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Book Reviews

Three Reviews of *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise*


I

Brian Q. Cannon, historian

Journalists Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling are self-described “conventional Protestants” who undertook in this book to produce “a candid but nonpolemical overview” of Mormonism, “focusing on what is distinctive and culturally significant” about the Church. They will have succeeded, they feel, if after reading their book, outsiders “want to learn even more” and insiders learn new things and feel they have been “portrayed fairly” (xi). Both authors are experienced journalists who have written extensively about religious and theological matters. Richard Ostling has received two awards for his coverage of religion in the press and holds master’s degrees in both religion and journalism. These experienced reporters are well suited professionally for the task they undertake in this volume.

While only time will tell whether the Ostlings have succeeded in whetting non-Mormons’ appetite for more information about the Church, they have produced a book that has much to commend it. Mormons with an interest in their own history and culture will find insightful analysis and deft arrangement here. True to their agenda, the authors have focused upon what makes Mormonism distinctive in terms of its doctrine and practice, drawing interesting contrasts between LDS practices and beliefs and those of other Christian denominations.

Although the Ostlings rely heavily upon published scholarly studies rather than original archival research, the vast majority of Latter-day Saint members, who seldom read the work of Mormon scholars aside from articles appearing in the Church’s *Ensign*, will find abundant new information in this volume. The volume treats controversial and seldom discussed, but historically significant, episodes. These topics include the King Follett discourse, with its teaching that God was once a man; the origins and practice of polygamy (including some post-Manifesto plural marriages and Joseph Smith’s sealing to married women); the young Joseph Smith’s employment
of divining rods in treasure hunting; and the relationship to the Book of Abraham of Egyptian papyri purchased by Joseph Smith.

The authors also examine the practice of excluding Blacks from the priesthood prior to 1978, the strident political conservatism of Ezra Taft Benson, the financial history of the Church (including its near bankruptcy in 1959), the history of temple rites, the clashes between some scholars and the institutional Church, the low rates of convert retention in some areas, and the dismissal of Church historian Leonard Arrington. Members who desire to follow President Hinckley’s admonition to “stretch our minds to a greater comprehension and understanding of this, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (376) can better understand the kingdom as they examine further and come to terms with such issues.

In its treatment of Mormon history and culture, including these challenging issues, Mormon America is generally reliable as far as it goes, but it is not free of factual errors. One such error or distortion is the author’s description of J. Reuben Clark as being “as extreme on the left as his colleague Benson later was on the right” (111).

Although the book broaches sensitive subjects, it does so in a fair-minded and honest fashion, criticizing some facets while praising many others. The Church’s international expansion and phenomenal growth are discussed favorably, the sophistication of Book of Mormon theology is acknowledged, the expansion of temple building and the consequent redistribution of largesse and spiritual blessings are explored, and the spiritual power of the 1978 revelation on the priesthood is captured through accounts of General Authority participants. Additionally, the Church’s welfare and humanitarian aid programs are fairly surveyed, as are the focus upon family and the idealism of missionaries.

Historians, who are accustomed to detailed notes setting forth an author’s sources, will be only partially satisfied with the Ostlings’ form of documentation. The authors have cited their major sources, including the origin of most quotations, in unnumbered endnotes, but the citation system is loose and impressionistic by historians’ standards. Still, the information is provided in most cases. For instance, instructions given to members of the Tabernacle Choir in 1893 are quoted by the Ostlings in their introduction. By turning to the authors’ endnotes and scanning them, one can easily find their source, preceded by the phrase “travel advice for the choir” (401).

In other places, however, the sources are not clearly cited. Reading about Catherine Stokes, assistant deputy director for health care regulation in Illinois, and her reasons for joining the Church, one might be eager to learn more. When one turns to the notes for that chapter, though, Stokes’s name is not mentioned, and it is unclear how the authors obtained their
information. Similarly, those who, after reading *Mormon America*, desire to learn more about the Brigham Young University Museum of Art’s removal of four Rodin sculptures from a traveling exhibition in 1997 will find no references clearly directing them to the authors’ sources of information on the subject.

Despite the lacunae in their endnotes, the authors have consulted some of the best scholarly works on Mormon history. They also cite the works of a wide range of professionally trained historians, including Davis Bitton, James B. Allen, Glen M. Leonard, Richard Bushman, Klaus Hansen, Robert Flanders, Thomas G. Alexander, and D. Michael Quinn. Nor do they neglect prominent works by scholars formally trained in disciplines other than history whose historical writing has earned praise for traits such as scholarly rigor, interpretive insight, or interdisciplinary approach; these scholars include Leonard Arrington, Fawn Brodie, Richard Van Wagoner, Carmon Hardy, Juanita Brooks, Todd Compton, Armand Mauss, and Wallace Stegner.

Articles printed in venues that have acquired a reputation for dissent and free thinking such as *Sunstone* and Signature Books are heavily represented, and the Ostlings often sympathize with such views. But they also quote from and cite the more conservative scholarly venues such as *BYU Studies* and FARMS and official Church publications such as the *Ensign*.

Will Mormon “insiders” feel they have been portrayed fairly, as the authors hope? Most insiders will probably feel that the Ostlings have discussed much that is important about Mormonism but that they have failed to capture the essence of the religion. While the authors have broached some subjects commonly avoided in institutional publications, they have marginalized other essential perspectives.

Given their academic training, the Ostlings naturally gravitated toward work by other scholars. Scholars’ views are also the ones most readily available in research libraries. Justifiably, the Ostlings paid less attention to dedicated amateur polemicians on either side of the spectrum whose credibility tends to be more questionable. If their goal were only to capture the history or the organizational profile of Mormonism, the Ostlings’ sources might be sufficient. To accurately portray the pulse of Mormonism, however, the perspectives of the Church’s leadership and of the lay membership are critical. Here the authors fall short.

To their credit, the authors interviewed Gordon B. Hinckley, four members of the Seventy, and the Presiding Bishop, and they quote extensively from their interview with the prophet. Ideally, they should have interviewed many more leaders and probed more in their interviews regarding religious and spiritual matters in order to grasp the hierarchy’s sense of religious mission and spiritual zeal. The authors glimpse an
organization mentality that seems to link Mormonism to Fortune 500 corporations. Yet the Church and its leadership do not pursue wealth or power as ends.

The authors’ misunderstanding of the Church’s leadership is reflected in the title for their chapter on ecclesiastical governance and revelation: “The Power Pyramid.” Their study of Church administration emphasizing “centralized control, continuing secrecy, regimentation, ‘correlation,’ obedience, suspicion toward intellectuals, suppression of open discussions, file-keeping on members for disciplinary use, sporadic purges of malcontents, Church education as indoctrination, the proselytizing push, and reemphasis on religious uniqueness” (382–83) fundamentally misinterprets the preeminent concerns and motives of Mormon leaders.

In their attempt to capture the essence of Mormonism, the authors also should have spent more time visiting Mormon congregations and interviewing a wide range of Mormons. This would include Church members outside of the United States, who now outnumber American communicants. The authors briefly discuss the Church’s international expansion, but their own investigative efforts focused solely on the United States. As Jan Shipps has argued, Mormons are arrayed along an ideological continuum; the Ostlings have gravitated not only toward American Mormons but toward American Mormon academics, particularly those whom Richard Poll once labeled Liahona Saints. These Saints represent a small subset on the Mormon continuum. Most Mormons have never read Sunstone or BYU Studies.

The authors did mingle on a limited basis with “the people.” They accompanied a pair of missionaries in the Bronx; chatted with missionaries at the Missionary Training Center; interviewed one mission president; questioned some Mormon celebrities about their faith; visited LDS meetings in Utah, Texas, and New Jersey; and even stopped in for a family home evening. The insights gleaned from these experiences constitute some of the best sections of the book in terms of originality and freshness. A handful of disaffected Mormons and a handful of Mormon celebrities, however, receive more attention than the rank and file membership. The authors devote fifteen pages to Mormon celebrities, twenty-three pages to the relationship of dissidents to the Church, and only about twenty-six pages to the perspectives and experiences of the remaining vast majority of the Church’s membership.

On balance, Mormon America provides a compelling temporal and secular profile of Mormonism. Its historical discussions incorporate insights from many of the best-known historical studies of the Church. The book provides only fleeting glimpses, though, of matters of faith lying at the core of the Mormon religious experience.
II

Alf Pratte, journalist

For starters let me say how much I appreciated this book on the power and promise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as it enters the twenty-first century. As journalists would say, it’s “a good read.” The volume is thoughtfully researched and appears fair. Its chapters are titillating and move along quickly. I even learned a few things about the Mormons I didn’t know before. As far as I’m concerned, the authors come close to reaching the goals outlined in the preface: to provide “a candid but nonpolemical overview written for non-Mormons and Mormons alike, focusing on what is distinctive and culturally significant about this growing American movement” (xi). Their book provides the latest scoop on what the cover showcases as “the beliefs, rituals, business practices, and well-guarded secrets of one of the world’s fastest growing and most influential religions.”

The authors seem well equipped for their job: to “assemble through their reportage the complete story behind the most prosperous religious group in contemporary America” (book jacket). Richard Ostling was senior correspondent and religion writer for Time magazine, where he wrote twenty-three cover stories and conducted field reporting for the 1997 cover story, “Mormons, Inc.”1 He is currently a writer for the Associated Press. Joan Ostling has been a writer and editor for the U.S. Information Agency and is currently a freelance writer and editor. “By illuminating the church’s surge in power and popularity,” the Ostlings “[pick] up where [the] 1997 Time magazine cover story, ‘Mormons, Inc.,’ left off” (book jacket).

As with the widely read article, the book is engrossed with Mormon money, the exact figures of which are not available to well-meaning journalists, the public, or even Church members. Nevertheless, the Ostlings and researcher Sam G. Gwyne guesstimate the Church’s worth at $25 billion, with $5 billion more in annual income. In this sense, the book follows the muckraking tradition of The Mormon Establishment by New York Times writer Wallace Turner,2 The Mormon Corporate Empire by John Heinerman and Anson Shupe,3 and newspaper exposés in Hawaii, Arizona, and other locales, exposés fixated on just how much Mormon money there is. To back its figures up, the book provides a detailed appendix on how these income and wealth estimates were reached when the Ostlings recast “Mormons, Inc.” into chapter 9.

All in all, Mormon America is a fine cut-and-paste treatment by prominent journalists who chronicle Mormonism as well as other reli-
igious denominations with equal doses of admiration, reservation, and skepticism. Although techniques such as adjectival and adverbial bias and outright opinion without factual basis are not evident, overdramatization and emphasis on conflict, excitement, cultural curiosities, and historical quirks are included in the framing formulas. Instead of hitting the Saints with a sledgehammer, the tendency of the authors is to use the knowing nod, raised eyebrow, and occasional smirk to kill them with kindness. The squeaky clean image Mormons strive so assiduously to maintain and project is clouded and tarnished by omission, overgeneralization, labeling, false balancing, anonymous quotes, and overuse of sources from the fringes of the Mormon mainstream.

My major complaint as a journalist, however, is not the *Time*-style techniques evident in this book. I was frustrated because there is so little that is new about the homegrown American faith that the authors put forward as a world religion. Most of the book is simply “the same old, same old” with a few new tidbits tossed in to tantalize instead of urgently needed analysis and interpretation appropriate for a major religion. As a journalist and freelance writer who continues to chase news, I found myself crying out, “Where’s the news? What’s the new angle? Where’s the beef in this rehash of the familiar old issues about a peculiar people who are probably less peculiar than many ministers and journalists who are regularly unable to help the public come closer to finding the answers to such fundamental religious questions as Who are we? What is the purpose in life? and Where are we going?”

Like watchdogs with an old bone they have rediscovered, the Ostlings continue to chew on the ancient agenda of critiques of Mormonism: the Joseph Smith prophet-fraud dichotomy; Smith’s creative exegesis in regard to polygamy; his alleged reliance on the Masonic tradition for temple ceremonies; and a host of other concepts that most journalists and many scholars still don’t recognize as fundamental to religious life in America and around the globe. A number of times, I was tempted to bark out as did Hugh Nibley after reviewing Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*, “No Ma’am That Ain’t History,” with my own “No, Brother and Sister Ostling, that ain’t in-depth journalism.” It’s rehash.

Another concern with the book is its “Rolodex” or elite gatekeeping approach to the sources the Ostlings chose for picking bones with LDS doctrine, culture, and lifestyle. This results in a strategy that tends to ignore, downplay, or overlook the impressive mainstream LDS scholarship of Hugh Nibley, Richard Anderson, Kent Jackson, Daniel Ludlow, John Welch, and other major academics as well as publications such as *BYU Studies* and the stream of resources coming from the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). In the Ostlings’ eyes, such orthodox researchers...
and institutions are less scholarly than they are “apologetic” (259). To counter these orthodox views, the Ostlings too often subject readers to the name-dropping of a host of identified and unidentified scholars, ministers, and Latter-day Saints far out of the orthodox loop but presumed to be the last word on Mormon debate and dialogue.

An example of the questionable use of mysterious sources is seen on page 268, where in a single paragraph the veracity of the Book of Mormon is challenged by a multitude of anonymous authorities such as “non-Mormon scholars,” “some critics,” “others see,” and “according to these critics.” Although thirty pages of endnotes provide some clue to the identity of these sources, readers may not always be certain who they are so we can check them out and consider their honest concerns. Although the index is helpful, it excluded enough names to raise concerns in my mind.

Among the more prominent identified sources is former Brigham Young University historian Michael Quinn, who has fashioned a celebrated academic career with studies on folk religion, magic, the ambiguities of authorized polygamous marriage, revisionist organizational and administrative history, and “theocratic ethics”—the belief that truth has a lower priority in Mormonism than obedience (90). By sprinkling Quinn pronouncements in nearly twenty-five strategic areas throughout the book, the Ostlings overly rely on the voice of one person who they say “attempts to combine the goal of objective scholarship and candor with taking faith claims seriously” (416). Although recognizing Quinn’s often painstaking work, this journalist sees the overuse of such sources less as a means to remain objective and more as a Jerry Springer technique of confronting, focusing on the fringes, and using circumstantial evidence to make the benign seem suspicious, bizarre, overly sentimental, banal, and sometimes even ridiculous.

In addition to the excessive name-dropping from the fringe, my biggest peeve with <em>Mormon America</em> is that in its magnificent obsession with the money, mystery, and material aspects of the LDS faith, coupled with heartfelt pain for dissenters and other internal and external critics, the authors fail to dig deep enough to probe the spiritual side of the doctrines that motivate millions of the more mundane members to pay their tithing and put forth the time and effort it takes to make the Church flourish. That’s the real story that the Ostlings as well as other religion writers overlook in their fascination with the old bones of Mormonism or with digging up facts on Mormon money. As with past journalistic efforts to appraise Mormonism, the watchdogs bark or chase hubcaps, while the Latter-day Saint caravan rolls on.

If I were forced to give the book a grade, I’d give it a C+. It’s certainly above average as far as today’s religious writing goes. Ah, heck, as one who
practices grade inflation on a regular basis, I’ll elevate it to a B-.

The book is not meanspirited. It certainly is among the laudable works of a genre that reports religion in the same terrestrial way journalism reports secular activities. But I believe it is public-relations hype to say that the book “represents religion reporting at its best,” as the book jacket boasts. The Ostlings appear among the best of outside journalists prepared to discover and divine the spiritual roots of Mormonism or other faiths while at the same time resisting the public-relations efforts of zealous defenders of the faith and apologists. But from this old journalist’s point of view, Mormon America doesn’t quite fill the bill.

III
Marie Cornwall, sociologist

The cover of Mormon America promises information about “the beliefs, rituals, business practices, and well-guarded secrets of one of the world’s fastest growing and most influential religions.” Richard and Joan Ostling deliver a tremendous amount of information, providing a history of the growth of Mormonism from a small band of individuals in the early nineteenth century to an eleven-million-member, global religion of the twenty-first century.

As a journalistic endeavor, Mormon America is an update (and expansion) of earlier treatments of Mormonism such as America’s Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power and The Mormon Corporate Empire—only more. The authors attempt once again to estimate the Church’s financial empire, but, much to their credit, they pay attention to other aspects of Mormonism as well.

The Ostlings give an accounting of Latter-day Saints who have garnered media attention, established modern corporate empires, succeeded as athletes, or achieved scholarly acclaim; detail instances of institutional intrigue and power struggles among the Church leadership; describe Mormon families and the strict standards of behavior required of devout members; explain the importance of temple ritual (without any explicit description of the temple ceremony); examine the missionary program; extensively recount conflicts between Church leaders and certain intellectuals; tell of the growth of the Church Educational System; and, finally, explain several distinctive and problematic Latter-day Saint doctrines. Despite the focus on institutional intrigue, the book is fairly objective and evenhanded. Unfortunately, the reader comes away from the book with more detail than insight, with more information about the rites, rules, and regulations of Mormonism than understanding of what binds a person to the tradition.
Reviews of *Mormon America*

Very little is new in the book. Longtime Mormon watchers will likely find the book useful only because it has accumulated many of the issues and controversies into one publication. Unfortunately, the authors chose not to footnote, offering instead a bibliography of sources for each chapter. The exception to my “little new information” assertion is found in the chapters dealing with the Mormon faith in relation to other Christian traditions. I found chapters 19 (“Are Mormons Christians? Are Non-Mormons Christians?”) and 20 (“Rivals and Antagonists”) to be helpful summaries of the location of Latter-day Saints on the religious landscape. Chapter 22 (“Mormonism in the Twenty-first Century”) is also worth reading. But many readers may tire of the book long before they reach these useful chapters.

The reader comes away from the book with schizophrenic impressions of Mormon America. On the one hand, we see the Church as an institutional behemoth freely accessing the finances of its members and unwilling to reveal expenditures. This hegemonic hierarchy regulates the lives of its members and its missionaries, and, according to the Ostlings, most Latter-day Saints relish the regulation and abide by the rules. I hardly recognized my Church.

The emphasis on regulation approaches absurdity in the chapter on missionaries. Describing the departure of missionaries, the Ostlings write, “After orientation, the next glimpse that parents get of their children is a half-hour visit allowed at the Salt Lake airport when the missionaries are en route to their assignments” (212). Someone who has never visited the Salt Lake City airport when missionaries are leaving might expect missionary police regulating half-hour visits between young children and their parents. On the contrary, the missionaries’ departure is a rite of passage that includes extended family, ward members, youthful friends, and teary eyed girlfriends (for the sister missionaries, lonely looking boyfriends). Describing the Missionary Training Center, the authors write, “Every hour is carefully scheduled and every activity regulated, down to the notations that bathroom urges should be handled during the five-minute break between classes and at dinner only one trip to the dessert line is allowed” (212).

The problem with the Ostling’s account of Mormonism is that they are unable to discern the difference between the bureaucracy (which is, indeed, a central part of Mormonism) and the religion. But they can be forgiven in their failings because some Latter-day Saints don’t understand the difference either. The Ostlings miss the fact that the Church bureaucracy does more than regulate individual behavior; it binds people together, encourages leaders to be patient and longsuffering, and structures opportunities for members to aid and comfort those in need.
On the other hand, we see a church that has always had doctrinal and intellectual dissenter{s. Likewise, the institutional behemoth has always had its challengers, both within and without. Leaders haven’t always agreed, and they have clearly had difficulty formulating the exact future of the Church (let alone dictating the Church’s historical accountings). But the Ostling’s portrayal is that the institution prevails in the long run, leaving dissenters battered and bruised. The discomfort of some dissenters and intellectuals may be accurate, but the extent to which the institution prevails is debatable.

What the Ostlings fail to realize is that the majority of Latter-day Saints do not, in the end, perfectly submit to the directives of the leadership. Latter-day Saints are expected, for example, to pay a full tithe and a generous fast offering, to attend all their meetings regularly, to be endowed and attend the temple often, and to follow completely the guidelines of the Word of Wisdom. Few reach the ideal goals—in fact the majority do not.

The greatest frustrations for the Church leadership are not with intellectuals (although some of them make that arena more public) but rather with the general members who have a tendency to neglect their duties. A study of member activity in the United States indicated that only one quarter of members remained fully active in the Church throughout their lives. Fortunately, most eventually return after a period of being less active. The home and visiting teaching rarely gets completely done in most wards; only about one-third of young men serve as full-time missionaries. After years of telling women they should not be employed, the Church has accommodated to the reality of employment for many women. Church leaders constantly encourage temple attendance, but some members—even active members—feel uncomfortable with parts of the ceremony. Church leaders find they must help families cope with teenage pregnancy, adolescent drug use, and domestic violence. Many people stay in the Church but do so on their own terms. I am reminded of the advice a mother gave her middle-aged daughter who was not an “active” member at the time. She said, “Just go back to church; you don’t have to listen to everything those men say.”

The Ostlings give us an account of Mormonism that is focused on the growth of a world religion. Yes, they describe some of the beliefs, rituals, business practices, and “well-guarded” secrets of Mormonism. But you don’t find any real people or, for that matter, real Latter-day Saints in the book. What the Ostlings neglect is the pastoral qualities and spiritual strivings of Mormonism—the fact that Latter-day Saints, like religious people everywhere, find their way into Mormonism looking for solace and comfort. If you want to understand Mormonism, you have to understand what binds people to the faith despite the institutional intrigue and outward politics.
Reviews of Mormon America

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