

Gregory A. Prince and William Robert Wright.
David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism.
Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005

Reviewed by James B. Allen

During the administration of President David O. McKay (1951–70), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was transformed in many ways, not the least of which was its becoming a worldwide church. *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* is a candid, insightful, and highly important topical study of those years. For some Church members, the book may be uncomfortably candid, for in addition to discussing President McKay’s remarkable strengths and accomplishments, the authors do not hesitate to deal with controversial issues or to discuss his and other Church leaders’ vulnerabilities. Neither do they shy away from the disagreements that sometimes arose among Church leaders. Throughout, however, Prince and Wright show deep reverence for President McKay and make very positive assessments of his leadership.

The strength of this book comes, in part, from its sources. As the authors point out, “There has never been a prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints about whom so much information is available” (ix). Most significant was the multivolume set of diaries kept by Clare Middlemiss, President McKay’s private secretary for thirty-five years, who painstakingly compiled first-person dictations, extracts from minutes of meetings, letters, newspaper clippings, various memoranda, photocopies of Elder Alvin R. Dyer’s daily record from 1967 on, and other significant materials. Middlemiss gave them to Robert Wright before her death, with the expectation that they would lead to significant publications about President McKay. The authors also drew from the 215 scrapbook volumes compiled by Middlemiss, which are housed in the Church Archives, and profited from many other rich primary sources. In addition, the

authors conducted over two hundred important interviews and scoured all the significant secondary studies dealing with the McKay administration.

The authors clearly honor President McKay as a man and revere him as a prophet. They describe his “noble character,” his concern for missionary work, and his intense distaste for bureaucracy. “To those accustomed to a bureaucratic management style,” they write, “McKay’s approach was a source of continual frustration” (21). They also emphasize McKay’s deep spirituality, his personal emphasis on prayer and meditation, and the way he received revelation. Though he sometimes experienced “the more dramatic forms of revelation” (39), his mainstay was the “whispering of the spirit” that came when he was alone and not under pressure. He thus spent many hours alone in the temple, often early in the morning and often on Sundays, studying and meditating. It was then, he explained to the General Authorities in a 1956 temple meeting, that “impressions come as clearly as if he were to hear a voice, and those impressions are right” (39). He also reminded them, “If we so live that our minds are free from worry, our consciences are clear, and our feelings are right toward one another, the operation of the Spirit of the Lord upon our spirit is as real as when we pick up the telephone; but when they come we must be brave enough to take the suggested action” (39). On another occasion he told a reporter that he had never seen the Savior but that he had “heard his voice—many times—and that he had felt His presence” (38).

As the book uncovers the challenges, problems, and controversies facing President McKay, it also reveals his values. The authors underscore his encouragement of intellectual inquiry, his emphasis on free agency, his tolerance of disparate views within the Church, and his refusal to embarrass anyone publicly. In private conversation and correspondence, for example, he made it clear that Elder Joseph Fielding Smith’s strongly anti-evolutionary *Man, His Origin and Destiny* was not Church doctrine but, because of his refusal to publicly contradict another General Authority, he was unable to take the book out of print or keep many Church members from considering it official. A similar story is told with reference to Elder Bruce R. McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine*. At the same time, when other General Authorities wanted to discipline Juanita Brooks for her writing about John D. Lee and excommunicate Sterling M. McMurrin for his unorthodox views, President McKay intervened in their behalf.

One of the most contentious public issues during these years was civil rights. The authors describe an administration in which most of President McKay’s “inner circle” was opposed to civil rights legislation, with Hugh B. Brown, a member of the First Presidency, the notable exception.

To the consternation of many people, President McKay tried to sidestep the issue, and no official Church statement was forthcoming. In October 1963, however, he instructed President Brown to read a statement supporting civil rights as part of his own general conference address, and many people considered that statement as official. The controversy did not abate in Utah, however, partly because of Elder Ezra Taft Benson's continuing effort to link the civil rights movement with Communism.

In the minds of some people, attitudes toward civil rights were not unrelated to the LDS ban on blacks holding the priesthood. The authors provide an important discussion of President McKay's concern about the ban and his little-known efforts at least to soften it if he could not completely remove it. They note a few ways that he intervened to extend priesthood blessings when he could, such as lifting the requirement in South Africa that a man must trace his genealogy out of that country before he could receive the priesthood. Surrounded by those who, with the exception of Hugh B. Brown, insisted on keeping the ban, he was nevertheless "repeatedly pleading with the Lord for a complete reversal" (105). He would not change the policy without a revelation, which never came, but the authors rightly maintain that "it is no stretch to assert that David O. McKay built the foundation upon which the revelation to Spencer W. Kimball rests" (105).

A chapter on education catalogs the remarkable growth of Brigham Young University, largely the result of President McKay's confidence in the controversial and sometimes overly tenacious BYU President Ernest L. Wilkinson. The authors also discuss the ever-present matter of academic freedom. Though religious orthodoxy was certainly within the purview of the university president, they say, political orthodoxy was another matter—especially when Wilkinson attempted unsuccessfully to discipline, or even release, certain faculty members for their views. (One minor clarification: Richard D. Poll is referred to as a professor of political science when, in fact, he was a professor of history. The confusion may come from the fact that Poll was a professor of history and political science before the two disciplines were given their own departments, after which Poll was solely a professor of history.)

The authors also discuss the Church College of Hawaii, Ricks College, and the unsuccessful attempt by Wilkinson to establish an extensive junior college program. All this provides some interesting insight into two different sides of President McKay: his deep devotion to broad, liberal education, but also, especially in connection with Wilkinson's plans to relocate Ricks College, his sometimes uncomfortable indecisiveness. One

weakness in this chapter, however, is that too little attention is paid to the dramatic expansion of the seminary and institute programs. Of particular importance were early-morning seminaries, which began the year before David O. McKay became Church President but expanded dramatically during his administration. It is not insignificant that from 1951 to 1970 seminary enrollment jumped from 29,812 to 132,053 and institute enrollment increased from 3,862 to 44,005.¹

The discussion of the building program is an example of the authors' frank yet even-handed approach to sensitive issues. With Henry D. Moyle, a member of the First Presidency, overseeing the program and Wendell Mendenhall as head of the building committee, the program boomed during President McKay's early years. Due to a variety of problems, however, including possible financial irregularities, Mendenhall was ultimately released, but the authors remind readers that judging the excesses of those years too harshly may be unfair. Both Moyle and Mendenhall had a vision of "lifting the image of the church throughout the world, of instilling in members a pride in their church that they did not have when meetings occurred in rented facilities that included nightclubs and bars, and of using handsome buildings to assist missionary efforts" (225). In that respect, they largely succeeded.

The missionary program, likewise, was beset with controversy and marred by some excesses, partly because of President Moyle's support of certain mission presidents whose overly enthusiastic prodding led to such abuses as the so-called baseball baptisms. Prince and Wright discuss these things openly, but also emphasize the long-term positive results of the entire period, such as the formation of new stakes and the raising up of local leadership. They also show empathy for the men whose reputations were marred by some of the excesses, reminding readers that they "acted out of genuine concern for the church to which they belonged and to which they devoted their lives" (253).

For some readers, the most disquieting discussion may be in chapter 12, "Confrontation with Communism." Here Elder Ezra Taft Benson looms large as the most extreme and outspoken anti-Communist among Church leaders. President McKay also despised Communism, and thus encouraged Elder Benson. In the eyes of others, however, the apostle became too extremist, especially in his open support of the John Birch Society. The inside story of the tension within Church leadership and the unsuccessful efforts of President McKay to check Elder Benson's excesses, but still make clear his own opposition to Communism, is dealt with in fascinating detail. On one occasion, after Elder Benson gave an especially inflammatory

address at BYU, President McKay authorized President Hugh B. Brown to give a strong rebuttal speech at the same school. In the end, however, just where President McKay stood on how to fight Communism was unclear for, the authors say, “both Latter-day Saints who endorsed the extreme views of the John Birch Society and those who opposed them found reason to believe the prophet was on their side” (279).

On other political issues, President McKay made every effort to demonstrate public neutrality, though he did not hesitate to take a stand if he thought moral issues were involved. The authors draw attention, for example, to his controversial support of right-to-work laws and his opposition to liquor-by-the-drink in Utah. They also tell of the surprising friendship that grew between him and U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson. One result of that friendship was Johnson’s clearing the way for LDS men to be appointed as military chaplains even though they did not have the requisite three years of formal theological training.

Many other important topics are discussed chapter by chapter. One is President McKay’s ecumenical outreach and deep respect for people of other faiths. A chapter on radio and television broadcasting details the Church’s failed effort to establish a short-wave radio network but also the beginnings of its successful programming through Bonneville International. Another examines the fitful start of the correlation program and its mixed results, frustrated in part by the long-entrenched bureaucracies of the auxiliary organizations. There is also a fine overview of President McKay’s desire to take the blessings of the temple to all members of the Church as well as his willingness to introduce certain changes in the temple ceremony that would “subordinate the physical aspects of the ceremony to the symbolic” (278).

When asked by a reporter what the most outstanding accomplishment of his administration was, President McKay replied, “The making of the Church a world-wide organization” (358). The authors agree and present a fine overview of how he accomplished that feat. Reversing the traditional “gathering” policy, improving the Church’s image abroad, placing emphasis on training local leaders, and recognizing great cultural differences among the peoples of the world were among the achievements that led toward internationalism not just in numbers but also in spirit.

David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism is a must read for anyone interested in the history of the Church in the twentieth century. In their willingness to frankly discuss all the controversies the authors may offend some sensibilities, but in the end every reader should be impressed

with their clear appreciation for President McKay as both a prophet and a remarkable exemplar.

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1. William E. Berrett, *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988), 245.