material, however, producing the most complete portrait yet of McKay's presidency. That said, however, we must remember that this is a very carefully painted portrait.

Of course, Prince and Wright's rhetorical structure will not work if it is made explicit, and they wisely choose to present themselves as faithful Latter-day Saints who happen to be writing a rigorous, scholarly biography. According to Wright, faithful Mormons should not be concerned about their decision to "scrutiniz[e] the details of a prophet's life" because meticulous research revealed that McKay "impressed . . . greatness on all he met" (xi). Prince affirms that their research "has been enormously faith-promoting" (xviii) but also suggests an inclusiveness that is usually lacking in the typical LDS hagiography. According to Prince, he and Wright "have taken pains to tell the story of David O. McKay with sufficient care and context to take what we hope will be a broad spectrum of readers to a position of comfort with 'things as they were'" (xviii). In other words, they address a readership ranging from devout Mormons who fondly remember Ezra Taft Benson's denunciations of Communism to secular academics approaching McKay as a historical figure.

Prince's and Wright's decision to organize the book by topic rather than chronologically allows them to satisfy this radically divergent audience, neatly separating the respectful from the controversial. There are hagiographic chapters like "Prophet and Man" that feature section headings such as "Tributes from Around the World" (27) and "Developing a Noble Character" (11). The chapter also describes McKay's "impressive physical presence" (18) and notes that many found him "striking and glamorous" (19). It draws conclusions like the assertion that "McKay would be a bridge uniting the LDS and non-LDS communities" (9).

Of course, the opening chapter and others like it aren't irresponsible. In "Prophet and Man," Prince and Wright go into great detail in their discussion of McKay's sometimes problematic stubbornness (13) and relate an anecdote about the prophet deliberately eating a piece of rum cake that might make orthodox

Mormons uncomfortable (23). On the whole, however, this chapter, along with chapters on McKay's efforts to increase the number of temples, use modern broadcasting technology to expand the reach of the Church, and give the Church a more international outlook, are deferential enough that most observant Mormons will feel at home reading them.

Yet there were times when McKay dealt with divisive political issues in ways that may trouble some members of the broad audience that Prince and Wright envision. Additionally, McKay made some operational decisions, like authorizing a massive building program that caused a serious cash crunch, which may appear in hindsight to most readers as managerial mistakes. While there is not space in this review to discuss all of the critical chapters, an examination of two intensely controversial issues will illustrate Prince and Wright's method for laying all of the problematic material bare while still distancing McKay from direct responsibility.

"Blacks, Civil Rights, and the Priesthood" examines the impact of the Church's refusal to ordain or give temple ordinances to people of African descent. Here, Prince and Wright defend McKay's attitudes through historical contextualization. Contemporary readers might interpret McKay's beliefs as signs of racism, and the biographers forthrightly discuss incidents that would strengthen this impression. They dutifully note that, when McKay as a young missionary heard the Fiske Jubilee Singers, he wrote in his diary that although he did "not care much for a negro" (61), he was nevertheless impressed. Later, readers learn McKay believed that "the Lord, himself, created the different races and urged . . . they be kept distinct" (65). For explanation, Prince and Wright reasonably offer that the prophet was "a product of his time and locale: resistant to change and unprogressive" (60) and remind readers that, in that context, "his views were mainstream" (104).

Yet while McKay's ideas may have been a product of his times, his biographers suggest a pragmatism that was either prescient or prophetic. For example, McKay ended the practice of having converts in South Africa prove they had no black ancestry through submitting extensive genealogies (78). This gave tacit permission for those with remote African ancestry to fully participate in the Church, softening "the ban" on priesthood ordination "around the edges" (105). As this policy change would suggest, McKay himself did not feel bound by the ban and hoped for its demise. Prince and Wright note that the prophet once told Sterling McMurrin, an outspoken critic of the ban, that it was "a practice, not a doctrine" that would "someday be changed" (79-80). The biographers also observe that McKay often "sought unsuccessfully to call down the revelation that would have changed the ban" (105).

In addition to historical contextualization, Prince and Wright also use McKay's insider-dependent leadership style to explain many of his administration's controversial decisions. According to Paul H. Dunn, if McKay "trusted

you, you couldn't do any wrong" (250). Furthermore, the biographers note that when trusted subordinates went too far, McKay had difficulty reining them in. When attempting to address the problem these subordinates caused, McKay often "made statements that were not always consistent, sometimes leading to major conflicts" (292). Consequently, in chapters dealing with topics ranging from the financial crisis triggered by an overambitious building program to the negative publicity surrounding the baseball baptism scandal, a pattern emerges in which McKay places unwarranted faith and responsibility in a subordinate who then uses that faith to circumvent the spirit of the prophet's delegation of duties.

This pattern is best seen in "Confrontation with Communism"—a misleading title since there was no direct conflict between the LDS Church and the American Communist Party, nor has there ever been any evidence that a statistically significant percentage of active Mormons were also active party members. In fact, the content of this chapter suggests that a more accurate title would have been "Confrontation with Ezra Taft Benson over the John Birch Society." McKay, who trusted Benson in the sense that Dunn describes above, "gave his special blessing to Ezra Taft Benson as an opponent of Communism." According to Price and Wright, this blessing allowed Benson to "propagate his ultra-right-wing views among Church members" (279). Benson, in turn, became highly active in the John Birch society and continually pestered McKay to endorse the society. McKay refused but often "implicitly endorsed Benson's position" (286) when the apostle drew criticism for delivering politically charged talks in Church meetings or attempting to use his position to influence Church members to join the John Birch Society.

Because the society's views are so far to the right—its founder, Robert Welch, did not stop short of claiming that U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower was a Communist plant—Benson's advocacy was incredibly divisive within the Church. Despite the negative publicity Benson generated and despite the complaints of more moderate apostles, McKay did nothing for a long time. For example, after Benson gave a conference talk in which he claimed that the Communists were using the civil rights movement to "promote revolution and eventual takeover" of the United States (304), McKay merely remarked in a heated post-conference meeting with the Twelve that he "had told everyone not to mention the Birch society but let the matter die out" (305).

Later, Benson attempted to trick McKay into appearing on the cover of *American Opinion*, the John Birch society's magazine, by grossly misrepresenting that periodical's purpose and readership (310). Nevertheless, the loyal McKay later tacitly endorsed Benson's bid to be Strom Thurmond's vice-presidential candidate, observing that "this nation is rapidly moving down the road of soul-destroying socialism" and that Thurmond and Benson could help stem that tide (315). By 1969, however, McKay finally grew tired of Benson's shenanigans and agreed

with second counselor N. Eldon Tanner that “Elder Benson should discontinue” his activism, “particularly in stake conferences, and should limit himself to talking about the gospel and its applications” (321). Prince’s and Wright’s implication in this chapter is that Benson abused the trust of an increasingly aging and ill McKay until the apostle simply had to be stopped. This approach shifts much of the blame for the bad publicity and hard feelings to Benson’s shoulders. Enough of McKay’s overmastering fear of an ill-defined Communist threat is preserved, however, to allow for other conclusions.

As the above examples illustrate, Prince’s and Wright’s biography allows readers to draw the conclusions they would have drawn anyway. Even though *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* routinely employs faith-promoting conclusions, it is honest and thorough in its treatment of its subject. Consequently, readers who believe that the Church’s policy of excluding blacks from the priesthood was evidence of a systemic racism will find much support for that position. Readers who believe that McKay’s administration was divinely inspired to pave the way for President Kimball’s revelation, as Price and Wright imply (105), will also find their views validated. Readers who see the connection between the Church and the John Birch society as symptomatic of its far right orientation will find vindication, while those who see McKay’s toleration of Benson’s activities before eventually reining him in will find confirmation of the promise that a prophet, even one committed to tolerance and free agency (43), will never let anyone lead the Church astray.

There are some Mormons who cannot tolerate even a hint of criticism of their prophets, and Prince’s and Wright’s un-hagiography is not for them. And there are some whose antipathy toward the LDS Church will not let them countenance this book’s positive tone. Almost everyone else who is interested in David O. McKay, however, will appreciate Prince’s and Wright’s deft handling of an impressive amount of historical data and will enjoy their ability to speak directly to them.

Tending the Desert

Alan K. Parish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), xvi, 677 pp.

Reviewed by Samuel Brown, a staff physician at Massachusetts General Hospital who studies severe infections and religious history

We have waited five decades for a biography of one of our most prominent apostles, and I am grateful to Alan Parish for bringing the volume into existence. He is to be congratulated for returning to our awareness the life of a remarkable