

WILKINSON, ERNEST L., and W. CLEON SKOUSEN. *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976. xvi, 925 pp. \$7.95.

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The prevailing assumption among educators who direct universities that are recognized as truly great is that a university must be a community of scholars whose predominant concern is free inquiry, the pursuit of truth, regardless of any by-products which may or may not bring desired social goals. The aims of Brigham Young University are somewhat different, according to Ernest L. Wilkinson, a former president of the university, and W. Cleon Skousen, a member of the religion faculty, in their recently published history, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny*. The authors indicate that the school's policymakers have had a strong sense of destiny for the institution, a belief that one day their school would gain recognition among the peoples of the world as a leader, if not *the* leader in matters educational (pp. 289, 433). Throughout the history of the school its board, made up of Church authorities, and its administrators "were in favor of seeing BYU become a leader in secular fields" (p. 451). Nonetheless, the primary goal has been to encourage Mormon students to "live up to the high moral standards implicit in the Mormon faith," which is "more important to educating the soul than the mere accumulation of facts." The authors maintain that very early Brigham Young University became a "training ground in obedience and soulbuilding as well as in traditional academics" (p. 116). Thus, it has sought to educate the whole man spiritually and intellectually, believing that "spiritual objectives could be combined with the pursuit of scientific, intellectual and artistic excellence without detriment to either" (p. viii).

Despite the authors' affirmations to the contrary, their study shows that there have been recurring tensions between the two goals. They provide considerable evidence that on occasions students and faculty have been curbed in expressing certain attitudes freely. They recount the resignation of prominent faculty members following the evolution controversy in 1911 and the negative influence this incident had upon the maintenance of a qualified faculty (pp. 199-209, 216, 217, 221, 243). They relate how in the 1950s and 1960s members of the

Economics Department said they were not free to teach other than conservative economic theories without suffering administrative disapproval (pp. 514, 584). They also tell us that accrediting teams have complained of restraints on academic freedom at BYU (*Ibid.*). They come perilously close to admitting that Wilkinson himself was responsible for student spying on the faculty in the late 1960s (p. 753). They acknowledge that on one occasion in the 1960s the student newspaper was “reorganized” so that open discussion of controversial issues would be eliminated (pp. 622–23). Can an institution which upon occasion resorts to such measures, which seeks so hard to promote obedience and social tranquility, establish an atmosphere on campus sufficiently free to encourage significant scholarly inquiry? By reading this revealing work one gets an ambiguous answer, an impression of the very difficult task which Mormon leaders have set for themselves in administering an educational institution where dual objectives seem so often to be in conflict.

The volume traces in detail the evolution of BYU from an ungraded school that would admit all kinds of students regardless of preparation, to a normal school for training teachers, to a “university,” with numerous departments, colleges and programs, including graduate work in schools like the law school established in 1973. The study is an enormous cataloging of the physical growth of the university. We are told that as late as 1951 university property was worth only 4 million dollars but that by 1971 it was worth in excess of 100 million; we are told of increasing enrollments and improving faculty salaries. With this kind of evidence of financial commitment the Mormon people give convincing proof of their high degree of determination to advance their special kind of education.

The study is impressive for the immense amount of research it reflects, but it is marred by the fact that too frequently it is used to justify the personal political views of the authors, or the policies and style of leadership of former President Wilkinson. At the same time it exhibits great discomfort with criticisms levied at Wilkinson’s administration and with policy changes made by the subsequent administration.

There are many places where the subject matter seems egocentric. An example is Wilkinson’s recollection that as a student he was able to get a scoop for the school newspaper on the selection of Franklin S. Harris as the new university president (p. 235). Another is the comment that what progress has come under the Oaks’ administration “may have been rooted more in the structure of the school itself rather than in the

new leadership” (p. 837). Since it is maintained elsewhere that when Wilkinson took over, BYU was in the doldrums, that it was his own creative energy that made it into a university (p. 759), that he established a “well-oiled machine” to handle all university affairs even after his resignation (pp. 771, 772), this comment seems like an attempt to claim for Wilkinson most of the credit for what Oaks has achieved. The authors maintain that from 1951 to 1971 it was “Wilkinson’s University,” that he was the dominant force on campus (pp. 770–71). Be that as it may, it is bad taste for Wilkinson to allow in the text stories about himself that bestow lavish praise (e.g., pp. 112, 224, 340, 440–41, 446, 452–68, 765).

Excessive length is given to treatment of Wilkinson’s personal life before coming to BYU, 36 pages (pp. 432–68), while too little attention is given to the early lives of other presidents. Karl G. Maeser receives 8 pages, Benjamin Cluff 3 pages, George H. Brimhall 4 pages, Franklin S. Harris 2 pages, and Dallin Oaks 9. Furthermore, only 111 pages (pp. 231–343) are taken to cover Franklin S. Harris’ administration of 24 years, while 320 pages (pp. 429–759) cover Wilkinson’s 20 years. As a consequence, what we have here is more nearly a memoir of a president than a history of an institution.

There are still weightier, although not unrelated difficulties. In part because neither author is a trained historian, they tend to perceive the task of writing a history of a university too narrowly. That part of the text which is actually history is administrative history: largely a parading of presidents and deans. There are two sections on student life but none on the work of the faculty. While something is said about the evolution of curriculum in the early years, as BYU moved away from being a grade and secondary school, there is nothing said about curriculum during the Wilkinson years. What were the students being taught? How well? Had the curriculum and the point of view of the faculty broadened sufficiently by 1971 for BYU to be more than a Church seminary? What of the quality of the work in the graduate program? These are questions that require treatment. As Samuel Eliot Morison informs us in his superb study of Harvard College in the seventeenth century, the curriculum is “more important” than the administration, the physical plant, or student life. Without “knowledge of what the scholars studied, we should be constructing a mere temporary shell, ignoring the kernel from which a university sprouted.”

This seems to me to point toward a fundamental weakness of the Wilkinson-Skousen history. They obviously believe, as the selection of material suggests, that the controlling influence in a university is the

administration, that its functions constitute the only really significant activity. In an admission that seems devastating, coming as it does from a professor and a former university president, the authors state that “what a faculty actually does to develop a truly great university is hard to capture on paper.” The context of this statement (p. 778) suggests that they see the only contribution of the faculty coming in the classroom. They say almost nothing about student or faculty scholarship, their work on important articles, books, or in editing important scholarly journals, or participation on significant national committees, or their role generally in the discovery of new truth. When the authors describe “institutional research” they talk about a fact-finding group established to investigate what was happening at BYU, not a scholarly institute (p. 714).

Reflected here is an inability to understand the very sensitive thing that a university is, the vital part that community and culture play in encouraging capable men and women to produce worthwhile scholarly work. This may have something to do with the failure of the university (which Wilkinson and Skousen acknowledge [p. 798]) to achieve the desired excellence in the field of learning to which its leaders have aspired. Most of the presidents of great universities would hold that their primary role is to develop an atmosphere where faculty and students might pursue their learning freely, with confidence and security, knowing that when the work is done recognition and rewards will be forthcoming. The book acknowledges, and well documents, that Wilkinson’s administration was otherwise. If it was “Wilkinson’s University,” then he must assume a large share of the responsibility which goes with the admission that the university has not measured up to its goals. Perhaps those university heads, faculty, students, and Mormon people who shape what the university is and ultimately will be have yet to live up to the ideals of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who said that he would teach his people correct principles and let them govern themselves. When that spirit prevails at BYU the greatness that is sought may one day come to be. There are signs that the new administration perceives this and in that there is reason to hope.