

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

Church leader and scientist. Over the course of his eighty years, Widtsoe was an internationally recognized expert in low-rainfall agriculture and irrigation, president of two Utah universities, a prolific LDS apologist, and a devoted and effective apostle.

At age twelve, Widtsoe immigrated to Salt Lake City with his widowed mother, a Norwegian convert. His excellent record at the Brigham Young College (BYC) in Logan secured his place in a group of young Mormons headed for Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the direction of Dr. Joseph Marion Tanner. This professor secured a house for the group and guided them through the entrance exams for Harvard College: two of the boys matriculated. The history, dynamics, and day-to-day life of the so-called "little flock" (81) are fascinating but unexplored in this review.

After graduating with highest honors from Harvard College in 1894, Widtsoe took a position at the Agricultural College of Utah (ACU, later Utah State University) with its Experimental Station, where he flourished until moving to Germany to complete a Ph.D. in food biochemistry as a Parker Fellow at Göttingen University. By 1900, he had returned to Logan as president of the Experimental Station, whence he moved to BYU to found that school's agricultural program. In 1907, he was invited back as president of the ACU, where he served until 1916, when he took the helm of the troubled University of Utah. His full-time service to the state and academy ended in 1921 with his appointment to the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, though he continued to be active and influential in his scientific fields of expertise.

Life as an apostle involved two stints as the Commissioner of Church Education (1920s and 1930s), two consecutive terms as president of the European missions (1928-34), time on the Church publicity committee (1934-44), a long period as an editor of the *Improvement Era* (beginning in 1935), brief service on the Church's welfare board, and a year as a professor of religion at the University of Southern California (thereby founding the LDS Institute program). He died at eighty from complications of "prostate disease" at his home in Salt Lake City in 1952. Throughout his tenure as an apostle, Widtsoe served on the board of the Genealogical Society and was a major force for its modernization and expansion in Europe, particularly Scandinavian, countries.

Widtsoe's devotion to genealogical work was forged in a furnace I do not envy. He married Leah Dunford, a match made by her mother, Susa Young Gates, while John was in college. Of their seven children, three died of congenital anomalies and two from childhood diseases. Their only adult son died at twenty-five of pneumonia (381-83). I can imagine no stronger bond with the LDS doctrine of eternal families than these tragedies, though this connection remains undeveloped in Parish's somewhat superficial treatment (148).

In this biography, Widtsoe is presented as something of a Mormon Aquinas,

a position I suspect Widtsoe would have supported. His approach to the reconciliation of science and religion appears to be the same proposed by many other religiously committed scientists: steadfast loyalty to religious principles formed in childhood (a personal testimony of Brigham Young because "a boy's feelings are not easily fooled," 47), *ad hominem* rejection of atheists (64), and benign neglect of contrary scientific evidence. While such an approach to these tensions may be healthier, it can lead to muddled interim solutions, such as the unclear discussion of evolution (371), a reminder that such a reconciliation is tentative and fleeting.

Unfortunately, Parish (and the Widtsoes) chose one of the most faddish and mutable intersections of religion and science as their intellectual and spiritual *cause célèbre*. Leah's arguments for proper nutrition (422-23), including the Widtsoes' almost phobic distaste for cola products and chocolate (583, 586, 671), recall her near contemporaries J. H. Kellogg, Sallie Rorer, and Horace Fletcher. Little of their dogma remains current in the field of nutrition. Even the much maligned alcohol—in moderate amounts—is being resuscitated by medical epidemiologists. Leah's devotion to the Word of Wisdom—nicknamed "Word of Widtsoe" in Utah (418)—may have arisen from her experience with illness in her children. At ninety-one, she claimed, "If we're sick, it's our own fault, because we don't know any better" (581) and boasted that her longevity was a result of her diet (581). The perceptive reader (though not the biographer) hears echoes of self-doubt over the premature deaths of five of her seven children. In large measure, this is all we hear of Leah's reaction to her personal tragedy. Unfortunately, Parish does not explore this emotionally rich area, attributing the obsession with nutrition to Leah's training in home economics and John's chemistry background. The lack of an emotional overlay leaves their nutritional campaigns sounding faddish and dated rather than poignant and meaningful.

Several personal anecdotes make Widtsoe endearing: early practical jokes based on explosive (52) or malodorous (53) chemicals; his habit of taking his grandchildren for ice cream, countering Leah's nutritional decree with the claim that the car steered itself into the parking lot (670); sneaking bites of waffle with syrup or chocolate éclairs at his grandchildren's homes (671-72); and a speech to win over Utah's farmers delivered before an audience of two—a deaf man and the venue's weary custodian (124).

A prolific writer (thus redeeming his C in freshman English),¹ Widtsoe was insightful and occasionally aphoristic: "The world is organized for the average, not the exceptional person" (10). "One does not need to be intolerant to cling to one's beliefs" (87). "The earth appeals to me most in the contradictory phases of

1. Transcript of grades, John A. Widtsoe file, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

ocean and desert" (90). "Businessmen in a college town usually value the institution because of the money it brings to the town. Only occasionally does the shopkeeper raise his eyes to the true meaning of education" (162). "Education should . . . help us to earn our bread and butter in the midst of intelligent joy" (166). And "War is of the devil" (243).

While Widtsoe's life is compelling, this biography is somewhat rough around the edges. Parish's stated goal, according to the foreword by Widtsoe's grandson, is that "the family would be pleased" (ix). The author's efforts in that direction result in language that is often sunny, hyperbolic, and overstated (xiii, 45, 121, 135, 405, 411). This fawning prose ultimately detracts from Widtsoe's engaging life, though its target audience may find the approach consistent with their tastes. Otherwise, the biography is smooth and readable, without difficult words or syntax.

Despite the adulatory tone, Parish quietly allows Widtsoe's honesty to shine through. He is not afraid to mention the marital confusion of Anna Widtsoe, the oldest daughter, the emotional dependence and depression of her younger sister Eudora (479), a controversy between James E. Talmage and Joseph Fielding Smith over evolution (480–86), the implications of polygamy (22, 55), glossolalia (38), the negative consequences of income inequality (207), and other issues. Parish notes these potentially controversial elements in an overall framework of positive language and abiding faith in the LDS Church and its leaders, without caustic asides or criticism of the enterprise. While some may find this book insufficiently balanced, I was pleasantly surprised by the author's attempts at honest storytelling. I am hopeful that other biographers in the LDS tradition will learn from Parish's example.

On a technical level, the biography suffers from the author's lack of history training, insufficient editing, and the resulting excessive length (400 pages would have easily sufficed), a bizarre claim that the Vikings are Hebrews (5), citation of a PBS documentary instead of a text (255), and duplication of quoted material (199 and 225; 133 and 188; 78 and 285; 451 and 510; 458–59 and 575; 599 and 602). On the other hand, the work benefits from Parish's obvious fascination with all aspects of Widtsoe's life, Widtsoe's own forthright voice, and the intriguing *mélange* of Widtsoe's life-experiences. I found myself in this biography wishing we still had Widtsoe around, a chemist who loved science, a straight-talking, practical intellectual who loved experiments, the truth quest, and engaging exploration of ideas.

Unfortunately, the biography is too taken with Harvard (see especially 57–59). While there is evidence that Widtsoe suffered from the same flaw (61, 236), Parish takes it too far, even quoting Derek Bok (Harvard president, 1971–91) as if he were Widtsoe's contemporary (137). There are frequent superfluous references to Harvard (xiii, 37, 299, etc.), and some of Widtsoe's later

successes are framed in Harvard terms (266, 269). This emphasis makes the volume (and Widtsoe's life) seem more provincial than by rights it should. As it is, the reader is distracted by the starry-eyed wonder of parochial Utahns overcome with the grandeur of Eastern academe. This problem is compounded by claims that Widtsoe was "Harvard's prize student (3)," achieving the "highest accomplishments [of] any student [at] Harvard in its 365-year history (xiii)."² While Widtsoe's *summa* degree in three years is impressive, as is his completion of a Ph.D. in fourteen months (114), Parish's statements are distracting and hyperbolic.

Ultimately, though, this volume is a readable biography of an inspiring life. The Saints should be glad to dust off Widtsoe's place in our pantheon of religious forebears. The scattered problems in the text ought not to detract from the significance of Widtsoe's life, and I believe that the volume deserves a place on most LDS bookshelves.

2. Parish is apparently reiterating a claim that Widtsoe won a graduation prize. My review of graduation prize records and Harvard alumni class reports for Widtsoe's class at the Harvard Archive revealed no such official prize. I suspect he received an informal recognition from his peers, hardly the accolade Parish believes.