

REVIEWS

Candor, Craftmanship, and a Worthy Subject

Edward L. Kimball. *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005, 470 pp., \$29.95. Includes CD.

Reviewed by Lavina Fielding Anderson, an editor in Salt Lake City

In the interests of full disclosure, I hasten to acknowledge that I was involved in the early stages of editing this manuscript and, as I recall, continually urged Edward Kimball, whom I count, with his wife, Bee, a dear friend, to add more detail. (To see how my wish was granted, read on!) When the book came out, my husband, Paul, and I chose it for our bedtime reading-aloud, an acid test of prose quality, which it passed with flying colors. Thus, this review makes no pretense of cautious objectivity.

I consider this biography to be essential reading for anyone who lived through the last quarter of the twentieth century as a Mormon or who wants to understand Mormonism for that time period. Not only was Spencer W. Kimball the “main Mormon,” to borrow the *San Francisco Chronicle’s* phrase about Gordon B. Hinckley, but he was also the “model Mormon,” living a life of such Christian compassion and generosity that this biography is something of a handbook on how to follow the Savior. The combination of a genuinely inspirational life portrayed with remarkable candor, care, and craftsmanship also makes this volume a model biography, fully worthy to stand beside the remarkable earlier work that Ed wrote with his nephew, Andrew E. Kimball Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977).

Ed Kimball sets out his own standards for the book in a preface that describes his sources and his approach. He confesses that, “as a son,” he probably cannot be “completely free from bias,” but his own historical and legal background—in addition to his father’s own commitment to candor—“impressed me with a determination to tell the story as fairly as I can.” Therefore, he explains, the fact that the anecdotes “almost all illustrate good character comes not by conscious selection” but because those who reported their experiences with President Kimball to him “admired”

his father and remembered their encounters favorably. And what they remembered was “a truly good man, with unusual measures of intelligence, kindness, integrity, commitment, patience, and unaffected love. I did not exclude any evidence to the contrary” (xiii, xvii). Ed Kimball also describes his sources, including gaps in his father’s monumental diary and its decline in quality as his secretary took over making more of the entries until finally, by 1980, “it constituted little more than a list of appointments and visitors” (xv). Ed’s own background research included scanning the entire run of the *Church News*, *Ensign*, *Conference Reports*, and *Deseret News Church Almanac* for 1974–85.

The book is organized thematically rather than chronologically, since it focuses on the presidential years, including President Kimball’s landmark address to the Regional Representatives in which he first used the injunction, “Lengthen your stride.” Major topics are President Kimball’s personal style (a genuinely inspirational depiction of his humble but compelling leadership-by-example), dominant conference themes, missionary work, “Controversial Issues,” the 1978 revelation extending priesthood ordinances to worthy black men, program innovations and developments, his truly impressive criss-crossing the globe to meet with Church members, a focus on temples and temple work, and his final four years of declining health, which can only be described as a season of sadness and suffering. Spencer’s capacity for work was a plus that became a minus as his health failed and he fretted through his final years of frustration, limitation, and disorientation. Edward Kimball records this period compassionately but with the same unflinching honesty as the other chapters, and it becomes a sort of final witness that the other chapters are equally unromanticized.

I also greatly appreciated Ed’s candor in dealing with the sensitive topic of his older brother, Spencer Levan, who had come to consider Mormonism’s “truth claims” as “unfounded wishful thinking” (61). The son’s inactivity was a source of “anguish” to the father. Ed’s respectful but forthright description of this conflict between Spencer W.’s relentless attempts to lecture Spencer L. back into conformity and the son’s resentment at never being really “heard” by his father is a model for how to record unresolved conflicts in family history.

A double treasure is the accompanying compact disk that includes twelve previously published articles, thirteen audio clips, 185 photographs, and complete documentation on the sources. The notes that are

included on the printed page are not conventional citations or source references but a sort of running interpretation/commentary on points that the reader may find difficult. In a rather unusual move, the publisher has a separate preface (actual author unidentified) that admits to disagreement between “publisher and biographer . . . on the interpretations or weight of importance given to a number of events, or the choices of characterization of some of the people” (ix).

Perhaps one of the resulting compromises was the CD, which goes far beyond merely providing documentation. It includes three versions of *Lengthen Your Stride*: (1) the text of the book as printed, but also (2) the same text with about 1,600 footnotes, and (3) the “working draft” that includes much additional text and about 3,200 footnotes. Obviously the third version is the “real” book. Having it on CD enables keyword searches, another bonus. The CD also includes a rich library of resource material: the published version of the 1977 biography in English and in Spanish translation, President Kimball’s short and poetic reminiscence *One Silent, Sleepless Night* (about his throat operation), a brief 1985 biography *A Short Man, A Long Stride* authored by Ed and Andrew, and Edward’s two works about Camilla Kimball, both originally published as books. One is a biography co-authored with Camilla’s sister, Caroline Eyring Miner, and the other is a collection of Camilla’s writings and speeches.

In a private conversation, Ed explained that some people mistakenly assume that the short version is an expurgated version of the working draft which contains sensitive material. On the contrary, the publisher assumed (probably correctly) that not many people would read the working draft and gave top attention to going over the printed text. If Ed insisted that an item stay, the publisher conceded the point. But Ed was also accommodating about suggestions for different phrasing or a more nuanced explanation. In describing Elder Benson’s endorsement of the American Party, for instance, Ed agreed to add the clarification that the endorsement was extemporaneous, not planned (160), and several times he omitted the name of an apostle if the anecdote was about President Kimball, not about the apostle.

Helpfully, the printed text of the biography appears on the CD working draft in blue ink, so it is easy to spot additional material (in black ink) at a glance. For example, the published introduction to Chapter 22, “Decision and Confirmation,” about the extension of priesthood and temple blessings to worthy black men omits Ed’s careful analysis of seven

factors that “set the stage for change, although it is impossible to determine how much each contributed.” They include continued requests for missionaries from Africa coupled with President Kimball’s emphasis on missionary work and the Church’s responsibility to take the gospel to the world, the “decisive” shift in American attitudes against racism with the accompanying perception of “Mormons as bigots,” the “insoluble dilemma” of Brazil where the construction of a temple meant that “application of the policy [against ordaining men of African ancestry] would be accompanied by the near certainty of error, . . . and finally, the person responsible for directing the Church had changed” (CD, working draft, chap. 22, pp. 1–2).

Also omitted from the printed biography, as the working draft shows, is a thoughtful letter from Chase N. Peterson, then at Harvard but soon to be president of the University of Utah, suggesting that the current moment (he was writing in May 1978) presented a window of opportunity in which members’ preparation coincided with a decline in external pressures that might not come again soon (*ibid.*, 6). This brief chapter, eleven pages in typescript, ten typeset, includes sixty-eight footnotes; only seven appear in the published version and only one of the seven provides documentation. A real contribution of this section in the working draft is Ed’s careful documentation of how much background work preceded the revelatory policy change.

Given President Kimball’s remarkable concern about and compassion for what was clearly the most pressing social issue of his time—equal rights for African Americans—I was very interested in his stance on two other crucial issues of social justice for underrepresented and even misrepresented Church members: women and gays. In neither area, on the basis of this biography, was President Kimball ahead of his time. Even though it seems obvious from my perspective that both homosexuality and women’s issues are unfinished business that the Church must still deal with, Ed Kimball deals with the difficulties in a thoroughly professional way.

As an apostle, Spencer Kimball had been assigned, with Mark E. Petersen, to “counsel” homosexuals. He apparently never reappraised his “strongly negative” attitude (“abhorrence”) that homosexuality “was unnatural. . . . His logic was simple: homosexual acts are sinful and, since sin can be overcome with God’s help and sufficient effort, failure to overcome is a moral shortcoming” (86). One wonders what answer he might have received had he asked a different question. He obviously “had great

empathy” for those seeking counsel and was willing to spend enormous effort and time in his sincere efforts to “persuade and encourage” change. A footnote mentions one letter in Kimball’s papers of twenty-three single-spaced pages and another of twenty-six (86 and note 5).

Incidentally, this discussion takes place in Chapter 9, “Persuasion to Chastity,” a much-pared version of which appears in the published text. The CD is the best place to find documentation on the perennially popular email topic about the First Presidency letter in 1982 prohibiting oral sex and, eight months later, instructions to bishops not to “deviate from” the questions listed on the standard temple recommend interview form (working draft, chap. 9, p. 5).

Generational assumptions, obvious in President Kimball’s attitude toward homosexuality (as mine are) were also at work in the case of women’s issues. Although a chapter on Camilla Kimball is subtitled “Equal Partner,” the equality had some severe restrictions on information-sharing and decision-making that do not meet my definition of partnership. An obvious limitation was Church business, and Spencer assured confidentiality by not talking about it at all. Ed acknowledges that “one of my mother’s long-standing complaints was that ‘he never tells me anything’” (xvi). (For the record, President Kimball didn’t tell Ed anything either.) As a result, Camilla fretted for months about what could be troubling Spencer when he repeatedly made solitary trips to pray in the temple about extending priesthood to worthy black men. When word reached her indirectly that Spencer was spending these hours in solitary prayer and contemplation, Spencer “gently” chastised his security personnel for the leak (217). When the announcement of the revelation was made, Camilla learned about it, not from her husband but from her daughter, who had heard the announcement on the radio (231).

Although it seems like nit-picking to see unsatisfactory elements in a relationship that obviously worked well, for the most part, for the couple involved, the same combination of traditionalism and paternalism is also apparent in the two chapters (17–18) involving women’s issues, particularly the Equal Rights Amendment. Ed Kimball’s summary of the ERA fight and the Church’s opposition to it is concise and fair. He balances President Kimball’s conviction that “women should concentrate on family care and leave to men the responsibility of financial support” with his counsel to and support for his daughter to return to the workforce after her husband became disabled (174). Given the glacial pace of the

Church's change where women are concerned, Ed's charting of the small but significant steps is a salutary reminder. It was President Kimball who publicly called for "marriage as a full partnership" (161) and commented in 1978: "When we sing that doctrinal hymn and anthem of affection, 'O My Father,' we get a sense of the ultimate in maternal modesty, of the restrained, queenly elegance of our Heavenly Mother, and knowing how profoundly our mortal mothers have shaped us here, do we suppose her influence on us as individuals to be less if we live so as to return there?" (164). His presidency took active steps to increase the visibility and status of Young Women and Relief Society programs. His presidency also, in 1978, rescinded the policy set in 1967 that permitted only priesthood holders to pray in sacrament meetings (166). And although he refused to meet with Sonia Johnson, he reportedly "repeatedly prayed for her by name during temple meetings" (181).

The anecdotes with which the book is peppered add both spice and tenderness to the narrative. One illustrating President Kimball's sense of humor is when "a hurried Mitt Romney" stopped a closing elevator door late one night at Hotel Utah with his suitcase, then was embarrassed when he saw the Kimballs in it. He introduced himself and Spencer remarked, "You look like a Romney." "Thank you. I guess," responded Mitt. Queried Spencer, "What do you mean, I guess?" "Well, we Romneys have such huge jaws," explained Mitt. Spencer "with a straight face" commented, "Camilla is a Romney," then burst out laughing at Mitt's dismayed expression (442).

Equally characteristic are the anecdotes of President Kimball's unselfconscious concern and overflowing love for others, which frequently manifested itself in hugs, kisses, and words of blessing, even to complete strangers. In 1978, the president of BYU-Hawaii introduced President Kimball to Jack Sing Kong, age eighty-three, who was receiving an award for his fifty-seven years (including service as mayor and branch president) at Hawaii's leper colony. "Despite the continuing stigma of leprosy and without hesitation or any apparent shred of self-consciousness, Spencer greeted the former leper with a warm embrace and kissed his disfigured face" (427-28).

The radiance of such moments, captured in carefully crafted and unpretentious prose, makes this book a masterpiece: not only a model of the disciple's life but a model biography.