

A Must-Read on Gender Politics

Martha Sonntag Bradley. *Pedestals & Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority, & Equal Rights*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005. 584 pp., \$39.95.

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Martha Sonntag Bradley's *Pedestals & Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority & Equal Rights* needs a new subtitle. This is the story of LDS women (in and out of Utah), religious authority, and the Equal Rights Amendment. All other historical detail is merely context for this painstakingly researched, riveting account of 1970s feminism and the Church's explosive foray into gender politics.

Bradley begins the story in June 1977 with a personal introductory note. Though she travels back to the nineteenth century and forward to the 1990s, June 1977 is the epicenter for the book, the true climax. An entire chapter is devoted to the events of this month. The scene? The Utah International Women's Year (IWY) Conference. It was a "moment that forever marked my life—a moment of "'before' and 'after'" (viii). Later, IWY chairwoman Jan Tyler likened the experience to being born again—either to a more radical conservatism or a more radical feminism: "Without exception every woman who was there was radicalized . . . and it was painful to watch those births that were mishandled" (214).

My mother missed the IWY conference in June 1977. She was in a Utah hospital, recovering from a different kind of birth—mine. Just as Bradley bookends her carefully footnoted history with personal recollections, I could not adequately review this book without doing the same. The ERA is not within my memory, but it helped shape the cultural milieu of my birth and my development as a "next-generation" LDS feminist. I distinctly remember "discovering" the ERA in high school. The adults I questioned told me that while the amendment might sound like a good idea, it would have resulted in coed bathrooms, the drafting of women for military service, and gay marriage. Also, Sonia Johnson was a crazy "extremist" who left her husband to join a lesbian commune. Yes, some women were upset when the Church registered its opposition, but they got over it. Besides, the Church always reserves the right to speak out on "moral issues."

These conversations intrigued rather than satisfied my curiosity, but my research at the BYU library turned up little more than Rex Lee's *A Lawyer Looks at the ERA*, an *Ensign* article or two, and—quite by accident—Linda Sillitoe's poem, "an early elegy in lower case," written upon the death of President Spencer W. Kimball, which ends, "for my brothers' sake I weep at your death / for my sisters i keep my seat as you pass." The emotion of those lines kept me hunting for more. For fifteen years, I gathered pieces of information, but it took reading Bradley's compelling book—thirty years to the month after the IWY conference debacle—to piece them together into a coherent narrative.

Bradley's first chapter reviews the history of Mormon participation in the nineteenth-century woman's rights movement and describes how women on both sides of the ERA debate used this historical precedent to justify their position. As a stand-alone essay, the chapter is an excellent primer on early LDS female leaders, their fight for suffrage, their defense of polygamy, and the social, academic, and economic accomplishments of the Relief Society. In fact, the Relief Society's ability to organize women for political battles was a prescient foreshadowing of the massive mobilization of women during the ERA battle. Bradley writes, "By the 1970s, nineteenth-century Mormon women had become icons of mythic strength, expansive roles, and profound spirituality. . . . Whatever path an LDS woman chose, her pioneer foremothers had set the standard to follow" (26).

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a brief history of the Equal Rights Amendment and national context for the legal and emotional battles of the 1970s. In particular, Bradley explains the two competing factions that split the women's movement for generations: those seeking unfettered equality with men versus those fighting for gender-specific legal protection for women. In the fight for the ERA, "two value systems, two world views, two cultures suddenly impacted . . . [and] nowhere was this description truer than for Mormonism's women as the national debate over ratification began in 1973" (79). For Church leaders, the one-sentence ERA became a blank slate for fearful projections of what *might* happen if "radical feminism" took root. It "became a symbol of what was wrong with society" (80), a clarion call to preserve traditional family structure and gender roles.

Bradley expertly describes the new "unexpected alliance between Mormonism and the Religious Right," including Church leaders' active collaboration with the John Birch Society and Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Fo-

rum (82). She also examines the difference between a “political issue” and a “moral issue” and how—in the official LDS context—the former *becomes* the latter (84–93).

In Chapter 4, Bradley provides a dispassionate timeline of the Church’s involvement in the ERA by describing in detail nine anti-ERA documents produced between 1974 and 1981, including:

1. A 1974 address by Relief Society General President Barbara B. Smith, acknowledging the “social wrongs against women” but cautioning that “the ERA was the incorrect approach” because it might nullify protectionist laws (94). While the address reflected her opinion, it also contained language quoted directly from the Church’s in-house position statement.

2. A 1975 *Church News* editorial published at the beginning of Utah’s legislative session, “the first in a series of statements over the next five years that would officially establish the Church’s opinion” against the ERA (97). Just two months before the publication of this editorial, 63 percent of LDS Utahns supported the ERA.

3. A 1976 First Presidency statement, identifying the ERA as a “moral issue” and asking members to join the fight against ratification (99).

4. A 1978 press release published in the *Ensign* titled “Reaffirmation of the First Presidency’s Position on the ERA” (103).

5. *The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue*, a 1980 pamphlet distributed to every adult female member of the Church. The back of the pamphlet contained instructions titled “What Mormon Women Can Do.” Suggestions included: “Actively support political candidates who are honest and trust worthy, and who oppose the Equal Rights Amendment” (108).

These documents, along with major addresses by Elders Boyd K. Packer and Ezra Taft Benson left little ambiguity about the Church’s position and expectations of its members.

To Bradley’s great credit, she does not caricature the anti-ERA forces, despite their well-orchestrated campaign. She allows anti-ERA leaders within the Church to speak for themselves, revealing incisive differences in style and substance. Men and women, in particular, seemed to have different methods for speaking with women about this issue. For example, Elders Packer and Benson spoke in terms of good versus evil, issuing dire warnings, raising up the “cult of womanhood” as a standard, and

condemning any encroachment upon the traditional power structure. Packer describes the ERA as a “threat to the family” in apocalyptic terms: “Without that, when the floods come, in the end what will really be worth saving?” (151). In a 1981 conference address aimed specifically at the ERA, Elder Benson said, “Homemaking is the highest, most noble, profession to which a woman might aspire. . . . Support, encourage, and strengthen your husband in his responsibility as patriarch in the home. . . . A woman’s role in a man’s life is to lift him up” (111).

In contrast, President Barbara Smith played “an increasingly difficult role: acknowledging the realities of women’s lives, including some of their unmet needs, while representing the official Church position” (95). For example, when the *Ensign* asked if someone could be a good Mormon and support the ERA, she replied, “I personally would have difficulty opposing a policy of the First Presidency . . . [but] I would be unhappy if we tried to limit people who express their sincere beliefs” (153). She later expressed frustration at those with aggressive political agendas who tried to “use the Relief Society” to prey on the fears of women and advance their cause through unsavory means (187; emphasis mine). For example, after the 1977 IWY conference, she registered her strong disapproval of the tone of the conference—a tone that was created by the very LDS women who attended at the specific request of the Church. She accepted, as Relief Society president, some of the blame and said, “Mormon women are generally uninformed about the women’s movement because they don’t see a need to be informed. People were able to play on their fears and feelings and we saw what comes of it. If people are uninformed, they are easily panicked” (210).

Two other prominent LDS anti-ERA leaders, Beverly Campbell and Georgia Peterson, are presented as bright, driven women who are more concerned with arguments than fear-mongering. In fact, one of the most salient scenes in the book describes Peterson, a politician and organizer, attending a Conservative Caucus meeting hosted by Dennis Ker, a local bishop who presented himself as having approval from the Church and from Peterson’s group “Let’s Govern Ourselves.” The meeting attracted nearly a thousand women who had been told to attend the upcoming IWY and who were desperately looking for direction. As Ker spoke, Peterson became agitated “to the point that I had the nerve to get up and walk up, uninvited, and take over the microphone.” She told the women, “Look, you don’t need to go in there and be frightened. I mean, this is a

meeting of women. You can go in, you can voice your opinion, you can [take a] stand, . . . and this can be fun. This is the legislative process” (183–84). Later, in the ruckus of the conference, she exhorted the women to “Think! Think! You decide what you want! And think! You have a God-given mind. Use it!’ I was totally dismayed that women did not know . . . what effect they can have on politics and government” (203). Perhaps the most disturbing observation from this book was the readiness of LDS women to act—even act out of character—at the directive of male leadership without examining an issue fully.

Chapters 5 through 9—a full third of the text—are devoted to the Utah IWY Conference, the National IWY Conference, and their aftermaths. Chapter 7, which describes the Utah IWY conference, is the clear climax of the book, and Bradley allows the women who attended to narrate the events in their own words. She notes that, even twenty-five years later, some of her interviewees broke down while describing the events of that month. As a reader, I had to put down the book at one point during the chapter and walk away, stunned at the anger and chaos unleashed by a few thousand Mormon women a few miles from where I lay in a hospital bassinet. The IWY *mêlée* is jarring for many reasons—the *open* rudeness and hostility so atypical of LDS women’s gatherings, the mob mentality that seemed to overtake the crowd, the image of men patrolling the perimeters with walkie-talkies to help coordinate voting, the line between feminist and traditionalist which seemed to implode in our Church community in the space of forty-eight hours—creating wounds that have yet to fully heal.

Bradley writes movingly about this loss of trust: A “wide gulf” opened up; and “almost without exception, women on each side felt bitterly mistrustful of women on the other side. Perhaps the greatest casualty of the IWY conference was the feeling of sisterhood with other women. For many Mormon women, ‘sisterhood’ had become a shrinking circle wherein admittance was controlled by politically proper shibboleths” (209).

Chapters 10 through 12 carefully trace the Church’s anti-ERA activism in other states, effectively leading to the death of the amendment. Bradley provides minutes from meetings, explores financial contributions, and erases the fuzzy distinction between “grass-roots” individual efforts by concerned citizens and direct Church-sponsored mobilization. Drawing from the painful—but also effective—results of the Utah IWY

conference, the Church “learned how to mobilize an inexperienced but devoted mass of foot soldiers in a holy war against feminism” (222).

Of course, Bradley also describes the efforts of Mormons for ERA (MERA), the success and turmoil of its subgroups, and the excommunication of its president, Sonia Johnson. While she does not dwell on Johnson’s case, she gives a fascinating glimpse into the proceedings of the Church court through the testimony of five witnesses. These witnesses appealed not just for Johnson but for the health of the Church. Ralph Payer, a Mormon psychology professor, told the court: “Those outside the Church either did not care about [Sonia’s speech] or saw it as a positive sign that the Church could accept and tolerate, without repression, a contrary opinion from within. . . . Damage has been done to the Church’s reputation . . . by the convening of this trial” (365).

As one who constantly searches for middle ground—something between stewing silently and flying a Mormons-for-ERA banner over the temple—I was particularly grateful that Bradley added one final chapter: a “case study” on the Alice Louise Reynolds Forum. For nearly fifteen years, a group of diverse, educated LDS women met monthly for “personal support, safe opportunities for discussion, and intellectual rigor that led to refined argument” (420). They hosted speakers, grilled local politicians, and wrote to Church leaders about their concern of the eroding boundary between Church and state. In the very first meeting in BYU’s cafeteria, “they focused on how each saw her feminist views intersecting with Church doctrine” (412). From Bradley’s description, the group seemed to mirror the energy and efforts of the women who formed *Exponent II* in Boston—and, perhaps, the women who are now forming similar discussion and support groups on LDS blogs.

This book is a necessary read for me and for many of my generation. Thirty years after IWY, I have great hope that the conversation about Mormon feminism is resurging. The LDS blogging community—which is increasingly garnering the attention of the mainstream media, academics, and the Church—in many ways resembles the demographics and energy of the women who began *Exponent II* and the Alice Louise Reynolds Forum. Largely, the women bloggers are in their twenties and thirties. Our blogs differ in specific orientation (motherhood, personal essay, feminism, scholarship); however, the overlap in voices and conversation is enormous, with women from different political and theological perspectives vigorously conversing about the experience of being a Mormon woman.