

NEWELL G. BRINGHURST. *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer's Life*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. xviii; 350 pp. Photographs, bibliography, notes, index. \$29.95.

Reviewed by David J. Whittaker

Fawn McKay Brodie has cast a long shadow across the landscape of Mormon studies since 1945, when her controversial biography of Joseph Smith appeared. Since that time, she has been alternately praised or vilified, cited or ignored. Some consider her a saint; others are sure she is a devil. Within the Mormon community, it is almost impossible to be neutral about her work. While this biography does not reconcile these views, it does allow readers to see Fawn Brodie within the broader context of her family, her life choices, her marriage, her own world as wife and mother, her education and literary productions, and her views on the world of the Mormon Utah that both shaped and repelled her.

Newell Bringhurst teaches history and political science at the College of the Sequoias in Visalia, California. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Davis in 1975, writing a dissertation on the history of Mormon attitudes towards Blacks. His dissertation was published by Greenwood Press in 1981. This study was followed by a short biography of Brigham Young, issued in the Library of American Biography Series published by Little, Brown in 1986. With the exception of a few articles on other Mormon topics, much of his research and publishing since then has focused on Fawn Brodie.<sup>1</sup> Between 1989 and 1997, he published eleven articles on her life and thought, and in 1996 he edited a volume of essays on *No Man Knows My History* that grew out of the conference held on the fiftieth anniversary of that biography's publication. To those who have followed these essays, Bringhurst's research and approach are already clear. But the biography gives a fuller and more complete accounting of his work, even though he does not directly inform the reader that much of the volume has appeared in other places.

In weaving his biographical tapestry, Bringhurst gathers several threads. The patriarchal and authoritarian McKay family is ever present during Brodie's life and in the tensions between her parents. Her father was Thomas E. McKay, brother of future Church President David O. McKay. Her mother, Fawn Brimhall, was a daughter of George Brimhall, president of Brigham Young University from 1903 to 1921. At the time of her parents' marriage, her father was nearly thirty-seven and her mother was twenty-three. This age gap, Bringhurst suggests, created distance and tension between them. In her early life, Brodie was influenced by the faith of her family and their strong emphasis on education. As the story of her

early life unfolds, we see a bright youngster who gradually grew beyond what her biographer views as the provincial religious and cultural world of her youth and slowly entered the world of learning and its accompanying secular explanations. Bringhurst shows this process to be a gradual one, slowly influenced by her travels as a college debater; her broad reading; her own mother, “the quiet heretic” (20); the Brimhall clan, who were seen as liberal and liberating; and her own inquisitive mind. Brodie would clearly feel more at ease with the Brimhalls than with the McKays.

Bringhurst argues that Brodie was frustrated in her youth by a strong patriarchal family that would not tolerate either dissent or public questioning. We are given a picture of an inquisitive young girl slowly moving toward the disappointment and frustration that she felt was the product of a religion and its male authorities who would not allow the discussion of serious questions. Like her own mother, Brodie wanted to challenge and question, to set fires, as it were, on the landscape of Mormonism. For Brodie, this compulsion would be manifested in her scholarly work, a major theme of which was the critical study and psychoanalysis of strong male figures. Brodie’s mother ended her own life by literally setting herself on fire. In dealing with this tragedy, Brodie wrote, “I can’t help feeling that mother wanted to set fire to things all her life, without knowing it, and in the end chose to take vengeance on herself rather than on whatever it was she hated” (164). Bringhurst might have argued that this is exactly what Brodie was doing in her published biographies.

Fawn Brodie was born September 15, 1915, in Ogden, Utah; she died of lung cancer January 10, 1981, in southern California, where she and her husband had made their home since 1952. The framework of Bringhurst’s study is chronological, moving through Fawn’s youth in Huntsville and Ogden, her schooling and interest in books and reading, her family’s poverty, her early interest in creative writing (crushed by a male teacher at the University of Utah), and her studies and experience as a student at the University of Utah (“I was devout until I went to the University of Utah” [45]). At the university, she found friendship and liberating models in her association with her uncle, Dean Brimhall, and his wife, Lila Eccles Brimhall, the daughter of Utah businessman David Eccles. Dean, an outspoken Democrat, encouraged questions, and the Brimhall home provided an open setting for critical discussion. Lila, a professional dancer and faculty member at the university, was an important example for a young woman seeking role models, suggesting that success was possible both in and out of the home.

Fawn’s studies at the University of Chicago, beginning in 1935, further broadened her world view. Her educational experience at Chicago during the heady days of Robert M. Hutchins’s leadership and her additional

reading as she worked in the university library continued to exert powerful influences on her intellectual development.<sup>2</sup> Chicago is also where she was introduced to Bernard Brodie, whom she married after a six-week courtship. They married the same day Fawn received her master's degree in English literature, August 28, 1936. Bernard was everything she had been moving towards: he was well read, a secular Jew who had also abandoned the faith of his family, and someone to whom she could talk. Bringhurst leaves no doubt as to the importance of this relationship. Bernard would soften her anger toward Mormonism; she would assist him in research and writing in his field of political science and international diplomacy. He would continue her education in ways no one else could. But he would also betray her through his affairs with other women. Ironically, many of the men who were subjects of Fawn's biographies possessed traits that she found manifest in her own husband.

Bringhurst has managed to gather a lot of interesting material for his biography. Family sources were critical, but most of these remain unavailable to current researchers.<sup>3</sup> Fawn's own papers, on the other hand, are accessible in the Marriott Library at the University of Utah. Her oral histories and several autobiographical essays also provided important insights for this biography. Her husband's papers are in the University Research Library at UCLA. The editorial files of Alfred A. Knopf and W. W. Norton, Fawn's main publishers, are an important source for understanding her as an author and intellectual. Knopf issued her first biography, but after being rebuffed by him, she turned to Norton, who published her other major works.

Especially revealing are the many letters that she exchanged with George Brockway, her editor at Norton, who became her friend. Bringhurst provides extensive citations from their correspondence, the core of which reveals Brodie's life as a working author, struggling to articulate what her research, psychological theories, and intuition were telling her. Brockway was surely an important silent partner in her biographical endeavors. Bringhurst thus helps us better understand the process of book creation once she had submitted her drafts to her publisher. We are also given some insight into the financial aspects of Brodie's book production; for example, we learn that her royalties on the Thomas Jefferson biography totaled \$350,000. We also learn of her strong and active interest in having several of her biographies made into motion pictures.

Fawn Brodie clearly had her own inner demons: her love-hate relationship with her heritage and the LDS Church, both of which were so central to her early life; her relationship with her parents and the larger McKay family; her struggle with sex and intimacy; and her own professional psychoanalysis over several decades. These personal issues and tensions

became important themes in all her biographies; clearly she was able to use biographical study to address most of these “personal” devils.

For her biography of Joseph Smith, Brodie had a number of mentors. The most important was Dale Morgan, whom she first met in 1943. As a critic of, and source for, Mormon historical items, Morgan was particularly valuable to her biography of Joseph Smith, although he later misled Brodie (who wanted to write a biography of Brigham Young also) by telling her that his girlfriend, Madeline R. McQuown, was just about finished with her own study of Brigham. He knew that this was not true. But in other matters, Morgan was a critical source and advisor for Brodie’s historical work. It was Morgan who correctly saw just what the role of her biography of Joseph Smith played in her deepest inner life. When she was unable to settle on a topic for a new biographical study after 1945, he wrote to her in January 1946:

I don’t think you fully recognize the extent to which your book was written out of an emotional compulsion, and the extent to which that compulsion persists. You are looking for something that will occupy and satisfy your emotions as Mormonism has done, and it is hardly likely that you will find such a topic or subject. Because writing Joseph’s biography was your act of liberation and of exorcism. (115)

There were others who assisted Brodie with her Mormon research: Vesta Crawford supplied material on Emma Smith; Claire Noall shared research files on Willard Richards; Wilford Poulson read Brodie’s manuscript and taught her about James J. Strang, an early claimant to Joseph Smith’s mantle (Samuel Taylor would later argue that she took Poulson’s ideas about Strang and applied them to Joseph Smith); and Juanita Brooks assisted with several topics, although Brodie could never personally understand Brooks because Brooks remained faithful to the Church while still studying its history.

Brodie herself was considered by many to be one of America’s preeminent, if controversial, biographers. Bringhurst treats her published work on Thaddeus Stevens (1959), Richard Burton (1967), Thomas Jefferson (1974), and Richard Nixon (1981), providing interesting detail on these projects. Her biographer weaves into his larger narrative the scholarly activities of her husband, Bernard, and shows her involvement with several of Bernard’s printed works. In addition, Bringhurst provides a useful bibliography of Fawn Brodie’s published works, including her lesser-known essays (at least one published under another name) and reviews. While her Mormon background and long-term interest in things Mormon are the major themes of this biography, Bringhurst also involves his reader with the broader life and scholarship of his subject.

One of the valuable aspects of this study is its attempt to present a full portrait of a life. We see Fawn Brodie as a wife, loving and supporting and even coauthoring Bernard's works; a fundamentally insecure person; a mother who preferred that role to all others; an environmental activist who helped save the Santa Monica Mountains from developers; a university professor who had to fight for tenure and promotion in the history department at UCLA because she had no degrees in history; and a human being who could never completely escape from her family and religious heritage. Even as she was dying, she asked for a blessing from her estranged brother, only to clarify within days of the blessing that this was not the action of a prodigal daughter returning to the fold. In a final evaluation at the end of his study, Bringhurst suggests that Brodie was an agnostic, not an atheist, when it came to her personal religious views.

She could be quite stubborn in her pursuit of a topic or theory, as with her work on Richard Nixon. Such limiting focus, as Bringhurst suggests, created methodological weakness in her research and writing, but with the exception of her theories on Nixon's homosexual tendencies, we are not shown how this problem might have affected her other works.

Bringhurst could have treated other areas in greater depth. It is clear that Brodie was a great reader, but Bringhurst does not fully probe either the content or the possible influence of the written word on her. She liked Russian literature, including Dostoevsky's novels, but what impact did these authors have on her thought? How many of her psychological insights came from this powerful literature, an influence separate from her reading of Freud and Erickson? From her youngest years, she was drawn to *King Lear* and seems to have identified with Cordelia, the "good daughter," but the reader is left to relate this identification to Fawn herself as she thought about her loving, but "blind," father. She loved her father but was deeply hurt that he refused to even discuss her book on Joseph Smith with her; she was sure that he never even read it. How did her love of literature and storytelling relate to her approach to biography? Bringhurst shows the influence of Alice Smith McKay's 1930 master's thesis, which applied psychological tests to Joseph Smith's prophecies, but he does not evaluate Alice Smith's theories or her Mormon history.

Biographical studies can tend toward the autobiographical. Stanley Fish has recently argued that because they are excessively autobiographical, biographers can only get it wrong, can only lie, and can only substitute their own story for their announced subject. He concludes that we really ought to give up writing biography or at least claiming that is what we are doing.<sup>4</sup> While this position is overblown, Mormons have tended to believe that Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith reveals far more about her religious faith (or lack of it) than that of the founding prophet. Bringhurst has

shown in one of his published essays that her work on Joseph Smith does contain many autobiographical elements.<sup>5</sup> Marvin Hill argued years ago that her portrait of Joseph Smith is flawed at the most fundamental level: it is a secular study of a religious man.<sup>6</sup> Brodie admitted that she considered Joseph Smith to be an imposter and a fraud before she began her research for the biography, although she later said that she “felt guilty about the destructive nature of the Joseph Smith book” (116).

Bringhurst readily admits in the preface that he was drawn to this thirteen-year project because he shares much with his subject. Like Brodie, he married out of the Mormon faith, and like her, he writes outside the faith. Like her, he rejected Mormonism’s pre-1978 policy of denying the priesthood to Blacks and also questioned the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham. No doubt these views helped him better relate to his subject, but they leave the reader wishing for more analysis, more insight into her life and thought. For example, rather than provide analysis and evaluation of her biographies, Bringhurst gives the reader a sample of reviews of them. Does he think that Brodie’s work on Richard Burton is dependable? that she really understood Burton? that her hatred of Richard Nixon did not get in the way of objective analysis? Brodie thought Nixon and Joseph Smith had a lot in common; without evaluation the reader assumes Bringhurst would agree. Did she really do all her homework about the subjects on whom she chose to write? She admitted that she hated archival work, but how did this distaste affect her research?

On the whole, this is an adequate biography, if for no other reason than that the reader will come away from it with a better sense of Brodie as a human being—fallible, shy, and struggling somewhat with melancholy. It helped me to better understand the private devils that she tried to exorcize in her biographical works.

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1. An additional project was his work on the history of Visalia Fox Theater as part of his involvement in the preservation and restoration of a landmark in his community: Newell G. Bringhurst, *Visalia’s Fabulous Fox* (Visalia, Calif.: Josteus, 1999).

2. The best study of these influences is Mario S. De Pillis, “Fawn McKay Brodie: At the Intersection of Secularism and Personal Alienation,” in *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 94–126.

3. Bringhurst conducted over sixty oral history interviews in addition to having some access to the family’s correspondence. His research files will eventually be placed in the Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

4. Stanley Fish, "Just Published: Minutiae without Meaning," *New York Times*, September 7, 1999, A19.

5. Newell G. Bringhurst, "Fawn M. Brodie—Her Biographies as Autobiography," *Pacific Historical Review* 59 (May 1990): 203–30.

6. Marvin S. Hill, "Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of *No Man Knows My History*," in *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History*, 60–93. Originally published in *Church History* 43, no. 1 (1974): 78–96.