
Reviewed by J. Michael Allen, Lecturer in History, University of Auckland, New Zealand.

For those interested in the international growth of the LDS Church, the publication of this long-awaited book was welcome news. R. Lanier Britsch, professor of history at Brigham Young University and former director of that university’s David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, is well qualified to chart the course of the Church’s history in Asia. This volume, originally part of the Church sesquicentennial project, adds a great deal to our understanding of LDS history in that region.

Properly eschewing the notion that “Asia” can be treated as a unit, Britsch adopts a combination chronological-regional approach to his subject. Following a brief introduction that situates the LDS Church in Asia in a broad historical context, the book is divided into a series of regional chapters. Where more than one chapter covers a particular country or region, each chapter in that section deals with a different time period. Within chapters, the subject treatment is largely topical, covering such concerns as missionary work, the acquisition of property, the growth of missions and stakes, visits and direction from General Authorities, translation and publications, and so on. The concluding chapter is a short reflection on the author’s own involvement in Asia and especially on President Gordon B. Hinckley’s special concern for the Church and its members throughout Asia and his importance in the history of the Church there.

Some readers may wonder about the author’s tendency to focus primarily on the lives and activities of Church leaders, rather than on the vast majority of members who never hold a highly visible administrative office. It is true, of course, that most local leaders started out as “average members,” and one must acknowledge that most members of the Church are simply not mentioned in historical sources except in membership records, which generally give no enlivening information. There is a great concern in this book with statistics: numbers of members, numbers of wards and branches, numbers of converts per missionary. But there is little detailed information available about the people whose lives and struggles give texture and meaning to those statistics.

On the other hand, I found it remarkable how many times a few certain people were called again and again into Church service as leaders in Asia—and accepted the callings. This applies both to Asian members and to Westerners called to serve as mission presidents or in other capacities. A core of committed, faithful members can truly be called pioneers of the Church in Asia.
After reading this book, no one can question the importance of local missionaries and local leadership, especially in places where foreign proselyting missionaries are prohibited or severely curtailed. Much of the period charted by Britsch is a time when foundations were being built. To chronicle more of the lives of individual members would require countless hours of interviewing across more than a dozen countries, in even more languages, and at an astronomical cost. Someday this may be done, country by country, but one does well to be grateful for the context Britsch has provided for that future project.

There are a few infelicities in the book. For instance, the author refers to the People’s Republic of China as “Communist China” rather than by its proper name and uses the term “populous” several times when the intended word is “populace.” These slips should have been caught by a careful editor, but such errors are few, particularly given the size of the book. Several statements could use some clarification or further explanation. For example, certain Korean ideas about God are said to “correlate well” with Mormon beliefs (181). The reader might ask what they are. Britsch states that “America, of course, is the home of religious pluralism” (508). Perhaps this is true if one refers to religious pluralism as enshrined in written constitutions, but de jure religious pluralism is not the same thing as de facto religious pluralism, and it can be argued that America is not the original home of the latter. Other parts of the world had considerable mixing of religions and a remarkable degree of religious pluralism during times when the West was dominated by a very intolerant Christianity.

Despite these criticisms, which a reviewer feels obligated to mention, the scale is weighted heavily on the positive side. No other book attempts to cover so many aspects of the Church’s growth in Asia. Britsch greatly expands the scope of coverage found in Spencer J. Palmer’s The Church Encounters Asia (1970). Both the story of the Church in Asia and the local and regional contexts that provide the backdrop for that story are now vastly different from the contexts of the 1970s. This book, therefore, fills a definite need.

Britsch places the Church’s first introduction into each country or region in its broad cultural context by discussing religious, cultural, social, political, or historical backgrounds. This discussion is of necessity brief, but it is helpful nevertheless. There are times when Britsch’s contextual introductions capture, in a few words, exactly what the reader needs to know about the situation. For example, in the chapter on the earliest missionary efforts in Japan during the first two decades of the twentieth century, he helps the reader understand how alien that country seemed to missionaries from Utah. In some ways, Japan was more alien than “less-developed” parts of Asia, simply because, at first glance, the country did not appear so strange.
By the time LDS missionaries arrived, Japan had already been hard at the work of modernizing (and to a large extent Westernizing) under a vigorous leadership with lofty national goals in mind. What made Japan so disorienting, therefore, was the fact that it was modern but at the same time completely different—an experience in many ways more difficult to handle than going to a place that had none of the trappings of home. Britsch goes on to offer plausible explanations for the apparent failure (in terms of numbers of converts) of the early Japanese mission.

Although the author concentrates on growth and is eager to emphasize the positive and the prophetic, he does not avoid discussing problems the Church has encountered along the way—problems including not only bureaucratic roadblocks and cultural differences within Asian countries but also miscalculations and outright insensitivity on the part of Church members. He is willing to acknowledge where expectations have not been met, where activity or retention has been low, where experiments have failed, where progress has been inconsistent, and where progress has, in fact, been reversed. A good example of this is his deft treatment of the fiasco that occurred in 1972 when a missionary in Thailand climbed atop a statue of the Buddha and had his picture taken by a fellow missionary, surely one of the most egregious examples of insensitivity in LDS mission history. The picture made its way into the newspapers, and the resulting firestorm of criticism damaged the Church’s reputation in that country so badly that the effects are still felt over a quarter of a century later. Britsch neither excuses the missionaries nor attempts to minimize the damage, but uses this incident as an occasion to deliver a low-key but well-placed call for “greater maturity, more cultural knowledge, and increased sensitivity everywhere in the Church” (386).

Britsch includes a very effective discussion of Church welfare in the chapter on the Philippines—a topic that may be unfamiliar to many readers. He highlights the words of Elder Marion D. Hanks, who, when reflecting on his time as Executive Administrator over Southeast Asia, said, “I felt and feel that we need to establish ourselves, not theologically according to their definition, but, at least in terms of behavior, we need to be able to identify with what we so earnestly pronounce ourselves to be, and that’s Christian” (389). One senses Britsch’s own sympathy with this sentiment in his emphatic treatment of welfare and service issues. The section on Thailand and Cambodia (389–97) contain the most moving stories in the book. The focus on individual people demonstrates how the sometimes quiet efforts of the Church and its members can make an incalculable difference for good in the lives of people for whom the circumstances of birth, education, geography, war, or luck have not provided the opportunities for self-betterment that others have had.
Any reader interested in Church growth will gain much from this book. The Church has faced considerable difficulties in Asia: the expulsion of nearly all foreign LDS missionaries from Singapore in 1970, the Buddhist statue controversy in Thailand, the inability to send foreign missionaries to Malaysia at all, the impossibility of long-term entrance of missionaries into Indonesia, the struggle for survival of small, isolated LDS groups in India, and other numerous problems of greater or lesser magnitude. The coming of age of the Church in Asia is an endlessly fascinating, still-unfolding story. R. Lanier Britsch is a most able chronicler of that story to date.

1. BYU Studies points out, with apologies, that From the East, rather than the erroneous reference to Mormonism in Hawaii, should have appeared in BYU Studies 38, no. 2 (1999): 206 n. 6. —Ed.