

'Going Clear' by Lawrence Wright (2013)

I'll declare up front that I've never been one for horror stories. When my kids were younger, I got bored watching *Saw* after a few minutes, or was it *Saw III* or *Saw MCMMLIV*? The way people carry on about Scientology, for or against, usually leaves me cold too although the idea of a religion with its foundations in a self-help movement created by a 1950s science fiction writer probably defines postmodernism. (I certainly can't.)

Going Clear is a book about Scientology and its influence; it was scary, a true life horror story. Lawrence Wright deservedly won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (2006). He is very good at explaining attitudes to religion, recovered memory, fanaticism and deviance. He also has the courage to defy threats, of which he must get a few. That this aggressive, wealthy, "new religious movement" is infiltrating government, intimidating the judiciary and grabbing public attention in North America was exemplified by the giant Scientology ad that appeared during the 2013 *Super Bowl*, probably in anticipation of the publication of Wright's evenhanded yet chilling account.

Scientology started by opposing two fashions of fifties: drugs and mainstream psychiatry. Ironically, people who break away after long involvement in the group often need plenty of both. Estimates of the number of Scientologists in the world today range from the 25,000 to 30,000 thousand officially registered to the eight million the Church claims. Whatever the case, Wright discovered the organisation has at least \$1 billion in liquid assets, probably more, and property to the same value, which puts it up there with the Catholics. Income is derived from selling self-help materials, investing wisely and wringing contributions from its followers. Tom Cruise, the most visible disciple, is supposed to have put in millions, as have others with less well known names.

Going Clear cannot be published in England because of the libel laws and the expensive lawyers retained by Scientology. However, the web version of *The Guardian* noted:

"Scientology is a neat reflection of the worst aspects of American culture with its repulsive veneration of celebrity; its weird attitudes towards women, sex, healthcare and contraception; its promise of equality among its followers but actual crushing inequality.... It is, in its own dark way, the inevitable religion to emerge from 20th-century America."

If you haven't read the 1950 book *Dianetics* where Scientology all started yet, my advice is don't. Read *Going Clear* instead.

Five stars

Robert Hitchins April 2013

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