

Edward L. Kimball. *Lengthen Your Stride:
The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball.*

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Reviewed by Gary L. Hatch

Edward L. and Andrew Kimball's 1977 biography, *Spencer W. Kimball*, is a candid and intimate portrait of the life of the twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That book, which went up through President Kimball's first year as president, set the standard at the time for Latter-day Saint biography. Other biographies written by the sons of Church Presidents preceded this one, perhaps most prominent among these is the biography of Joseph F. Smith by his son Joseph Fielding Smith.¹ Edward and Andrew Kimball likewise had a close personal connection to their subject, but *Spencer W. Kimball* was different in that they approached their prophetic father with an unusual candor and openness combined with a meticulous attention to detail and a desire to get the story right. Several biographies that followed *Spencer W. Kimball* would take a candid approach to representing Church Presidents, among these is Leonard J. Arrington's *Brigham Young: American Moses*² and most recently Richard L. Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*.³ The same basic spirit of openness, together with the added benefit of personal familiarity, characterizes Edward L. Kimball's new biography *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball*.

Edward Kimball began planning to write a book about President Kimball's years as president even as he was finishing the first biography. Because of his unique relationship to the president of the Church, Edward Kimball was able to keep track of events in the life of the prophet and in the history of the Church as they unfolded. And because President Kimball was aware of this project, he was able to provide his son with biographical material that would not have been available to any other scholar. In addition, President Kimball himself kept meticulous journals throughout his

entire life. Even after he became ill, his secretary, D. Arthur Haycock, who was President Kimball's constant companion, kept an official journal. As he served as Church historian, Leonard J. Arrington called Spencer W. Kimball's journals one of the greatest resources for historians of the LDS Church:

Three great diaries have chronicled the history of the Church. The first is the diary of President Wilford Woodruff, which provides a day-by-day record of the Church from 1834 until his death in 1898. The second is the diary of President Heber J. Grant, which supplies a daily history of the Church from 1882 until 1944. The third is the diary of Elder Spencer W. Kimball, which carries the history of the Church, in painstaking detail, from 1942 [1943]. (xiv)

At one point Edward Kimball thought that he could merely include supplementary material in a reprint of the original biography, but he soon realized that he had enough material for a second work. In fact, there was so much material that it could not all be included in one book. As a result, Kimball worked with BYU Studies to produce *The Spencer W. Kimball CD Library*, which accompanies each copy of *Lengthen Your Stride*. The CD includes over sixteen hundred additional footnote citations that were omitted from the book to enhance readability, a longer research version of the book, additional photographs, audio clips of Spencer W. Kimball's voice before and after his throat surgery, and several other biographies of Spencer and Camilla Kimball. A book aimed at a general Church readership combined with a CD with additional material of a scholarly interest may well point the way to the future of LDS publishing.

Lengthen Your Stride reveals the personal side of a prophet, but it is also a history of the Church over the twelve years of President Kimball's administration from 1973–1985. Kimball organizes his biography both chronologically and thematically. He begins with the calling of Spencer W. Kimball as President of the Church, focusing on the dramatic difference between what some expected of the Kimball administration and what they immediately realized: President Kimball was not merely a caretaker holding the place for a younger and healthier successor. In fact, it was apparent from the beginning that President Kimball would make dramatic changes in the direction of the Church, a development that was surprising even to himself. Spencer W. Kimball set the tone for his administration in a dramatic address delivered to regional representatives and general authorities in preparation for the April 1974 General Conference.⁴ In this address he developed themes that would shape the first several years of his ministry: the importance of missionary work, the development of missionaries in lands outside the United States and Canada, the eventual opening of new lands (such as the Soviet Union, China, and India), and the call for

members of the Church to lengthen their stride. W. Grant Bangerter, who attended the meeting as a regional representative, relates that as President Kimball spoke

a new awareness seemed suddenly to fall on the congregation. We became alert to an astonishing spiritual presence, and we realized that we were listening to something unusual, powerful, different from any of our previous meetings. It was as if, spiritually speaking, our hair began to stand on end. . . . We realized that President Kimball was opening spiritual windows and beckoning to us to come and gaze with him on the plans of eternity. . . . I doubt that any person present that day will ever forget the occasion. (18–19)

Following his description of the beginnings of President Kimball’s ministry, Edward Kimball roughly follows the chronology of the prophet’s early years to describe his distinctive leadership style (particularly his one-on-one interactions with others) and some of his core teachings, including his focus on morality, journal keeping, and provident living. Of particular interest to Church history scholars is the section on controversial issues, of which there were many in the turbulent decade of the 1970s. These chapters focus primarily on the Church’s position on women’s issues, the Equal Rights Amendment, and blacks and the priesthood.

The revelation President Kimball received on the priesthood in June 1978 forms the apex of the book. Edward Kimball carefully explores the issues as well as the unfolding of the Church’s position. There is a moving account of the moment when President Kimball received the revelation with the Quorum of the Twelve, which Elder Bruce R. McConkie described as “another day of Pentecost” (222). Kimball carefully documents the dramatic events of that day and also addresses some possible misconceptions about the circumstances surrounding the revelation. Gordon B. Hinckley clarified:

There was not the sound “as of a rushing mighty wind,” there were not “cloven tongues like as of fire” as there had been on the Day of Pentecost. . . . But the voice of the Spirit whispered with certainty into our minds and our very souls. . . . Not one of us who was present on that occasion was ever quite the same after that. (223)

Several other members of the Twelve confirmed Elder Hinckley’s sentiment: it was an experience that would leave them individually changed forever. The revelation on the priesthood would also have a dramatic effect on the Church, as missionary work spread rapidly in South America (particularly Brazil), South Africa, and West Africa.

Although President Kimball is best remembered as one who ministered to others, he also made important administrative changes in the Church as it emerged from its center in the Rocky Mountain West to grow

into an international church.⁵ His partner in several of these administrative changes was Gordon B. Hinckley, who carried the primary responsibility for the daily administration of the Church when President Kimball's health declined dramatically from 1981–1985. In explaining some of these changes, Gordon B. Hinckley said in 1984, “We can’t lick every postage stamp in Salt Lake City. We have to do something about decentralizing authority” (249). These changes included reconstituting the First Quorum of the Seventy, redefining the duties of the Twelve and the Presiding Bishopric, and instituting emeritus status for General Authorities other than Apostles (250–59). President Kimball also established the Church Correlation Department in 1975, consolidated the auxiliaries’ separate funds in 1978, and introduced the consolidated meeting schedule in 1980 (260–73). President Kimball also introduced a program for building new chapels and temples that would not be matched until the administration of President Hinckley. As Edward Kimball reports, “During President Kimball’s twelve-year administration, the number of dedicated temples rose from fifteen to thirty-six, with construction begun on five more and another six announced” (358).

As President of the Church, Spencer W. Kimball traveled extensively, particularly through a series of area conferences, from 1974 to 1980. During this time, the Church held sixty-three total area conferences throughout the world. Edward Kimball’s review of President Kimball’s travels to these conferences provides insight into the many small miracles that accompany Church leaders on their journeys and also provides a useful summary of the administration of the prophet. After 1980, President Kimball did not travel extensively due to his health, and new media made it possible to reach members via satellite.

Edward Kimball concludes his biography with the decline and eventual death of his father. These years, 1981–1985, provide a stark contrast to the energy and activity of President Kimball’s early years. During these years his many health problems took their toll. President Kimball had uncharacteristic moments of anger, despair, and disorientation, but these episodes were paired with moments when he was remarkably lucid and in control.

Although Edward Kimball has lost his father, he maintains the same objective tone throughout the biography and allows the story to carry its own emotional weight. Appendix 1 provides many stories of those who had personal encounters with President Kimball. Appendix 2 provides a more concise chronology of Spencer W. Kimball’s presidency.

Edward Kimball’s *Lengthen Your Stride* is a remarkably intimate portrait of a President of the Church during twelve significant years in Church history. It is a story that could have been told by none other than a faithful

and scholarly son of the prophet. This unique perspective reveals itself particularly in the prophet's relationship to his family. In chapter 6, Edward Kimball describes the strained relations between Spencer W. Kimball and his oldest son, Spencer. Although he served a mission to Canada, Spencer Jr. "had doubts that grew until they overcame his belief" (61). He became a distinguished member of the law school at the University of Chicago and could no longer accept the "truth claims" of Mormonism. He was never antagonistic toward the Church and remained proud of the service of his father, who worked throughout his life to try and reclaim his son's faith. But President Kimball's persistent efforts only created greater tension between father and son. The father could not understand why his oldest son rejected the beliefs that he had worked his entire life to proclaim. The son could not understand why his father could not simply accept him and love him for who he was. This episode is only briefly mentioned in the biography, but it is the kind of human relationship that could only be fully comprehended by a biographer who was himself both a believer and a professor of law, and both a son and brother in this remarkable family.

Just as in the original biography of Spencer W. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride* sets new standards for LDS biography. In addition to being an inside look at a prophet, it is a record of Church history and provides a detailed account of the workings of the priesthood and Church administration at the highest levels. Because *Lengthen Your Stride* is both a book and CD, it reaches two audiences: the general Church readership and scholars interested in Mormon studies. One hopes that the book will encourage many readers to delve into the CD, providing them with an even more comprehensive understanding of this extraordinary person.

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1. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938).

2. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

3. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

4. Spencer W. Kimball, "When the World Will Be Converted," *Ensign* 4 (October 1974): 4–13.

5. In 1974, Church membership stood around 3.3 million. By 1985, it had grown to 5.7 million.