
BOOK REVIEW

A BOOK OF REVELATIONS

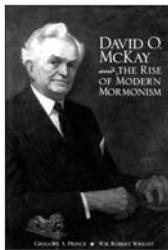
DAVID O. MCKAY AND THE RISE OF MODERN MORMONISM

by Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright

University of Utah Press, 2005

512 pages, illustrations, index, \$29.95

Reviewed by Gary James Bergera



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REG PRINCE'S HISTORY of the Church during the middle decades of the twentieth century is a revelation.¹ Relying in large measure on the life and experiences of ninth Church president David O. McKay (1873–1970), Prince carefully tracks in considerable, but always fascinating, detail the sometimes tumultuous trajectory of a relatively young church standing nervously on the threshold of a modern world. Where other LDS leaders may have hesitantly tested the turbulent waters of growth and expansionism, McKay jumped in headfirst. Recalling D. Michael Quinn's superb biography of McKay's stately counselor J. Reuben Clark (for me, the book to which Prince's most readily compares),² Prince lovingly portrays McKay as an intensely human, complex, contradictory Church administrator, seemingly motivated at times as much by his own vanity and dislike of confrontation as by his sincere estimation of God's mysterious will.

Though in the introduction Prince refers

to his book not as history but as biography, it reads as a hybrid of both in which the venerable McKay serves as catalyst and foil. After a first chapter offering some helpful biographical background on McKay (including an intriguing report of McKay's apparent early religious skepticism), Prince structures the remainder of his treatment around a generous handful of singularly engrossing topics, presented as chapters, including race relations, the development of priesthood correlation, the Church's educational and building programs, and politics (which merits two chapters). Cautious, yet fearless, Prince describes his methodology as "scientific," meaning that he first gathered as much information as possible—including copies of McKay's voluminous diaries kept by his loyal personal secretary, Clare Middlemiss, as well as some two hundred equally revealing contemporary interviews he and Wright conducted during the research process—analyzed and arranged the data, collated and grouped like topics, then more or less allowed the sources and

subjects to speak for themselves with a minimum of authorial intervention. Of course, the process of researching and writing such a massive work is never so simple, and while Prince—trained as a dentist and medical researcher—may seem to disdain speculation, his meticulous presentation is logically organized and clear-headed; his writing, smooth and easy to follow; his observations and conclusions, compelling; the overall approach, deferential and generous to a fault. Other readers may long for more analysis and judgment (and I don't know that I'd disagree with them), but as it stands, the book is a pleasure to read and a major contribution to Mormon history, "new" and "old."³

In many ways, Prince—again, like Quinn—is a "perfect" LDS historian. While stressing his admiration for and love of his subject, he nonetheless does not shy away from pointing out and scrutinizing McKay's many "warts." From my reading of the book, these include, among others, McKay's cultivation of an attractive, charismatic persona that encouraged near cult-like adoration; his tendency to succumb to the fawning appeals of sycophants; his sometimes basing decisions more on personal relationships than on the informed advice of his own counselors; his tacit encouragement of administrative end-runs; his racial (and occasionally religious) bigotry; and his reluctance to publicly and explicitly condemn—or at least temper—the anti-science rhetoric of Joseph Fielding Smith, the religious dogmatism of Bruce R. McConkie, and the political extremism of Ezra Taft Benson. (While I wish Prince did not seem to feel obligated to explain the need, and especially to apologize, for such long-overdue discussions of McKay's less appealing characteristics, I understand his inclination to want to contextualize, if not minimize, them.)

On the other hand, Prince is equally quick to applaud McKay's advocacy of personal freedom and willingness to defend and protect the free agency of Latter-day mavericks such as Sterling McMurrin; McKay's quiet and apparently persistent push for greater Church involvement (including possible priesthood ordination) by blacks of African descent; his selective ecumenical outreaches, including his blessing by an Episcopalian bishop; his lifelong celebration of education and the humanities; his emphasis on marriage and family life; and his call for a truly international gospel.

If several of these shortcomings and strengths appear contradictory, or even mutually exclusive, Prince explains that it is primarily because McKay was such a complex,

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inconsistent, contradictory man. This is undoubtedly true, but I also wonder if Prince's organizing his book thematically rather than chronologically—a decision I completely understand—might not sometimes obscure possible relationships between McKay's strengths and weaknesses. For example, how might McKay's championing of free agency relate to his racism?

Most readers will probably find something new on nearly every page. For me, such discoveries include, but are not limited to: Harold B. Lee's end-runs to garner McKay's support for Lee's reorganization of Church programs in line with his revolutionary philosophy of priesthood correlation (in fact, the book makes it seem as though almost every Church official at one time or another engaged in end-runs to McKay); McKay's opposition to fair-housing laws and other proposed anti-discrimination legislation; N. Eldon Tanner's confrontation with McKay



over McKay's not seeking his counselors' guidance (so intense was the encounter that Tanner worried afterwards that McKay might release him as counselor); the extent of the so-called baseball baptism program and McKay's initial brushing aside of reports by journalists as Mormon bashing; McKay's turning a blind eye to the bribing of low-level South American functionaries; McKay's not anticipating and planning better for the challenges posed by his own physical and mental decline; the rampant racism among a majority of the Church's general authorities; the extent to which secretary Middlemiss functioned as McKay's domineering "Chief of

Staff" (Prince's term) much to the chagrin of other Church officials (his own counselors sometimes found it easier to approach McKay through his sons than through Middlemiss); Ezra Taft Benson's tortuous reasoning in deciding whose counsel to obey regarding his involvement in the John Birch Society and other anti-Communist activities; Hugh B. Brown's public relations gambles—and fumbles—in pushing for the priesthood ordination of blacks; and McKay's apparent change of heart in regards to his black-sheep niece, Fawn M. Brodie, though I wish the latter development were supported by more persuasive documentation.⁴

As mentioned above, Prince calls his book a biography. However, its focus and ambition are much broader. As a result, Prince treats some details of McKay's life only superficially, if at all, a concession to the economics of publishing and his own scholarly interests that Prince freely acknowl-

flects more of Middlemiss, and of her own "construction" of McKay, than of McKay himself. I also question that oral histories are always as factually reliable as Prince's use of them may imply. Prince includes some brief, but useful, treatment of Middlemiss; her faithful, but not always welcome, influence; and, following McKay's death, her final years alone as the president's *de facto relict*.⁶ Given that Prince's co-author is Middlemiss's nephew and executor, perhaps a more probing discussion of the dynamics of her relationship to the McKays, and vice versa, was not feasible. After the opening to the public in September 2005 of Middlemiss's copy of McKay's diaries, now housed—thanks to Wm. Robert Wright—in the Marriott Library's Special Collections department at the University of Utah, attempts to address these and similar questions may be a little less complicated.

Prince's own extensive research materials, comprising the Gregory A. Prince Papers, are

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edges. For example, except for a page or two, there is almost no mention of McKay's private, or intimate, life—no detailed discussion of his relationship to his wife, Emma Riggs, nor to his children. Given his consuming involvement in the Church, if I were to base my judgment on Prince's account alone, I would conclude (perhaps incorrectly) that McKay was largely an absentee husband and father. In view of McKay's well-known, oft-repeated dictum, "No success can compensate for failure in the home," I wonder how the McKay marriage and family operated on a daily basis. Assuming that Emma McKay acted as the primary parent and caregiver, I wonder what role(s) David O. McKay actually played in his own marriage and family.⁵

I also wish that more discussion had been possible of McKay's, his wife's, and his children's relationship(s) to Clare Middlemiss. As keeper of McKay's diaries, Middlemiss looms large in the book, her ghostly presence a constant reminder of our debt to her contribution to Prince's reconstruction. In fact, Middlemiss as creator of McKay's remarkable diaries causes one to wonder to what extent any introspection contained in the diaries re-

now at the Marriott Library as well, and will be open as soon as they are catalogued. Likewise, Harvard S. Heath's annotated editions of McKay's diaries, which include both a one-volume edition of his presidential diaries (Signature Books, forthcoming) and a projected multi-volume edition of nearly all of McKay's diaries (Greg Kofford Books, forthcoming), should also facilitate our understanding of McKay and his times.⁷

As an additional brief aside, while I admire Arnold Friberg's evocative full-color portraits of McKay and his counselors featured in the book, I believe the money used to procure and reproduce them could have been better spent on the publication of three or more times as many black-and-white photographs.

Finally, for me, at least, Prince's book repeatedly begs a fundamental question—one, I suspect, Prince would prefer that readers answer for themselves. In view of the many missteps attending McKay's years as Church president, how are we most satisfactorily to account for the affirmation of continuing revelation and prophetic guidance in the daily governance of the Church? While possibly convincing arguments may be made for the

role of revelation in the Church's many successes, what role, if any, did revelation play in its failures and missed opportunities? If it played no role, why did God choose to stay His hand? How did Church leaders explain, even if only to themselves, God's apparent whimsy? Prince has waded waist-deep through the sources, has carefully considered the issues and controversies at play, and I would have appreciated, and no doubt been benefited by, his thoughts on such questions. Despite the omission (which, granted, may be of interest only to readers like me), I thoroughly enjoyed, and was both moved and enriched by, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism*. Those who are interested in the LDS Church and its place in the modern world owe it to themselves not only to own the book but, more importantly, to read it.

On a concluding note, the following incident, which occurred too early in McKay's life for inclusion in Prince's biography, may shed some light on McKay's sense of humor, his commitment to the Church, and his private view of dissent—attributes that may be of interest to McKay's future biographers. In late November 1944, Benjamin L. Rich (1878–1968), a Salt Lake City lawyer and son of early twentieth-century Church leader Ben E. Rich, wrote to Morrill Farr, his cousin, in Los Angeles. Farr (1885–1949), grandson of early LDS convert and pioneer Lorin Farr, had asked Rich's advice on how best to go about formally leaving the Church. Rich responded:

Get a piece of heavy bond paper or parchment, legal size and indite a communication to your bishop, advising him that you desire to have your name removed from the rolls of the church and asking that you be excommunicated therefrom on the grounds of apostasy. This letter you should sign in your full name as Morrill Newton Farr in durable ink and have it acknowledged before a Notary Public who should affix his seal and the expiration of his commission. Then take the letter and stick it up your ass. That is the only way I know by which a grandson of Lorin Farr and a son of Newton Farr can get out of the Mormon Church. If I can advise you further on any ecclesiastical procedure, do not hesitate to ask me because I know most of the answers.

Some four months later, McKay, seventy-one years old and second counselor in the

First Presidency, was sent a copy of Rich's letter and rushed to congratulate Rich: "Your directions on the procedure he is to follow are so direct, and to my mind so appropriate, that I am considering the advisability of sending a copy of it to each Bishop in the Church. I think every descendant of our Mormon Pioneers who contemplates withdrawal from the Church should be given a copy of your 'procedure.'"⁸

2004). See also Woodger's compilation, *The Teachings of David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004).

4. Not quite six months after the publication of Brodie's controversial biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), McKay, making no attempt to conceal his anger, wrote: "Her attack on the Prophet Joseph [Smith] is really the result of an inflated egotism. Conceit and a tendency to arrogate to herself an intellectual superiority are traits that began to assert themselves early in her youth. To be a conformist in religion, or in politics, was to her an indication of mental lethargy. Her intellectual pride led her to disregard her parents' wishes with respect to her marriage [to Bernard Brodie, a Jew], influenced her to apostatize from the Church and prompted her to write this book of 'great swelling works of vanity,' having in mind the display of her own self-conceited greatness rather than a desire to state the unblemished truth. . . . Even if she were honest in her unfounded disbelief in the divinity of the mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith, she would think that respect and consideration for her father [i.e., Thomas E. McKay, David O. McKay's brother] would have restrained her hand from writing such a vicious attack on one in whose inspiration her gran[nd]parents believed, and to whose belief Brodie owes her very existence" (letter to Hugh Nibley, 16 May 1946, typescript in my possession). Given the depth and severity of McKay's antipathy, it would be instructive to know how he reportedly overcame, according to Prince, his considerable dislike of his niece.

5. One son's fond, understandably partisan, reminiscences may be found in David Lawrence McKay, *My Father, David O. McKay*, edited by Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989).

6. One wonders if Middlemiss, who never married, in life or death, was ever sealed to McKay.

7. For the published version of some of McKay's pre-general authority diaries, see Stan Larson and Patricia Larson, eds., *Whate'er Thou Art Act Well Thy Part: The Missionary Diaries of David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1999).

8. The letters are dated 27 November 1944 and 9 April 1945 respectively; copies in my possession.

NOTES

1. Throughout this review, I treat Prince as sole author of the book bearing his and Wm. Robert Wright's names. I do this because, as he explains in his introduction, Prince wrote the book and Wright acted as sounding-board and critic, as well as conducted several of the interviews. Thus, I believe that Prince deserves more than partial credit as author.

2. In his review of Quinn's *Elder Statesman: A Biography of J. Reuben Clark* (Signature Books, 2002) published in the *Journal of Mormon History* (Fall 2002), Prince disputes Quinn's interpretation of Clark's and McKay's ecumenism, McKay's "demotion" of Clark in the First Presidency, McKay's making decisions independently of Clark, and Clark's position on blacks and the priesthood. After reading Quinn's biography, Prince's review, and now Prince's biography, I believe that any disagreements are largely ones of emphasis and differing points of view (i.e., Clark's versus McKay's), that the two biographies have considerably more in common than not, and that both reinforce each author's portraits of the two men rather than contradict, or even seriously qualify, them.

3. Francis M. Gibbons's uniquely informed study of McKay, *David O. McKay: Apostle to the World, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), is an important, if under-appreciated, contribution to Mormon biography and should not be overlooked. Other biographical treatments include Keith Terry, *David O. McKay: Prophet of Love* (Santa Barbara, California: Butterfly Publishing, Inc., 1980), and Mary Jane Woodger, *David O. McKay, Beloved Prophet* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications,

THE FLOCK

BY JETT ATWOOD

