

# LEONARD JAMES ARRINGTON: HIS LIFE AND WORK

DAVID J. WHITTAKER

THE APPEARANCE OF LEONARD J. ARRINGTON'S *Great Basin Kingdom* in October 1958 was an important event in Mormon historiography. Reviewers hailed it as "one of the most important books ever produced about the Mormons and Mormonism"; "a significant and definitive contribution"; "easily the most informative single volume yet published on the Mormons in Utah." Lewis Atherton in the *Economic History Review* wrote, "This book has the virtues of intensive research and mature deliberation." T. A. Larson in the *Annals of Wyoming*, described it as "a masterpiece" and further said that "the work is objective, analyzing church successes and failures with admirable impartiality." With hardly less admiration, Dale Morgan in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, wrote, "Few scholars working in the Mormon field have displayed an industry and energy comparable to that of Leonard J. Arrington . . . . As a descriptive work, *Great Basin Kingdom* is an immense accomplishment, and can be consulted with pleasure and profit." Leland H. Creer agreed, "it is probably the most definitive and provocative study on any phase of Utah or Mormon history published during the last three decades." In a prophetic note, W. J. McNiff wrote, "This book illustrates the fact that the mine of Mormon history has rich possibilities for an understanding of American life and beliefs."

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DAVID J. WHITTAKER, a Ph.D candidate in history at Brigham Young University, wishes to express his thanks to Leonard Arrington for access to the Cornwall biography, personal counsel, and for his assistance in making the attached bibliography complete. Thanks also to James B. Allen for suggestions on an earlier draft.

The work was a labor of love. Like his many other publications, it reflects his appreciation for his subject and his involvement with it, an involvement that preserves historical objectivity. Its enduring qualities and Arrington's academic career have paralleled the rise of a new generation of Mormon historians, which has in turn led to a renaissance of Mormon studies. This twenty-year anniversary, then, affords the opportunity to pay tribute to the man and his work—to a man who exemplifies the best in Mormon scholarship and Christian commitment.

### *EARLY YEARS*

Leonard James Arrington was born July 2, 1917 on a farm near Twin Falls, Idaho. Though few of his early experiences hinted that he would end up studying economic history, growing up in Idaho would later serve him well in the writing of Mormon and western history, for much of his work would derive from the rural, agrarian life of the Great Basin. Leonard was the third of eleven children, nine of whom lived to adulthood. His mother, Edna Corn from Indiana, and his father, Noah Arrington from Tennessee, lived for a time in Oklahoma. Noah Arrington was called to serve a mission for the Church after six of his children were born, and Leonard remembers that living without him was a turning point in their spiritual lives. His mission increased the family's church involvement and Leonard's economic responsibilities. He remembers attending stake conferences and being impressed with the sermons of such leaders as B. H. Roberts ("brilliant orator . . . although he always talked a long, long time"), Orson F. Whitney, Rulon S. Wells, Richard R. Lyman, J. Golden Kimball ("everyone kept on the edge of their seats waiting for a hell or a damn"), Melvin J. Ballard, Reed Smoot and David O. McKay ("so tall, so handsome, with such a big, infectious smile, and such interest in young people!").

Before and especially during the Depression years, young Leonard was able to add considerably to the family income by raising chickens, at which he became an expert. His interest in chickens led to active participation in the Future Farmers of America. He competed in state and local fairs, gaining confidence, leadership skills, and public speaking experience. He eventually served as the Idaho State President of the FFA and as national first vice president of the FFA. His membership on the Twin Falls High School debating team helped to develop his ability for logical presentation and smooth delivery. It also took him to various conventions outside the state.

Leonard grew up in a state that still exhibited strong anti-Mormon feelings, although he recalls being only slightly aware of his membership in a "minority" group.

Although his horizons were broadening, he remained a country boy at heart, loving the land and the people of his youth. A visit to the top of the Empire State Building in 1935 confirmed to his youthful mind that he was "exceedingly blessed to have been born on a farm." Sleeping under the stars during the summer reinforced his appreciation for his individuality and the goodness of the rural life. So strong were these feelings that when he graduated from high school in May 1935, he planned to earn a university degree in agriculture and return to work with his father on the family farm.

In September, 1935 Leonard became a freshman at the University of Idaho, and by the end of the year, he had changed his major from agriculture (because "it required too much chemistry") to economics. This change was so much to his liking that by his junior year he was working as an assistant to Professor Erwin Graue, who was, for several years, his mentor in economic theory. Dr. Graue "taught him to consider the personal drives behind the profit motive."

His college years brought intellectual crises. Leonard was puzzled by the conflicting theories of evolution, behaviorism and theodicy. Although he never fully answered the questions raised by these issues, he emerged with an open-minded faith tempered by the liberalism of George Tanner, director of the LDS Institute of Religion at Moscow. In Tanner, Leonard found a friend who listened to his questions and who counseled that the development of right attitudes was more important than quick answers.

After graduating with high honors in June 1939, he accepted a graduate teaching fellowship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he quickly adjusted to southern life and the pleasures of teaching. He remembers that his first year introduced him to the Southern Agrarians and their regional and distributist approach to social problems.

During his second year at Chapel Hill (1940-41), Leonard was so thoroughly introduced to Keynesian economics that he strongly considered doing a dissertation on Keynes' precursor, Thomas Robert Malthus. Before he could carry out this plan, he accepted an instructor's position at North Carolina State College, in Raleigh, where he was allowed to continue taking classes in his minor—rural sociology. He also agreed to co-author a much-needed text on "the new economics in the field of agriculture economics," but, although he wrote fifteen chapters, the book was never published. As part of this study, he was introduced to the concept of regionalism by his new mentor C. Horace Hamilton, who pointed out that an interdisciplinary approach would open up new ways of looking at American history.

He reports that during this time he discovered Mormonism as much more than a theology and an ethical system. While reading T. Lynn Smith's *The Sociology of Rural Life*, he became fascinated with the "secular aspects of Mormon culture." He wrote,

I immediately canvassed other works on rural sociology and found several additional references to the Mormons. I hunted through other monographs on the American scene—on American history, politics, economics, and literature—and discovered to my surprise and delight that there existed a whole literature on the "secular" aspects of Mormon culture.

This discovery coincided with his growing interest in the scholarly dimensions of the Church, an interest that he would later describe as leading to his "real conversion to Mormonism."

His renewed interest in his own religion led him to seek out other Latter-day Saints in the area. These were few, but their number was growing, and it was through this group that he was introduced to his future wife, Grace Fort. Grace had been reading the *Reader's Digest* condensation of Vardis Fisher's *Children of*

*God*, and had formed many questions to ask of a "real Mormon." These discussions led to their courtship, and Grace, a Presbyterian, would later join the Mormon Church.

### *THE WAR AND AFTER*

Leonard had tried to enlist in the Army as an officer, but his height (just under the minimum 5 feet 6 inches) and his asthma prevented his entry. He arranged a leave of absence from North Carolina State and joined the war effort as a civilian in the Office of Price Administration. Finally, in March 1943, he was drafted and sent to Fort Bragg for boot camp. It was then that he and Grace were married, ending a courtship of eighteen months. By the time he was shipped off to North Africa, in July of 1943, his experiences had convinced him that he would settle his family in the West. He wrote Grace, "The best souvenir I'll have of my stay in the South will be you."

In North Africa he spent the first eighteen months "processing" Italian prisoners of war after which he was appointed "Allied Controller of the Central Institute of Statistics in Rome." Eight months in Rome led to assignment with the Committee for Price Control in Milan, where he joined in the invasion of northern Italy. Finally, after 33 months overseas, he was reunited with Grace on January 4, 1946. He later estimated that their separation had produced over 1000 letters.

While in Italy, Leonard had written to John A. Widtsoe asking for suggestions for a dissertation on some phase of Mormon economic history. Widtsoe had replied:

If you desire to write a thesis dealing with some phase of the economics of the Latter-day Saint Church, you have a field at your command.

Since Leonard had not yet narrowed his interests, Widtsoe offered several suggestions, even promising personal help:

After you make up your mind as to one or two themes, it might be well to write me again, and I will be glad to present them to the Authorities of the Church for their inspection and willingness to give the assistance you need, by providing material in the archives of the Church.

His former teacher, Milton Heath, continued to encourage him to do for the West what scholars were then doing for the South through a regional approach. Finally, he was able to obtain approval for a study called "The Economic Aspects of the Mormon Church Security Program." Knowing that several years of work lay ahead, he accepted a teaching position at Utah State Agricultural College in Logan, Utah.

The Arringtons saw Cache Valley for the first time in June 1946. After a brief glimpse, both said, "This is our valley." Many years later, when they moved to Salt Lake City, they announced that their "hearts had remained in Logan." Grace arrived in Utah a Presbyterian, but on September 15, 1946, Leonard's father baptized her into Logan's Tenth Ward.

Shortly after the Arringtons settled in their new home, John A. Widtsoe finally convinced Leonard that to give unity to his project, he should limit his topic but that he should also broaden his study to include the entire economic

contributions of the Mormons in the West. Widtsoe gave good advice on obtaining material from the church archives:

First, he said, go in and ask to see published books. Read those a few days. Then ask for theses and dissertations. Read those a few days. Then ask for the Journal History. Use that for a period. And when you're through with that, ask for specific documents you need. This way you will build up their confidence in you, they will see you as a serious scholar, and they will give you about everything you want to use. Like the proverbial camel, you will stick your head in the tent, gradually move farther in, and ultimately carry the whole tent away with you.

At that time the archives were supervised by Church Historian Joseph Fielding Smith and Assistant Church Historian A. William Lund. Apostle Smith's approach to church history had been directed by his own father: "The more you say to [critics of the Church] the more opportunity is given them for criticism and faultfinding." Brother Lund discouraged Leonard's research. He seemed to think of the historian's office as a mere repository of records, rather than a research department. But Leonard finally obtained Joseph Fielding Smith's permission to spend his summers from 1946 to 1951 in the archives.

Following the advice of Apostle Widtsoe, he worked from printed works to documents, and then through the Journal History. By his fourth summer he was using manuscript material. He recalls that no document was ever denied him.

Thus began the eleven-year project that became, in 1958, *Great Basin Kingdom*.

### *GREAT BASIN KINGDOM*

In 1951, Leonard was able to begin publishing his findings in articles, some of which were later included in his dissertation. In 1952, under the title "Mormon Economic Policies and their Implementation on the Western Frontier, 1847-1900" the dissertation was submitted. Numerous other articles followed from it, all of them supporting his underlying ambition: to convince church members that their history is waiting to be discovered among a wealth of sources and that only a systematic study can make the past come alive. He was discovering aspects of Mormon history that no one else had even suspected.

During this time he shared research and ideas with a group of friends and associates he described as a "loyal community of scholars." These included S. George Ellsworth, Milton R. Merrill, Wendell Rich, Eugene Campbell, Richard Poll, Philip Taylor, Merle Wells, T. Edgar Lyon, Stan Cazier, Gaylon Caldwell and others. "We were confident," he recalls, "that we were doing a service for the Church, and I think we all believe that subsequent events have proved our work to have been useful and illuminating."

During this period, Leonard had become a father. In 1948 James Wesley was born, a year before Grace and Leonard had traveled to Chapel Hill to prepare for the Ph.D. exams. In Logan, just before he finished his dissertation, Carl Wayne was born (September 1951).

Leonard defended his dissertation in 1952 before a committee that not only approved it, but recommended it for publication. For the next two years he worked at revising the 600 page work, finally submitting it to the Committee on

Research in Economic History of the Economic History Association. The two main readers for the Committee, Herbert Heaton and Lewis Atherton, responded favorably and made suggestions for improvement. Leonard began further revisions then, but he found little time and energy for perfecting the product. Church assignments and professional responsibilities (he was still on the faculty at Utah State), and the articles he was publishing took up most of his time. But his reputation for excellence as a scholar and as a writer was reaching an ever-widening circle of western historians.

Reflecting this recognition, the Utah State University Research Council granted him funds enough to allow him to teach only half time, thus freeing him for writing, some of which went into a centennial history of Cache Valley.

All of his activities were exciting and important, but he had not yet finished his book. Finally, in 1956, he received a six-month grant from the Huntington Library and another six-month grant from the Department of Economics at Yale University. He soon became so involved in editing projects at Huntington, that his grant there was extended and his Yale grant postponed.

The year in Southern California was very rewarding. The “scholars paradise” he found at Huntington was more than he had hoped for. Its reference library in western history, the miscellaneous Mormon collections, and the Dale Morgan index of Mormon materials were just the items he needed. Besides the creative environment, his stay at the Huntington also afforded him a new circle of acquaintances. His own thinking about Mormon and western history, and especially about Mormon historiography was influenced during this period by scholars like Paul W. Gates, Austin and Alta Fife, and Allan Nevins. He specifically began to broaden his conceptual base for the study of Mormon history:

We are still provincial and narrow—Salt Lake centered—in many ways. Our faith rests to a large extent upon parents, grandparents, etc., and the Utah experience. How much broader our concepts if we could see our history in terms of presenting the gospel in far-off Singapore, Cape Town, Hong Kong, and Jutland!

He considered making a proposal for a scholarly periodical which would be devoted to Mormon topics, and when he returned to Utah, was asked by Clinton F. Larson to submit material to the proposed *Wasatch Review*. This finally appeared as *Brigham Young University Studies* with Leonard as an early supporter.

By May 1957 he had completed the manuscript for *Great Basin Kingdom*. He sent a copy to George Ellsworth at Logan who thoroughly reviewed the work. Ellsworth’s comments were important not only as a scholar, but also as a believer. Leonard was anxious to know how his book would be received by the general membership and by the leaders of the Church. Ellsworth did suggest some minor changes, but gave the work his approval, recognizing that it would be difficult to please both scholars and laymen, but feeling Leonard’s book to be objective and fair. The book combined the ideals of the Mormons with their actual achievements. In the preface, Leonard defended his “naturalistic treatment” of Mormon history:

The true essence of God’s revealed will, if such it be, cannot be apprehended without an understanding of the conditions surrounding the prophetic

vision, and the symbolism and verbiage in which it is couched. Surely God does not reveal His will except to those prepared, by intellectual and social experience and by spiritual insight and imagination, to grasp and convey it. A naturalistic discussion of "the people and the times" and of the mind and experience of Latter-day prophets is therefore a perfectly valid aspect of religious history, and, indeed, makes more plausible the truths they attempted to convey. While the discussion of naturalistic causes of revelation does not preclude its claim to be revealed or inspired of God, in practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish what is objectively "revealed" from what is subjectively "contributed" by those receiving the revelation.

In this way he sought to account for the spiritual and the temporal dimensions of Mormonism by dealing with its natural expressions as revealed through history. While the book's main focus was institutional, it included social and cultural history as well. This approach has since become the hallmark of a new generation of Mormon historians.

After making many changes in the manuscript, Leonard sent it to the Committee on Research in Economic History, which arranged to publish it with Harvard University Press. In the spring of 1958, the galleys were returned, and he spent much of that summer preparing an index and searching for appropriate photographs. The book finally appeared in October of that year, but Leonard did not actually see a copy of it until December. He had been sent to Italy as a Fulbright Professor of American Economics at the University of Genoa. He was accompanied by his family, which by then included a daughter, Susan Grace, born in 1954.

After Leonard's return to America, it became obvious that *Great Basin Kingdom* would be only a beginning. During his teaching of economic history, he had noted the dearth of textbook treatment of the Mormons, but his acquaintance with non-Mormon scholars had convinced him that this neglect was not intentional on their part. He concluded that the sparse coverage was due not to prejudice on the part of non-Mormon scholars, but to the lack of good scholarly monographs written by Mormons themselves. Utah history had always been studied as "family history" in a way that seemed to encourage a narrow elitism in which Mormon history was considered in isolation from the rest of American history. For the next thirteen years, Leonard would lead and direct studies which would serve to broaden this approach and to correct it. He explained the significance of Mormon history:

First, [as] one of the few societies dominated by religious sentiments and managed by religious leaders, Mormonism had something to say about the relation of religious values to social development and of cooperative activity to democracy. Second, it illustrated the problems of settling a mountainous, semi-arid region. . . . Third, Utah was a model case study of how a region can develop primarily with its own capital. Fourth, Utah's institutions were distinct from the laissez-faire capitalism which predominated in nineteenth-century America, yet they were a capsule version of older American ideals of piety, a sense of destiny, and a dream of creating a new society—a kingdom of God. Fifth, and the best part about Utah history, was its accessibility; materials abounded—if historians could get to them.



**Leonard James Arrington**



The publication of *Great Basin Kingdom* provided the impetus for the "historical entrepreneurship" which has continued to this day. A summer grant from the USU Research Council, renewed for thirteen summers, gave support for large and small projects which he shared with a variety of graduate students and colleagues. His voluminous publication schedule since then can be partially explained by this prodigious team effort.

Early projects centered on institutional histories. These included studies of Utah's defense industry, the economy of the Wasatch Front, commercial mining in Utah, major federal irrigation projects and a study of the Utah and Idaho Sugar Company. These monographs and articles led him further into "the intellectual, social, and institutional history of Mormonism."

His growing contributions were recognized by Walter Prescott Webb, who in 1963 invited Leonard to give two TV lectures on the Mormons at the University of Texas. This so increased his demand as a public speaker that he found himself addressing a variety of groups on so many different topics that he was able to call upon his earlier experiences as a debator and teacher.

Throughout this period Leonard and his colleagues had discussed the need for a professional Mormon studies organization. Then, during the 1965 meeting of the Utah Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, Leonard was chosen to head up a temporary organization. Later in the year, during the meetings of the American Historical Association in San Francisco, the Mormon History Association, was organized, with Leonard as its first president. They also voted to publish a journal, to be tentatively titled *LDS History*. Plans for the journal were shelved, however, when it was learned that an independent journal called *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* had been founded at Stanford. The editors had already asked Leonard to serve as an advisory editor; so he promised that MHA members would submit essays on Mormon history to *Dialogue*. The Fall 1966 issue of the new journal was, therefore, devoted to the papers of the fledgling organization.

After his return to USU as professor of Economics in 1967, he joined the Western History Association. As vice-president and then as president, he saw the need for an official journal, and so teamed with George Ellsworth, professor of history at USU, to found the *Western Historical Quarterly*. He served as its first editor and then as its co-editor until 1972. During these same years, he served as the president of the Agricultural History Association, at the same time revising his biography of William Spry, began a history of the First Security Bank, and accepted an invitation to author a biography of Charles C. Rich.

#### CHURCH HISTORIAN

It was during the school year 1966-67 that Leonard was asked to substitute for John Caughey at UCLA. Caughey had made UCLA a center for Western American studies, and to stand in for him was a high honor. It was at UCLA that Leonard was introduced to Western literature by his assigned graduate assistant, John Haupt. They have since coauthored several important essays, and Leonard has continued to study the literary and historical preceptions of the Mormons.

While still at UCLA, Leonard had been invited by the Alfred Knopf Publishing Company of New York to write a one-volume history of the Mormon Church. Before accepting the offer, he wrote to President N. Eldon Tanner of the First

Presidency to ask for access to the church archives to prepare such a volume. When President Tanner assured him that the First Presidency had cleared the project, Leonard became the first professional historian in history to be granted complete and unrestricted use of the materials in the church archives. This paved the way for the phone call he received from President Tanner and the personal interview that followed in 1972, calling him to be church historian. Following three decades of preparation, the call represented a vote of confidence from church leaders and a new era in Mormon history. Leonard was the first church historian who was not a general authority and who was professionally trained.

As church historian, Leonard has initiated several important on-going projects: A sixteen-volume sesquicentennial history of the Mormons, each volume to be written by a professional historian; a heritage series of important church documents; two single-volume histories of the Church, one comprehensive, the other interpretative; assistance to archivists in guides and registers to the Church's rich collections; and scores of articles and monographs on all phases of church history.

His heavy administrative responsibilities have greatly increased his role as "historical entrepreneur." He writes:

While I am listed as the author of each of [these] publications, they really represent the research and writing skills of a large number of undergraduates, graduate students, and colleagues who contributed their time and expertise in return for compensation out of project grant funds. It would not be possible to mention all of their names here, but they are credited in the prefaces of these publications. These books represent an attempt to demonstrate that bright students can get good experience and training in research and writing by working under a historian director—and they can produce a creditable product.

Many other projects are on the way, including a biography of Brigham Young.

### CONCLUSION

In an address to *Dialogue's* Board of Editors in April 1968, Leonard Arrington surveyed the history of Mormon historical writing and described the "biases" pervading it. The biases were "the theological marionette bias"; "the male bias"; "the solid achievement bias"; "the centrifugal bias"; and "the unanimity bias". His attempts to correct the "male bias" are seen in his essays on women in Mormon history. He has devoted his life to correcting many of those biases, at the same time encouraging an honest and faithful retelling of the Mormon story. His own commitment to Mormonism and its central message has been strengthened by his work. As he told *Dialogue's* editors:

History can give meaning and purpose to life; it can help to formulate attitudes and policies for the future. As we prepare to celebrate the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Church in 1980, we must intensify our historical inquiries. May the images conveyed by our historians help us to continue the restoration of the Gospel of the Master, and may they assist us in building the Kingdom of God on earth.

SOURCES USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS ESSAY

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BIBLIOGRAPHY OF  
LEONARD JAMES ARRINGTON

Abbreviations

AH	Agricultural History
AHR	American Historical Review
AW	Arizona and the West
BYU Studies	Brigham Young University Studies
BHR	Business History Review
Dialogue	Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought
EHR	Economic History Review
Ensign	The Ensign (Salt Lake City)
Era	The Improvement Era (Salt Lake City)
HLQ	Huntington Library Quarterly
IY	Idaho Yesterdays
JAH	Journal of American History
JEH	Journal of Economic History
New Era	The New Era (Salt Lake City)
PHR	Pacific Historical Review
PNQ	Pacific Northwest Quarterly
PUASAL	Proceedings of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters
SUP News	Sons of Utah Pioneers News (Salt Lake City)
WHR	Western Humanities Review

1935

Article:

"Idaho Future Farmer Has Outstanding Project," *American Farm Youth*, I (April, 1935), 14.