Brigham Young University: A House of Faith

Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis

Richard D. Poll

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Book Reviews


Reviewed by Richard D. Poll, professor emeritus of history, Western Illinois University.

This is an interesting, provocative, tedious, titillating, mistitled, informative, tendentious, and important book.

An endorsement on the back cover describes Brigham Young University: A House of Faith as a "foray into some of the tensions which have bedeviled the history" of the school. The book's central issue is summarized in the words of BYU alumnus and former University of Oregon President O. Meredith Wilson: "The tensions between a vigorous church and a vigorous university are greater than many may suppose" (367). Words in a similar vein, taken from the 1980 valedictory of former BYU President Dallin H. Oaks, conclude both the first and last chapters: "A genuine mingling of the insights of reason and revelation is infinitely . . . difficult" (45, 367).

Gary Bergera and Ronald Priddis, both 1980 graduates of BYU, have organized their prodigious research into nine chapters. The first, "Growth and Development," surveys the university's 110-year history, devoting sections to each of the eight presidential administrations. Having established a structural framework, the authors then consider the following subjects or problem areas: "Integrating Religion and Academics," "Standards and the Honors Code," "Organic Evolution Controversy," "Partisan Politics and the University," "Student Government, Social Clubs, and Newspapers," "Intercollegiate Athletics," "Arts, Entertainment, and Literature," and "Academics and Intellectual Pursuits." A twenty-page pictorial insert, 130 pages of endnotes and a good index complete the volume.

Episodes that receive detailed treatment include the Peterson–Chamberlin evolution controversy, the Wilkinson "spy" embroglio, the racial protests involving BYU athletics, and the "Looking for Mr. Goodbar" censorship affair. Curricular and extracurricular ramifications of the institutional concern about proper sexual behavior are described. The difficulties inherent in assigning moral significance to such ephemeral social phenomena as styles in dress, dance, music,
and the visual arts are also noted. Tighter editing would have eliminated some of the trivia, grammatical lapses and name errors (for example, Nobel Waite, 29; Roman J. Andrus and Russel B. Swenson, 370).

Anyone who reads far enough into the book to discover that Karl G. Maeser was the son of ‘two unmarried, working-class Lutherans’ (5), and that a member of the 1900 Cluff expedition ‘sold his mule to buy liquor’ (11), will agree that the book is both interesting and titillating. In the text and endnotes is evidence that the researchers paid particular attention to documentary footprints made by feet of clay.

Anyone who reads through the chapter on athletics, only about 10 percent of which is relevant to the book’s theme, will likely find the going tedious. The chapters on university standards and on student activities also have episodes that parallel in loco parentis and generation gap controversies on hundreds of college and university campuses, secular as well as church-related. If the test of relevance to the revelation–reason issue had been applied to everything that went into this book, it would be significantly shorter and better.

Nevertheless, the book brought me to a fuller appreciation of the complexity of the church–university relationship as I looked, through Bergera’s and Priddis’s eyes, into the minutes, correspondence, and journals of the men—except for coeds, there are very few women in this history—who had the responsibility for defining and managing the relationship. Somewhere in the book is the rueful observation of one of BYU’s presidents that BYU has more people involving themselves in its administration than almost any other school. The book amply demonstrates the frustrations of all who have occupied the presidential chair.

I was also impressed by how much the authors have learned about their subject. They treat in some detail three episodes in which I was a central figure, and Bergera and Priddis know more about them than I do.

The placement of the endnotes make them inconvenient to use, but no one who reads the book will want to ignore them. Full as they are, the notes do not give sources for some of the items; for example, the reported dismissal of ‘at least six faculty for lack of testimony’ (65).

Moreover, the book does only partial justice to the subject of tensions between faith and freedom at ‘the Lord’s university,’ partly because it sometimes digresses and partly because a hidden agenda clouds its objectivity. It is provocative in both the affirmative (stimulating) and negative (aggravating) sense.

The aggravating provocations stem from what are, for me, serious problems with Brigham Young University: A House of Faith. People who buy the book on the basis of its title are entitled to seek redress under the ‘truthfulness in packaging’ statutes. They may be shocked,
angered, or disillusioned by what they read: but they will learn little about how well or how badly the university has discharged its charter mission to preserve and propagate the faith. Furthermore, they will not emerge from the reading with a very clear picture of how the university has tried to balance the competing claims of faith and reason, because the battles, blunders, intrigues, and idiosyncrasies that fill these pages are not assimilated into persuasive generalizations or long-range conclusions.

Indeed, the issues of revelation—reason and church—university are uninvolved, or only marginally involved, in some of the controversial episodes about politics, aesthetics, and history that the book describes in detail. The personal opinions and tastes of some of the university’s administrators and trustees have generated some of the most intense and unfortunate encounters with faculty and students. Bergera and Priddis do not distinguish between differences of opinion, disagreements over management style, academic challenges to ecclesiastical doctrine, and disputes in which the issue is obedience to authority.

A more appropriate title for this volume would be *Brigham Young University: The Other Side of the Story*, because that title would explain its genesis as well as its substance. The authors, like some other readers of the authorized centennial histories of BYU (Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. [Provo: BYU Press, 1975–76], and Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny* [Provo: BYU Press, 1976]), were dissatisfied with what they saw as excessively eulogistic and apologetic elements in the works as a whole and particularly in the treatment of the Wilkinson years. To redress the imbalance, Bergera and Priddis produced a work with a pronounced anti-Wilkinson bias. Somewhere between the “damning with faint praise” of Bergera–Priddis and the “praising with faint damn” of Wilkinson–Skousen lies the truth about the energetic, able, insecure, dedicated, devious, visionary, irrepresible, pugnacious and lonely man who did more than anyone else to make BYU what it has become. (If only he could have understood that neither *employee* nor *enemy* is a synonym for *faculty*).

The bias in the large part of the book that deals with the Wilkinson years is different from that in the remainder. Academic and individual freedom are preferred to religious dogmatism and authoritarianism throughout, and the authors’ favorite administrators are those who have most vigorously defended these freedoms. Among the early presidents, Franklin Harris and Benjamin Cluff are given white hats, while Howard McDonald, George Brimhall and Karl Maeser wear shades of gray. Dallin Oaks and Jeffrey Holland are also given gray hats, but with white linings. In contrast, Ernest Wilkinson wears a ten-gallon black Stetson—with a blue and white band that acknowledges his contributions to the physical dimensions of the university.
The authors are hardly reverential in their handling of the sponsoring church, but they find friends as well as foes of intellectual freedom among LDS General Authorities, who are individually and collectively present in the story. The range of opinions and the variety of influences brought to bear on the university are particularly delineated in the chapters on evolution, politics, and arts and letters. Incidentally, the 1911 evolution controversy is given similar treatment in Bergera–Priddis and Wilkinson–Skousen, whereas the later (and unfortunately still on-going) disputation about how God organized the earth and man that the authorized histories ignore are extensively detailed in Brigham Young University: A House of Faith.

If the title of the book may mislead some, the content has obviously misled, or confirmed the bias, of at least one reviewer. In a long commentary in the Salt Lake Tribune (2 December 1985, E2, E9), Jack Goodman claims support in Bergera–Priddis for describing BYU as a school “whose faculty members, past and present, fear to teach many subjects fully and honestly,” a school which under Wilkinson resembled “an academic Siberia.”

This is absurd.

Bergera and Priddis show how institutional policies excluding some speakers and entertainments and restricting the journalistic enterprise of some students have created a parochial campus environment, but the limited attention they give to academics includes almost nothing on what actually happens in classrooms. Like the authorized BYU histories, and college and university histories as a literary type, this book has little to say about the central business of higher education—teachers and students engaging one another in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

These authors also demonstrate that BYU has never had the degree of faculty autonomy and power that American higher education idealizes. This circumstance is unfortunate, in my view, not merely because it makes Phi Beta Kappa recognition unavailable to the best BYU students, but because it has at times deprived the administration of the full benefit of the ideas and talents of a faculty that surely must be one of the most loyal and united anywhere. Other consequences of arbitrary administrative control over employment policies have been that a few academically qualified faculty applicants have been denied appointment, a larger number have elected not to apply, a few people of questionable credentials have been employed, and some well-qualified people have left the university for professional opportunities elsewhere. Some self-censorship in the classroom handling of a few sensitive topics has probably occurred, and a certain amount of faculty time and energy has been spent in venting frustrations of a different sort than engage academicians on more conventional campuses.
Book Reviews

This is not to say, and Bergera and Priddis do not say, that the result is a substandard "educational Siberia." One who reads the book carefully will discover, as anyone really familiar with BYU already knows, that even within the closely supervised sphere of religious education a range of faculty perspectives and an occasional flirtation with heterodoxy may be found, and by no means all of the visiting experts who speak on religious themes follow a Mormon "party line." In the rest of the university, where a very small part of the curriculum relates to academic matters in which the sponsoring church has an institutional interest, almost all subjects are presented in about the same way as at other universities. This is partly because even Mormon faculty members tend to teach what they were taught in non-Mormon graduate schools and partly because they find no unmanageable tensions between their academic and religious consciences. Furthermore, the options for imposing outside viewpoints on the teacher in the classroom without jeopardizing accreditation are quite limited, and no administration or board of trustees has cared to take that risk.

Even in the unfortunate postsenatorial election phase of the Wilkinson presidency, what went on within the classrooms of the teachers whose story this book tells in detail was not significantly affected by what was going on outside. Having been there with Richard Wirthlin, Ray Hillam, Kenneth Davies, Louis Midgley and other faculty "radicals" who were objects of administrative concern, and at the same time having helped to develop an intellectually demanding honors program and having taught the required course in American history and institutions to several thousand students, I object to the suggestion that BYU students—then or now—are shortchanged in the content or integrity of their academic courses. Intellectually curious undergraduates are the exception, as they are at almost all other universities, but they are present, and their curiosity grows between their freshman and senior years. Lazy, lousy, and lopsided teachers are also found, but there is no institutional bias in their favor.

As reviewer of Brigham Young University: A House of Faith, I must finally consider the ethical questions posed by research which purports to be what it is not. Some of the content of this book comes from sources to which the authors did not have authorized access. They imply as much when they say of the Board of Trustees and Executive Committee Minutes and of the Presidential Papers that are heavily used: "Some duplicates are located in [various archives] and in private hands" (369). The propriety of citing the original documents, as these authors do, rather than the copies that were actually used must certainly be challenged. The propriety of using copies of restricted materials that may have been made by others without authorization must also be challenged. The authors have done an impressive job of gathering
interesting and sometimes sensitive materials from a wide range of accessible archival and personal sources. But this book could not have been written, and it is this reviewer's opinion that it would not have been undertaken, if the authors had not also had access to a large amount of material copied by a person or persons unknown (at least to me) from files to which access is restricted. Much of the copying probably took place in connection with the production of the authorized BYU histories, but the provenance of some of the post-1976 items is a mystery.

Restrictions on access to information are hard to enforce in a free society, as recent spy trials remind us, but those who generate private documents are entitled to limit their use. Unlike the "no holds barred" standards of exposé journalism, the canons of historical professionalism recognize and respect this entitlement.

_Brigham Young University: A House of Faith_ is an important book because it confronts us with this standard of scholarship, because it reinforces our skepticism about commemorative histories, because it throws light—despite its digressions and _ad hominems_—on the special problems of revealed truth versus academic truth, and because it demonstrates that the fate of BYU has always been in the hands of trustees, administrators, teachers, and students whose shared desire to serve God does not always generate unanimity on how to run a university.