

The Mormon Excommunication of Fawn Brodie: Why Banishing the Famous Biographer Reverberates 65 Years

- July 30, 2012

James Reston Jr. looks at the banishing of Joseph Smith biographer Fawn Brodie from the Mormon Church.

By James Reston Jr.

When I was David Frost's Watergate adviser for the Nixon Interviews in 1977, I carried on a secret communication with the best-selling author Fawn Brodie, who was then toward the end of her life and working on her intimate "psychobiography" of Richard Nixon. Obsessed as I was with getting to the inner core of Nixon's personality, and determined to get Frost to focus on that mystery, I made this estimable writer into my secret adviser. Each night after the tapings near San Clemente, I would take the transcripts of the day's proceedings to her home in Pacific Palisades so that she might counsel me, and I in turn Frost, about how the television prosecution of the former president might dig deeper and become more revealing. Of course, this outrageous breach of security would surely have gotten me fired, had Frost known about it. But Brodie's thoughts were profoundly insightful and immensely useful to the enterprise. Frost should have been grateful.

In 1977, I knew only vaguely that there was a dark cloud in Fawn Brodie's life. She had grown up devoutly Mormon in a small hamlet outside Ogden, Utah. Her grandfather, on her mother's side, was the president of Brigham Young University, the theological center of Mormonism, and her uncle David O. McKay was one of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, one of the ruling bodies of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS). (McKay would become the ninth president of the LDS in 1951 and serve in that capacity until his death in 1970.) Her first rebellion from the tight-knit restraints of her

family and faith was to marry a Jewish scholar named Bernard Brodie, a professor at Yale and national defense expert.

Fawn Brodie

In late 1945, after seven years labor, she published her shocking biography of Joseph Smith, the founder and prophet of the Mormon faith. The book rocked the church to its foundation, for it portrayed Smith as a charlatan and imposter who had made up the story of his purported discovery of the golden plates and who had written the holy books of the faith, the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham, out of his own fertile imagination. Her book, *No Man Knows My History*, questioned his “first vision” and pointed out that Smith had given three different versions of it.

Tracing the influences on Smith in upstate New York, she put forward her theory of how Smith went about his work of fiction, as she called it. And in her appendix, she listed Joseph Smith’s 47 wives by name — “Whenever I see a pretty woman, I have to pray for grace,” Smith said — and quoted Smith’s revelation in the early 1840s that permitted every man to take “10 virgins.” This was not an invitation but a command. To ignore it risked the loss of one’s crown in the celestial kingdom. Smith’s revelation was nothing less than a redefinition of the nature of sin, Brodie wrote. And it created for modern Mormons a “legacy of unconscious shame” for the polygamy of their ancestors. Polygamy was outlawed by 1890, and over time, she wrote, most Mormons came to regard the end of polygamy with relief. But because plural marriage was for so long a fundamental tenet of Mormon theology, the shame of history survived, even dipping into the recent genealogy of Mitt Romney’s family.

Fawn Brodie’s biography remains today the definitive work on the Mormon prophet. It was widely praised in the mainstream press. The New York Times called it one of the best of all Mormon books, “scholarly, comprehensive, judicial and painstaking.” It was effusively praised by such literary giants as Bernard DeVoto, Wallace Stegner, and Carl Sandburg. DeVoto called it “the best book about the Mormons so far published. It is in a class by itself.” In 2005 an academic conference, presided over by Brodie’s biographer, Newell G. Bringhurst, marked the 60th anniversary of its publication and revisited its major themes.

To many devout Mormons, however, the book is a “scurrilous work” and an atrocity. Over the years, Brodie herself was often referred to as “that awful woman.” The Mormon paper, *Saints Herald*, called her book a “ghoulish act” and a “desecration of the sepulcher.” “She has been entirely controlled by the deadly animosity against the church and its founder,” the review continued. “If she is not entirely beyond a saving grace, she will regret having written it.” Her own uncle, David O. McKay, waded in publicly several months after the book’s publication: “My heart aches this morning because one who was pretty close to me has failed. She has violated conventions in childhood and broken through the fence of consideration and decency. She found the poison grain of unbelief and now languishes in spiritual apathy and decay.” No doubt McKay worried that his niece’s book would be a reflection on him and his future aspirations. Wrote Dale Morgan, another writer on the LDS and the author of a book on the Great Salt Lake: “If [he] couldn’t keep the members of his own family converted, what future was there for him as the President of the Church.”

It fell to a Mormon historian named Hugh Nibley to write the official 62-page response to Brodie’s book, titled “No, Ma’am, That’s Not History.” Denouncing Brodie’s book was to become the standard for political correctness in the Mormon establishment. So wrote Samuel W. Taylor, an LDS writer, in an essay called “How to be a Mormon Scholar.” “By lambasting Fawn Brodie’s book,” he wrote, “you show that you are thinking right, because Mrs. Brodie was unchurched for the writing it and delivered to the buffetings of Satan. But you maintain your high intellectual objectivity by referring only to its inaccuracies.”

In May 1946, Fawn Brodie was living in New Haven and only a few weeks away from giving birth to her second child when she received a summons from the New England Mission of the LDS Church to answer charges of apostasy. (It is surmised that her uncle, David O. McKay, was behind the formal accusations, and that the matter was left to the New England Mission, to cover up the person who was the real driving force.) The summons letter accused her of asserting “truths which deny the divine origin of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the Priesthood and of Christ’s Church through the instrumentality of the Prophet Joseph Smith, contrary to the beliefs, doctrines, and teachings of the Church.” Brodie did not answer the letter and did not appear before the tribunal. Less than a month later, a bishop’s court officially and summarily excommunicated her from the Mormon Church as a heretic.

This is the same New England LDS chapter where Mitt Romney served as bishop and “stake” president, and the same kind of bishop’s court in which, according to *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*, Romney participated in or threatened a number of excommunications to wayward church members (though records of excommunication or “disfellowshipment” are confidential). One risks excommunication for three reasons, official church documents tell us. “Gross iniquity”— philandering on the part of a Mormon officer might be an example — and the practice of polygamy are the first two. But the most nettlesome is apostasy, which is defined as flat denial of the divine nature of the Mormon Church. The LDS Church does not make public how widespread its inquisition for apostasy is. Only the high-profile cases become known, like Brodie’s and the case of the “September Six” in 1993, when six Mormon writers and scholars were excommunicated for publishing the anthology *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*. Interestingly, two of those six have repented their heresy and asked to be readmitted to the fellowship.

Brodie’s book gives full credit to the Mormon prophet as charismatic, imaginative and mystical, a genius as a leader. “It would be hard to find another man whose life was such an outrageous melodrama and who was, at the same time, such a significant figure of American history,” she wrote in 1948. But *No Man Knows My History* fundamentally questions the credibility of Joseph Smith. And it is withering in debunking the LDS creation myths about the origins of the black race and the American Indian race, as they are laid out in the Books of Mormon and Abraham. Unflinchingly, Brodie wrote of how the devout Mormon must believe that the black skin of the African-American and the red skin of the American Indian are a curse of God. The devout must accept the story that the American Indian race began with refugees from Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C.; that there was a good contingent of fair-skinned Indians, known as the Nephites, and a bad set of dark-skinned Indians, known as Lamanites; that these two sets of Indians fought with one another for a thousand years, from about 600 B.C. to 441 A.D., until an apocalyptic battle took place in which the dark-skinned Indians wiped out their “white and delightsome” enemies. Black Americans were historically denied the right to be Mormon priests, for, it was believed, they were descended from Egyptians and their black skin went back to Noah’s “curse of Ham” in the Book of Genesis.

In 1831 the Mormon prophet set out to revise the Old Testament. To the standard Bible story of Ham’s disgrace in Genesis: 9:21-27, Smith added these words: “... and a blackness came upon all the children of Cainan, that they were despised among all

people. ... The seed of Cain were black and had not place among them.” [Inspired version: Genesis 7:10, 14, 29.] Brigham Young, Joseph Smith’s successor, deepened and memorialized this animus toward black people. Only in 1978 did the president of the Mormon Church, Spencer W. Kimball, have a “revelation” that changed the policy and allowed blacks to become Mormon priests. But this revelation stands in clear contradiction to the Mormon holy book, the Book of Abraham.

Joseph Smith

Fawn Brodie’s papers are deposited and beautifully catalogued at the Marriott Library on the campus of the University of Utah. The collection is a treasure trove that includes a mountain of correspondence from her supporters and detractors. It contains the summons letter from William H. Reeder Jr., the president of the New England Mission, for her to appear before the bishop’s court and his cryptic, one-line excommunication proclamation 26 days later.

Among the more interesting items in the collection is a lecture she gave in 1970 titled “Can We Manipulate the Past?” In it, Brodie pointed out that Mormon theology carries the belief—or at least carried the belief in its founding days in 1845—that the curse of black skin goes back even further than the story of Ham, to the very formation of the human race in the war in heaven between Michael the Archangel and Lucifer (Revelation: 12:7). This belief emerged in a debate in 1845 among the High Priests at Nauvoo, a historic Mormon site on the Mississippi River, when it was stated that a third of the angels could not decide between Michael and Lucifer and were cursed with the black skin for their indecision.

In late 1980, Fawn Brodie had cancer and was close to death. She was far beyond resting on her laurels. She had followed her Joseph Smith biography with impressive works on Thaddeus Stevens and Sir Richard Burton, the explorer. Her “intimate” biography of Thomas Jefferson in 1974 was 13 weeks on The New York Times best-seller list and was the first to prove that the slave Sally Hemmings had been Jefferson’s mistress. But for more than eight years at the end of her life, she had struggled with her psychobiography of Richard Nixon and expressly refused pain medication so that she could finish this last book. During this end game her brother, Thomas, a firm Mormon believer, paid her a visit and, reportedly at her request, gave her a blessing. But having identified herself for

most of her adult life as a Mormon heretic, she wanted to make very clear the spirit in which she received this final blessing. “I told him I was grateful. He said what I wanted him to say. ... But any exaggeration about my request for a blessing, meaning that I was asking to be taken back into the church at that moment, I strictly repudiated and would for all time.”

Her relation to the Mormon Church rested heavily on her mind to the very end and may have bespoken a deep inner conflict. In an interview before her death in 1981, Brodie stated that she had received surprisingly little correspondence from believers over the years who hoped she would burn in hell. The greater part came from young Mormons who were struggling with the theological basis of their faith, especially as they were required to espouse every tenet of the official doctrine in their two-year missions. Many of her correspondents were on their way out of Mormonism, or would become so-called “Jack Mormons,” those who quietly reject the belief structure and the code of conduct as proscribed by the Prophet’s Doctrine of Covenants, but who admire their religion’s sense of community, its work ethic and its dedication to service.

The problem for young Mormon missionaries, Fawn Brodie said long ago in her lecture on manipulating history, is their parents’ insistence that their sons and daughters accept the Mormon past in all its details. Was Far West, Mo., really the exact spot where Cain killed Abel? Was Adam-ondi-Ahman, Mo., really the place where Adam and Eve lived after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden? “The Mormon missionary has no choice,” she said. “He must espouse a belief in all four of the holy books, and this makes for enormous conflict.”

That, I suppose, goes for a Mormon presidential candidate as well. Governor Romney has been uniformly snappish when questions about his faith have arisen during the campaign, dismissing such queries with a few curt words like “next question” or referring reporters to the Mormon Church or to a speech he gave on his faith in 2007. On the historic Mormon discrimination toward blacks, he has resorted to platitudes like “all people are children of God” or “blacks have every right and benefit in the Hereafter that everyone else has” or I am “superior to no others — none in any place.” It seems unlikely, however, that he will continue to be able to duck such questions once he becomes the formal nominee.

Mitt Romney

It should be remembered that Mitt Romney is not the first Mormon to run for president. That honor goes to Joseph Smith himself, in 1844. Surprisingly, in that short-lived campaign the Mormon prophet changed his position on slavery and, espoused a position, as Brodie pointed out, that seemed to be both in conflict with his own earlier teachings on race and more generous than Abraham Lincoln's position when he ran for president 16 years later. "Break off the shackles from the poor black man and hire him to labor like other human beings," Smith roared, "for an hour of virtuous liberty on earth is worth a whole eternity of bondage."

But that campaign was cut short when the prophet was assassinated on June 27 of that year in Carthage, Ill..

James Reston Jr. is the author of Warriors of God, Dogs of God and Defenders of the Faith. His novel 'The Nineteenth Hijacker will be published next year.