

IN MEMORIAM

LEONARD JAMES ARRINGTON

By Dean L. May

I N 1974, while updating Preston Nibley's *Presidents of the Church*, Leonard Arrington asked me to work on several of the biographies. The research brought me to some of Leonard's papers, including a response from then-Apostle Ezra Taft Benson to his 1951 essay, "Zion's Board of Trade, A Third United Order." The letter began, "Dear Brother Errington, Thank you for the copy of Zion's Port of Trade, one-third United Order."

I've always wondered whether Elder Benson had a biting wit or a bungling secretary. If wit, the letter says much. In the early 1950s, Americans defined themselves as not-communists. For many, whatever communists were thought to be *for*, we were against. Since communists advocated communal responsibility and condemned selfish individualism of capitalistic societies, Church leaders downplayed the LDS communitarian past, which in the nineteenth century had caused some to see Mormons as among America's more successful communistic societies.¹

If Elder Benson's pun on "Arrington" intentionally suggested Leonard had erred, many others thought the work penetrated the clear, bright air of historical truth. At Harvard in the mid-1960s, a select library contained the books graduate history students had to master for their exams. Two connected directly with Mormonism: Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* and Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom*. Arrington's work resonated with me, drew my interest toward Utah history, and ultimately transformed my life and career.



Much has been written about *Great Basin Kingdom*, Leonard Arrington's magnum opus, in print for forty-one years and moving toward a highly likely golden anniversary.² It connected Mormon activities to larger social and economic contexts and set a high scholarly standard. But few Mormons realize its place in American and western history. The

central theme of these persuasive essays woven into so enduring a book is that one chief peculiarity of this people in the West is their commitment to cooperation and harmony—virtues held superior to individualism and competition and antithetical to the spirit of liberal capitalism. This *leitmotif* set Arrington's work at odds with what Elder Benson thought about Mormons and their place in U.S. society.³ So perhaps the apostle truly did see Leonard as Brother Errington.

Equally important, the book portrays the Mormons as strangers in a strange land, a people seeking a cooperative commonwealth in the midst of the American West, a region of rugged individualism, of often brutal competition for land, water, and space. The Mormons proclaimed tradition, civility, cooperation, and harmony—the antithesis of what Americans and their historians understood and wanted to believe about the West.

There are multiple ironies about the place of *Great Basin Kingdom* and what some see as its sequel, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons*,⁴ have in the historical literature of the United States and the West. *Great Basin Kingdom* appeared when the "consensus historians" reigned

and taught that American society was characterized, despite the diverse origins of its population, by a remarkable unity of purpose and conformity of values. Subsequent historians have condemned that view as facile and exclusive because it ignored the conflict, diversity, and complexity of the American past and present.

At first blush, Arrington's work might seem to have arisen from his day's prevailing paradigm. The agreed-upon consensus of 1950s historians was that American society was wholly and uniquely infused with liberalism, an argument compellingly made in Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America*.⁵ But Arrington was actually countering the conventional scholarly wisdom; he provided to a generation of scholars evidence that in the West, there were dissenters and alternatives to the liberal, Hartzian model.

The Mormons, Arrington argued, carved out in the Far West a haven of cooperation, unity, and order. Their cooperatives, United Orders, and Boards of Trade ran contrary to free markets and other fundamental tenets of liberal capitalism. Their society embraced a vast expanse of the West, and its very existence, manifested in *Great Basin Kingdom*, suggested major faults in the consensus Hartz and others claimed to be the bedrock of America.

In the 1980s and '90s, Donald Worster, Richard White, Patricia Limerick, and others offered a "new" western history that affirmed the Hartzian model but condemned, rather than celebrated, the consequences of Anglo-Europeans acting under it. In their eyes, liberal capitalism was the core of a dominant American culture that conquered, exploited, and ravished the West. Certainly, that insight was new to them and many others. But by emphasizing the Mormon alternative, Arrington had long insisted that neither a liberal consensus nor an exploitive rapaciousness were adequate to fully explain the West.

Thus, for nearly half a century, *Great Basin Kingdom* has vexed the changing modes of understanding the West. Its importance has been amplified by the expansion of Mormons beyond their Intermountain corridor, making it ever more difficult to see them as an aberration irrelevant to understanding the American West. As Paul Simon long ago reminded, "A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."⁶ Historians and other observers still do not really see the Mormons as part of the West.

More commonly, however, historians do not see Mormons at all. Many Mormon farm boys, working the back-country packing trade in southern Utah have had to learn to wear Stetson hats and cowboy boots, to chew and spit and swear in order to meet the expectations of their clients. The Mormons are not what Americans want to see when they think of the wild West, so they render them invisible. Even now, no history of the United States nor of the American West fully incorporates the Mormon experience and its relevance to understanding of the broader

American experience. Leonard Arrington's work as scholar and mentor assures that that lapse will not always be the case.

HERE is much more to Leonard James Arrington, however, than *Great Basin Kingdom*. He grew up on a farm in Twin Falls, Idaho, where his family was part of a small, Mormon minority. In 1929, at age twelve, for a Sunday School class, he researched his family history, and that fascination with families and their histories never left him. Throughout his life, he regularly amazed friends and colleagues with his remarkable mastery of the family connections of virtually the whole founding Mormon population.

In Twin Falls of the 1930s, most youth became farmers. With characteristic zeal, young Leonard specialized in poultry, and became Idaho state president then national vice president of the Future Farmers of America. Remembering that, he proudly put the chicken on his family crest, and friends bestowed him endlessly with chicken neckties, dishes, and statuettes. Much to the consternation of some Salt Lake neighbors, a six-foot-high plastic rooster adorned his front yard until it fell afoul of high school pranksters.

Leonard entered the University of Idaho with a scholarship from the National Youth Administration. He found agriculture sterile and technical and soon switched to economics, with minors in political science, history, and literature. A graduate scholarship in economics took him to the University of North Carolina, where he met and married Grace Fort before he was drafted into service in World War II. Their marriage lasted until Grace died in March 1982. In November 1983, he married Harriet Horne, who survived his death. In both marriages, he was blessed with supportive spouses who were exceptionally able and accomplished.

After nearly three years in North Africa and Italy, Leonard took a faculty position at Utah State University in Logan while he completed his doctoral degree, which North Carolina awarded in 1952. During this period, he had an epiphany,

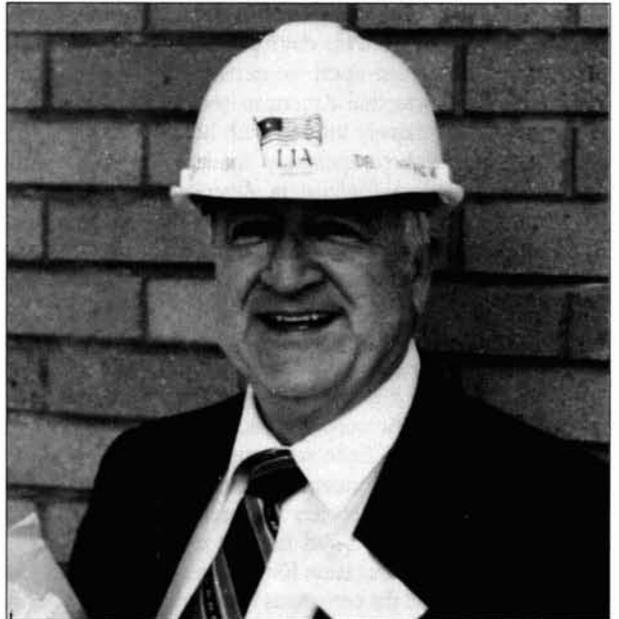
a meaningful moment of insight and connectedness had come to me that helped me to see that my research efforts were compatible with the divine restoration of the church. . . . In an electrifying moment, the lines and beliefs of nineteenth-century Mormons had a special meaning; they were inspiring—part of the eternal plan—and it was my pleasure to understand and write about their story. . . .

Regardless of frustrations and obstacles that came to me in the years that followed, I knew that God expected me to carry out a research program of his peoples' history and to make available that material to others.⁷

Encouraged by William Mulder, editor of *Western Humanities Review*, Leonard began publishing in professional journals in 1951, and his first book, *Great Basin Kingdom* (Harvard University Press), appeared in 1958. He was most proud of his 1962 USU Faculty Honor Lecture, *The Price of Prejudice: The Japanese-American Relocation Center at Topaz, Utah, during World War II*. That says a lot about his profound moral and human values. His was the first scholarly work on that shameful product of the panic and war mentality that arose after Pearl Harbor, in which more than a hundred thousand resident aliens and U.S. citizens of Japanese descent were removed from their West Coast homes to inland relocation camps. Leonard's humanness and compassion continued throughout his career. He is often praised for advocating women's history, but he encouraged research on many long-ignored groups and episodes in the Mormon and U.S. past.

This breadth of interest and empathetic wish to give place to the forgotten and unknown was manifested in his encouragement of other scholars, especially those beginning their careers. He was mentor to many. I was one of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of young, diffident researchers who sought out this living icon whose dozens of books and articles traversed nearly the whole terrain of Mormon studies. He always made time for us, and we always left buoyed, encouraged, and stimulated. He helped many in material ways—writing letters, seeking grants, or retaining them to assist his research. Rarely does an academic create so wide a wake.

If *Great Basin Kingdom* was his scholarly apex, his tenure as Church Historian crowned his mentoring. When Apostle/Church Historian Joseph Fielding Smith became prophet in January 1970, Apostle Howard W. Hunter became Church Historian and began considering the potential of "The Historian's Office." In 1972, he reorganized the office, and the First Presidency called Leonard to be Church Historian—the only time a professional scholar and lay Church member had filled the position. University of Utah history professor Davis Bitton and Brigham Young University history professor James B. Allen were called to assist in directing the History Division, which soon housed a stable of scholars charged with honest, professional



Leonard Arrington, the former chicken farmer, and Harriet with the chicken that adorned their yard for years. After a particularly rough year for Mormon historians, Leonard was awarded a hard hat by the Mormon History Association.

research and writing in Church history.

Arrington, Bitton, and Allen—the Church history “presidency” — enlisted promising, faithful, young scholars. They inaugurated a new, multi-volume Church history as well as focused, Mormon history “task papers.” They commissioned studies of women, Blacks, priesthood organization, communalism, and a myriad of needed research topics, including publishing papers relating to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and the first scholarly biography of Brigham Young based on complete access to his voluminous papers. They had transcribed and indexed heretofore inaccessible documents, and the Church’s archives, the motherlode of Mormon history, became more accessible to all scholars.

Following Leonard’s lead, the staff was generous and encouraging to all who came, and the History Division became a mecca for highly educated, creative Latter-day Saints. Many welcomed it as a haven where optimism, encouragement, counsel, knowledge, and sources were shared. Some revenues from division-related publications went to the Mormon History Trust Fund, whose directors aided research of younger scholars around the world. This was a heady time, and Leonard not only set the pace, for many he was also the symbol of the “New Mormon History.” But the Arrington spring was not to endure.

IN late 1982, five years after I had left for University of Utah, I returned to the large, open room on the second floor of the Historical Department where the History

Division researchers had once worked. The entire division had just been moved to Provo, Utah—miles from the archives. The room was quiet, vacant. Desks and credenzas seemed scattered; the walls were bare of their historical photographs and paintings. Books and papers were strewn about the floor. I sat and wept for the loss of the energy, honesty, goodness, and love I had known while in the company of those men and women.

Although gone from there, the staff was creating the new, Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University, with Leonard as its founding director. In his autobiography, he details the circumstances of the “move south.” My impression is that some Church leaders were concerned that members and others might take publications by division staff as official Church statements; that not all would see them as writings shaped by academic standards and subject to challenge, refutation, and refinement by future scholars. Some publications had raised eyebrows, including passages in *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* about “experiments” in communal living and in *Building the City of God* about failed Mormon pioneer communal efforts. These concerns were heightened by a fear that anti-Mormons had used the archives to acquire and publish documents out of context to harm members’ faith.

Apparently motivated by these concerns, Church leaders concluded to release Leonard as Church Historian and again have a general authority as Historian. The executive director

of the History Department was set apart as Church Historian—G. Homer Durham. Under Elder Durham, the decision was made to transfer the History Division to BYU’s academic setting where its academic publications would be identified with a university and not the official Church. Given the circumstances, this was wise and necessary. But it should have been possible to acknowledge Leonard’s remarkable work as Church Historian, to gratefully release him where he had been sustained, in general conference, and to retain his photograph in the pantheon of Church historians, from which it was removed for several years.

Moreover, the fellows of the Smith Institute (former history division staff) could have been given research space in the Church Office Building near the vital archives and still have been placed administratively at BYU. Leonard was clearly hurt and dispirited by the manner of the reorganization. Still, as always, he continued to encourage, to work, and to make the best of the new circumstance; he rarely spoke about it publicly. Even in his memoirs, he constructively emphasized the potential service of professional historians and downplayed the institutional conflicts and individual wrongs.

Many sensed a deliberate attempt at closure and conciliation when President Gordon B. Hinckley, now Prophet, spoke at Leonard’s funeral. Afterward, as he was getting in his car, President Hinckley saw the casket being brought to the hearse. With almost no one else around, the Church president got out of

the car and stood tall, alone, in a gesture of honor and respect, until the hearse drove away. Then, during the April 1999 General Conference when the list was read of prominent Latter-day Saints who had died the previous year, Leonard Arrington was described as former "Historian of the Church."

THE History Division was not the only history organization Leonard had presided over. He had been a founder and president of both the Western History Association and the Mormon History Association and a president of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association. After he retired from the Smith Institute at age seventy, he continued to be a prolific scholar and writer. When he died on Thursday, 11 February 1999, he had a book at press, and he was preparing a paper on the Mormons and the Gold Rush.

Despite his prominence in American history and his commanding position in Mormon studies, we must acknowledge that some did not see Leonard as perfect in all things. As with all highly accomplished people, he had faults, often arising from the same qualities that led to his greatest achievements. There were those who felt he was too prone to measure scholarly accomplishment by volume of output. I smiled at his implicit nudge, when, in our last telephone conversation, he asked me what I was working on now. He, of course, had just completed what would prove to be his last major work, the yet-to-appear biography of W. W. Clyde, the Springville, Utah, contractor and builder. And he had published several books since my last book, *Three Frontiers: Family, Land, and Society in the American West, 1850-1900*, had appeared in 1994.

Some felt his compulsion toward abundant production at times did not serve him well. His amazingly high productivity was first and foremost a consequence of hard work—the unstinting personal dedication he brought to his research and writing. Even allowing for that, such a level of output, as he understood, was possible only because he often collaborated with or retained others who contributed to studies ultimately published under his name as principal author.

Leonard's academic training was in the social sciences, where it is not only acceptable, but conventional, for well-known scholars to appear as first author in publications of work done with or by students and collaborators. In doing so, he promoted and enhanced the careers of others, using his name and prestige to give lesser-known scholars opportunity for research and writing they might otherwise not

have had. Moreover, during his years as Church Historian, Leonard felt pressure to justify the existence of his History Division to Church authorities, a justification he centered on productivity. I suspect nearly all who worked with Leonard and were credited as co-author or as having "assisted" him with work published in his name came, as did I, to understand the mutual benefits of the collaboration and are grateful to have had that opportunity.

In such collaborations, Leonard was not always the critic he might have been. He was encouraging and supportive, again, a quality consistent with his mentoring spirit. But there were times when I wished he had been more critical of work I did with him, when I hoped he would ferret out my facile logic or internal contradictions. He had too generous a spirit to find it easy to tell us when we were not up to snuff. That generous spirit also led him to avoid reviewing for professional journals studies that he felt he could not review positively.

Recently, I was asked who might be Leonard's successor in Mormon history. I replied "No one." Leonard was unique in his gifts—his playful spirit, and patented, down-home lack of pretension; his vast knowledge of the genealogy of Mormonism; his perceptive understanding of the relationship between the economic and spiritual underpinnings of the restored Kingdom of God; his unwavering faith; his wholly communal sharing of his remarkable personal knowledge (and even his notes and files from previous or projected studies); and his effervescent optimism, encouragement, and mentoring. He was a giving and caring father and a facilitator of a generation of writers, scholars, and history buffs; and withal, brilliant. He was unique. No one can take his place, and we shall never see the likes of him again. Even now, months after he's gone, I reach from time to time for my phone to call and ask him to help me with one problem or another, and then I realize he will not answer. We are on our own.



NOTES

1. Charles Nordhoff, *The Communist Societies of the United States* (1875; reprinted, New York: Hillary House Publishers, Ltd., 1961).
2. *Great Basin Kingdom Revisited: Contemporary Perspectives*, Thomas G. Alexander, ed. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1991).
3. Apostle Benson, ironically, had spent much of his early life helping farmers to counter marketplace and corporate inequities through the forming of cooperatives.
4. Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976; 2nd edition, Champagne and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
5. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: an interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).
6. Paul Simon, "The Boxer," 1969; on *Simon and Garfunkel's Greatest Hits* (New York: CBS, Inc., 1972).
7. Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 28-29.
8. A full description and citation of the various publications of the History Division is in *Adventures of a Church Historian*.
9. Reportedly, President Benson was especially unhappy with the use of "experiment" in references to the United Order—initiated by revelation, it could hardly have been an experiment. Apparently, others were bothered that the book documented the failure of many Mormons to live the United Order.



MISE EN SCENE

The tree is half dead
in which they play,
the sparrows, each
in its turn slooping
off, venturing away.
Yet they might be
tethered, so sure
is their returning,
desire tracing an arc
as inescapable as their
curve of wing, the set
of their eye—given,
as they are given
one another, as the whole
prospect is given,
retina and light, rough
bark for their homing,
a tongue for their
minimal cry.

—PHILIP WHITE