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# AN INTERVIEW

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WITH LEONARD ARRINGTON AND DAVIS BITTON

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**T**he *Mormon Experience* by Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton is a new book which will fill a unique niche on the expanding shelves of books and articles about Mormons. Released by a national publisher, the volume is intended as an introduction for those who are unfamiliar with Mormonism. The book is arranged topically rather than narratively which allows the authors to discuss chosen topics in some depth. Several of these topical discussions provide the first systematic chapter-length summaries of the designated subjects in the published literature, and thus the book becomes an important resource for professional and avocational students of Mormonism as well as the novice.

These include the chapters on the appeals of

Mormonism, the persecution of the Mormons treated in the context of the American vigilante tradition, the system of plural marriage in the larger context of the Mormon family, the significance of the Mormon ward, the Church's relationship to business and a summary of business interests, the Church after the Manifesto, and the Church demands on a contemporary family—official and unofficial ("unsponsored sector").

Because of the unique appeals and pretensions of *The Mormon Experience*, whatever the book's limitations and shortcomings, *Sunstone* is printing the following interview with the authors conducted in early August 1979.

SUNSTONE: Why did you decide to write the book, *The*

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*Mormon Experience*? And why did you decide on a collaboration?

ARRINGTON: When I was visiting professor of western history at UCLA in 1966-67, I received a letter from Alfred Knopf, the New York Publisher, indicating his feeling, shared with other historians, that the greatest single gap in western historical literature was a good one-volume history of the Mormons. Because of *Great Basin Kingdom*, I suppose, I had been recommended as the one to write it. I replied that I would be interested provided the Church would allow me unrestricted access to the material in the Church Archives. (At the time scholars were not given unrestricted access.) I wrote a letter to the First Presidency explaining the project and received a reply saying that they fully approved and were instructing Joseph Fielding Smith, Church Historian, to give me unrestricted use of the Church Archives.

When I left UCLA to return to Utah State University in the fall of 1967, I began to use every available "free" day in the Church Archives going through the records. It became clear that the material was so massive that I would not be able to do the project in a short period of time. There was so much material which had not previously been examined by scholars.

When I was appointed Church Historian in 1972 I had not yet begun any writing. I wrote a letter to the First Presidency indicating I would need to use a part of my office time as Church Historian and some time from the staff and secretaries of the History Division in order to complete the book. They gave me approval to do this. Subsequently I asked Alfred Knopf for permission to permit Davis Bitton to be collaborator on the project, and he was glad to do this. Davis and I then outlined possible chapters and began doing drafts, each assuming responsibility for roughly half of them. We asked some staff members to write task papers on those chapters where much research in documentary material was still necessary. However, we want to make clear that the book as it stands has gone through our typewriters at least three times and so it represents primarily our own writing and appraisal of the historical facts.

One other thing needs to be mentioned. One of the assignments given to the History Division when we were organized in 1972 was to prepare a one-volume narrative history of the Church intended primarily for members of the Church. Brothers James Allen and Glen Leonard prepared this outstanding volume, subsequently published by Deseret Book and titled *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*. Our own volume was intended for a national market and a national publisher and we designed it to be more topical than narrative. We chose topics that needed to be understood by nonmembers interested in LDS history.

SUNSTONE: Were there any strings attached to your "unrestricted access" to the Church Archives?

ARRINGTON: No, there were not. I'd been active in the Church all along and I suppose the Brethren had confidence in me as a dedicated Church member and as a reliable and trustworthy historian.

SUNSTONE: How has the book been received by nonmembers, lay people in the Church, scholars, and Church officials?

ARRINGTON: Fortunately, it is being received in precisely the way we had hoped. Libraries around the country are purchasing the book and placing it in their Mormon collections. Universities are placing it on their reading lists. It's receiving good reviews in both popular and scholarly magazines. So we feel that it is accomplishing its intended purpose—to give a straightforward, honest, friendly account of the Mormons for people who are not well acquainted with our literature and history.

BITTON: There will be criticisms, of course, and we have had intimations already that some people think that we're a little too pro-Mormon. Some reviews use statements like "these are dedicated Mormons and, as one would expect, the story is not hostile to the Church. But on the other hand it has remarkable balance." Others say that we should have had more on this subject or that subject.

ARRINGTON: Or that it should have been more narrative and less topical.

BITTON: One reviewer said that the treatment of the twentieth century wasn't very interesting; others have said that they are delighted with the later chapters. Generally speaking, having admitted little elements of criticism, we've been surprised and delighted at the positive reaction.

ARRINGTON: The thing that's pleased us most is that we seem to get an equally favorable reaction from non-Mormons, lay Mormons, lower echelon leadership, and higher echelon leadership. We haven't had any important criticism or unfavorable comment from any of those four groups.

SUNSTONE: You dealt with some subjects which had not been previously treated in literature about Mormons. How did you decide on the chapter topics?

BITTON: We just pooled our own ideas and outlined a series of topics. Some of them were fairly obvious, like persecution. We felt there should be a discussion of polygamy and later decided to diffuse it a bit and make it more intelligible by putting it into the context of the chapter on eternal marriage, which had a longer continuity than just polygamy. Some of the chapters we had planned just didn't seem to pan out too well. They

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either were not interesting or just didn't seem to contribute to the balance of the book.

SUNSTONE: What were some of the chapters dropped?

BITTON: We originally had a discussion of the development of doctrine, a chapter on the missionary program, and maybe one or two others. Some were written as single chapters and parts of them later merged into other chapters. We also decided that a good chapter on the Mormon ward would be beneficial not because this was obvious, but because our audience would be unfamiliar with this important aspect of the Mormon experience. It is quite crucial to interested readers to know what a ward is and how it affects our lives. We chose to treat the nineteenth century ward, but much of what we say continues to be true of the later wards. "Mormon women" was a timely topic and so we have a chapter on that. We felt that "finances" was one of those things that many people hear about the Church today, and so we treated that subject.

SUNSTONE: Why did you include a whole chapter on the "unsponsored sector"? We thought that was brave, and encouraging too.

BITTON: We thought that to understand the totality of the Mormon experience it was erroneous to assume that everything had to take place within the bounds of the official Church program. We didn't know of any treatment that had started from that perspective and so we think we did something valuable in informing the national audience, not only about the Mormon Church, but about Mormon activity in a private capacity.

SUNSTONE: You mentioned that you decided to drop a chapter that you were considering on the development of doctrine. Why?

BITTON: Well, there are various reasons. One is that the average lay-reader who is going to read a single book about the Mormons is probably not interested in the intricacies of theology, let alone theological development or the differences between Orson Pratt and James E. Talmage. We did include some theology, if you can call it that. That is, we tried to get across several of the basic beliefs of our religion. The chapters on the appeals of Mormonism and the creative adjustment that occurred in the early 20th century deal with this topic to some extent. There's still a great field to be explored, but this book was probably not the right place to do it.

SUNSTONE: How would you relate this book to other histories that have been done? Do you have any concept of its place now and in the future?

BITTON: We hope it's around for a while. I don't think any history book really is definitive in the strict sense of

that word, but I don't anticipate this will be superceded very soon. It does several specific things that no other treatment does. And if those things are important to the audience, the book ought to be around for a few years.

SUNSTONE: What unique contributions did each of you make to the book?

ARRINGTON: We started from different backgrounds in history. My training and experience had been primarily with economic and social history. Davis's specialty has been early modern European history, and so he has a marvelous background in religious, intellectual, and social history. Each of us had done intensive research on certain aspects of Church history that the other hadn't. We have different writing styles. In the end, each of us reworked the drafts of the other person, so both had input on the content and style of every chapter. We hope the merger is therefore clearer and more succinct.

BITTON: I think it's important in a collaboration that there be some kind of empathy. You can't be at loggerheads all the time just arguing over details or phraseology. We seem to have a capacity for relating and benefiting from one another—I think the fact that we're both from southern Idaho helps out on that.

ARRINGTON: And both equally dedicated to the Church, both equally dedicated to historical truth.

SUNSTONE: Speaking of historical truth, how do you decide how much or how little to include when you have had unlimited access to primary documents?

ARRINGTON: The writing of history is obviously a process of selection. We could write a ten-volume topical history of the Church, or we could write one volume, or we could write a pamphlet of thirty pages. In doing any of these, how much does one devote to given topics? How much does one devote, let's say, to the Danites? One paragraph? One line? This involves judgment, it involves long experience with people and with historical writing; it also involves prayerfulness, intense thought, a lot of discussion. No one can ever write down everything that he finds, because he has to decide which things are essential to telling the story and which aren't. Is it important to mention that the Prophet Joseph Smith had a rather prominent nose? Is it important to mention that the Prophet had plural wives sealed to him before his death? Is it important to mention how many children or wives Brigham Young had? Answering such questions involves making a judgment. I don't know that there's any simple statement as to how we decided to write so much and no more. Certainly our goal was to present a truthful picture, so we didn't want to leave out anything that would convey wrong impressions.

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BITTON: Any history is a selection from a vast reservoir of possible details and facts and documents that you might include. So our task here was no different than any history. The basis of the selection is always the criterion of *relevance*, whether it's explicit or implicit, whether it's recognized or unrecognized. But the term *relevance* doesn't mean a great deal by itself; one has to say relevant to what? Joseph Smith's nose might be quite relevant to understanding Joseph Smith; it is conceivable that a psychiatrist might have quite a lot to say about the importance of a prominent nose on a person's self-image. Very early we had to make it clear to ourselves that we were not writing a biography of Joseph Smith, not a biography of Brigham Young; we were writing a history of the LDS Church and the Mormon people. So all kinds of things that would be relevant for purposes of biography we excluded. There's also the question of how much space you spend on a subject once you decide to include it. The Mountain Meadows Massacre would be an example of this. We never for one moment contemplated excluding the Mountain Meadows Massacre from our history. That would be unthinkable. But to critics who think we should have devoted a whole chapter to the event, we simply say that our best judgment of the relative importance it had is reflected in the amount of space we devoted to it. We treated it as a phase of the Utah War. We don't whitewash it, we don't try to be apologetic, but we do make a judgment of proportion.

Persons with different specialties have intimated that we should have devoted much more space to this or that. For example, someone thought we should have devoted more space to Negro slavery in pioneer Utah. This was a person who had done some specific research on that. Well, the number of Negro slaves in pioneer Utah can be counted on the fingers of two hands, just about. We did devote a chapter to Native Americans. Their importance to the Church in Utah was such that we thought that a whole chapter was needed.

SUNSTONE: Why did you conclude with Richard Poll's symbolic Iron Rod and Liahona Mormons analogy?

ARRINGTON: We wanted people to understand that "in my Father's house are many mansions." Faithful and active Latter-day Saints include both intellectuals and non-intellectuals, liberals as well as conservatives. There are members of many categories in the Church, all believers and doers.

SUNSTONE: How would you each describe the relationship between faith and history?

ARRINGTON: I have never felt any conflict between maintaining my faith and writing historical truth. If one sticks to historical truth that shouldn't damage his faith in any way. The Lord doesn't require us to believe anything

that's untrue. My long interest in Mormon history (I've been working in it for 33 years) has only served to build my testimony of the gospel and I find the same thing happening to other Latter-day Saint historians as well. This does not mean that one doesn't have to make difficult judgments on relevancy. If a historian has access to private or confidential information, does he have the right to reveal it publicly? If he knows certain things because of an ecclesiastical position he has held, or if he's examined letters that were written to the First Presidency as personal confessions, does he have the right to reveal the information it contains? I don't believe he does. One must respect the rights of privacy—the rights of confidentiality.

BITTON: What's potentially damaging or challenging to faith depends entirely, I think, on one's expectations, and not necessarily history. Any kind of experience can be shattering to faith if the expectation is such that one is not prepared for the experience. A person can join the Church with a totally unrealistic mind picture of what it means to be a Mormon or to be in a Mormon ward. To go into a real Mormon ward where there are children crying and where there are uninformed comments made in Sunday School classes can be damaging to that person's faith. This is not just an imaginary example. A person can be converted to the Church in a distant part of the globe and have great pictures of Salt Lake City, the temple looming large in the center of the city. Here we have our home teaching in nice little blocks and we all go to church on Sunday, they believe. It won't take very many hours or days before the reality of experiencing Salt Lake City can be devastating to a person with those expectations. The problem is not the religion; the problem is the incongruity between the expectation and the reality.

History is similar. One moves into the land of history, so to speak, and finds shattering incongruities which can be devastating to faith. But the problem is with the expectation, not with the history. One of the jobs of the historians and of educators in the Church, who teach people growing up in the Church and people coming into the Church, is to try to see to it that expectations are realistic. The Lord does not expect us to believe lies. We believe in being honest and true, as well as chaste and benevolent. My experience, like that of Leonard, has not been one of having my faith destroyed. I think my faith has changed and deepened and become richer and more consistent with the complexity of human experience. This is what the Lord wants me to do in life—to grow and develop in this way. Perhaps the only answer to a question about faith and history is to say that we are examples of people who know a fair amount about Mormon history and still have strong testimonies of the gospel.