

Ten Years in Camelot: A Personal Memoir

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BETWEEN 1972 AND 1982 I was part of the team of historians located in the Church Office Building under the direction of Leonard J. Arrington. It was a golden decade — a brief period of excitement and optimism — that someone has likened to Camelot. But it came to an end. This is not an attempt to write the complete history of those ten years, with their achievements and frustrations. To tell anything like the whole story would require a book. Others participating in the same activities — and certainly those looking on from the outside — would see them somewhat differently or at least would emphasize different things. I confidently predict that one or two dozen different oral or written versions of these events will make the rounds during the next few years. What I offer here is modest, partial, and tentative.

In 1972, at a time when reorganization was taking place in other Church departments as well, the old Church Historian's Office was reorganized as the Historical Department of the Church with Alvin R. Dyer as its managing director. There were to be three subdivisions: Library, Archives, and Historian's Division. Later a Curator's Division, or Arts and Sites, was added. Named to head the Historian's Division and given the title of Church Historian was Leonard J. Arrington. It was the first time a professional historian, a real historian, was named to this position, for the so-called Church Historian had traditionally been one of the apostles and functioned as an administrator.

What was behind this decision? Apparently it was part of a recognition in many of the Church departments that experts should take over specialized functions, leaving the General Authorities free to exercise their role as spiritual leaders and as traveling ambassadors rather than being bogged down in departmental responsibilities. One can guess, too, that at least some previous

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Church Historians recognized that they simply did not have the training or the credentials to be historians. They had administered as well as they could, given the many demands on their time, but here was an opportunity for a recognized historian to show what could be done.

Leonard Arrington brought to the assignment impressive qualifications. A professor of economics at Utah State University, Leonard had done a dissertation in economic history at the University of North Carolina, later published as *Great Basin Kingdom*. He had been by far the most productive scholar working the fields of Mormon history. He had good connections in the academic community and among historians in such associations as the Agricultural History Society and the Western History Association. He was well known to virtually every scholar or student of Mormon history and had been in the small group that had formed the Mormon History Association back in 1966. He was active in the Church and a former member in a Logan stake presidency. If the Church wanted a historian who could command respect, Leonard was clearly the man.

What was in the minds of those who selected Leonard? The commission was to carry out a program of research and writing on Latter-day Saint history. A first kind of writing project would be scholarly books and articles designed for historical journals, papers for presentation at meetings of professional associations, and monographs that would be so well-researched and authoritative that they would provide the scholarly basis for other scholarly and popular works. Second, part of the division's assignment was to communicate information about Church history to a broad audience, especially through such magazines as the *New Era* and the *Ensign*. There were some hopes in the specific mandate to write scholarly history that a little judicious pump-priming would yield positive long-range results—respect for the Church, its history, and leaders who were willing to support thorough scholarship.

Even before 1972 there had been hints of a thaw. Scholars had been granted access to materials for a variety of historical projects. In 1967 Leonard Arrington's contract with Knopf for a one-volume history had led him to make such a request, which had been granted. S. Lyman Tyler, of the University of Utah, had also been a door-opener in arranging to get a letter of clearance from President N. Eldon Tanner for about a dozen scholars engaged in similar projects during the 1960s. I was one of those fortunate enough to receive such a letter—now no longer operative but glued in my scrapbook as proof of an attitude that once prevailed. Elder Howard W. Hunter, Church Historian for a brief period after Joseph Fielding Smith became president of the Church, had been warm and communicative, even inviting a group of us historians in for rap sessions. The Church and its historians seemed to be getting along well; certainly the historians saw themselves as loyal members while at the same time thinking, and being led to believe, that they had much to contribute.

I have often heard it said that Leonard Arrington "opened up the archives." It is not that simple, as he would be the first to admit. The horror stories about the old days when Alvin Smith and Will Lund reluctantly opened

the gates of access, screened notes, and on occasion helped a generation or two of scholars are true enough in general, as many of us can testify; but the situation had never been without glimmers of hope. Even before the 1972 appointment, new procedures and a relaxing of the old rules were being worked out. The "professionalization" of the archives, including systematic accessioning, cataloging of the material, the preparation of registers, and clearly stated rules about use, had begun when Joseph Fielding Smith was still Church Historian. Leonard, a convenient symbol to many people, certainly approved of these changes, for they made it possible for us to say, in answer to recurrent questions, "The Church Archives is a professionally run institution. Its rules of access are not arbitrary." We were proud to be associated with such a place. But the process was larger than one man.

Newly called as Church Historian in early 1972, Leonard had the right to appoint his own assistants and to have a small staff. I remember the excitement with which I received the information, and the grateful wonderment at his choosing me for one of the two Assistant Church Historians. (It was agreed that instead of a single person holding that title, Jim Allen and I would be Assistant Church Historians of equal title, each retaining our positions at our respective universities, he at Brigham Young University, I at the University of Utah.) Leonard has said that he saw us both as loyal, hard working, and supportive. He also saw a certain complementarity in our temperaments and institutional ties. Within weeks, others — secretaries, research assistants, and other historians — were added to the new Historian's Division.

Elder Alvin R. Dyer was our managing director and our champion. A skilled businessman and management consultant, Elder Dyer took it as his role to "put wheels" under the new division — set up the procedures and guidelines that would enable us to function. Approving wholeheartedly as the various proposals were presented was the First Presidency. I remember attending a ward party just at the time my own appointment was being announced. President Harold B. Lee, who happened to be a member of the ward, generously made a point of coming up to me and saying, "Welcome aboard."

My sense of privacy and aversion to postured piety are sufficient that I will not include in this account the many examples of answers to prayer. But perhaps it would be appropriate to share the tender experience, after Jim's and my appointments had been approved, of kneeling with Leonard in a prayer of gratitude. We were historians, to be sure, but we were also committed Church members and saw the development as a wonderful opportunity to combine the two.

Since my own training was in European history, I often wondered at the chain of circumstances that brought me to serving on Leonard's team. From the time I started dabbling in Mormon history when I was on the faculty at the University of Texas, through the experience of becoming acquainted with Leonard Arrington when he came to deliver televised lectures there, and through my participation in the organizational meeting of the Mormon History Association in San Francisco, I seemed to be moving almost irresistibly

in the direction of Mormon history. When a position at the University of Utah opened up in 1966, my family and I moved to Salt Lake City. It all seemed to converge.

The small group of historians attached to the Historian's Division gradually expanded. This was not due to any imperialist design or empire-building complex. Some of the appointments were seen as temporary; others were part-time. The division at its largest included fourteen historians and three secretaries. It was perhaps natural that much attention be given to history in 1980, the sequicentennial year. It would not have been surprising to have the division then shrink a bit by natural attrition. But what happened was not expected.

In effect the Historian's Division was a research institute. It produced scholarly work on a broad front, published work in a variety of outlets, engaged in discussion and consultation with other historians and interested Church departments like education and the magazines. Projects were not picked at random. They were cleared in meetings with Elder Joseph Anderson, the managing director after Elder Dyer's incapacitating illness and death. Projects of major importance were also cleared by the two advisors to the Historical Department of the Church from the Council of the Twelve and by the First Presidency. Individuals either volunteered or were assigned to work on given projects.

Quite early the question arose as to whether the findings and publications of the History Division should be "correlated." I am here referring to the reading committee with power to require changes in the Church's printed materials or withhold approval to publish. It is frequently regarded as a board of censorship but, to put the best light on it, is a means by which the Church assures that materials for the various classes and programs do not duplicate or contradict, that they are accurate, and that they are doctrinally sound. The research and publication program of the History Division was not part of any system of classes, it was not presuming to make statements about the current doctrinal positions, and with respect to historical accuracy it seemed unlikely that untrained committee members would be in a position to second-guess those who had done the research. So as a reasonable procedure it was agreed by the General Authorities in charge that the "reading committee" of the Historical Department would be Leonard Arrington, Davis Bitton, and James Allen. I think it worked out rather well. Some of the specific matters in our publications that later turned out to be irritants did not do so because of historical or doctrinal inaccuracy.

The overwhelming majority of our findings posed no problem to faith. Of course we early discovered, if we had not already known, that our ancestors were human; but within that framework there was ample evidence of faith and devotion. One of my projects, begun prior to my appointment, was *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies*. With the help of Gordon Irving and others I continued to devote time to it almost every week. This was the real stuff of history, the nitty-gritty, showing people without pretense. The sterling qualities, the willingness to sacrifice for a cause greater than their own immedi-

ate interest, the conviction that the restoration was what it claimed to be, are inescapable in hundreds of these personal accounts. Other historians of the division had similar reactions. Their research, to judge from their comments, deepened and strengthened rather than weakened their devotion to the Church.

Of course what constitutes a problem depends entirely on the person. On one occasion Leonard and I were advised to leave a chapter on polygamy out of our book. We listened to such reactions, tried to be sensitive to different audiences, and made the best judgment we could. Polygamy is a large and important part of our history. Questions continue to be raised about it. Thinking that we could render service by producing a concise, low-key treatment of the subject, we proposed such a work to our superiors. They declined. Whether because of general press reaction or because of the presence of Fundamentalists still clinging to the practice, polygamy is such a sensitive subject that some General Authorities preferred to avoid mentioning it at all. Church magazines were not supposed to mention the practice. Books produced by Deseret Book studiously avoided it. It seemed like something of a modest breakthrough when my article on "Great-Grandfather's Family" was published by the *Ensign*; for the whole point of this article was to acknowledge that our ancestors had family problems as do we, and one of these, for them, was polygamy. We were not advocating its present practice, needless to say, but to acknowledge that it existed in the past and that sometimes it had been reasonably successful and other times a failure seemed consistent with the historical evidence.

The euphoria of being part of something like the Historical Division in 1972 is hard to convey. It seemed like a heaven-sent opportunity. Our leaders were behind us, liked us, encouraged us. We had available one of the great collections of primary source material in the world. There was much that needed to be done. In meetings between Leonard, Jim, and me, and in larger meetings with the whole staff, we discussed needed projects and thought in terms of priorities. Those that seemed strongest were carried by Leonard to meetings of the heads of the different divisions of the Historical Department and on up the ladder. Generally speaking, the responses were favorable and encouraging. There were fruitful meetings with *Ensign* editors Jay Todd and Lavina Fielding Anderson, who were anxious to carry good historical articles and sought our advice in mapping out possible topics.

At the very beginning, when our staff was still small, I made the suggestion that we should do something with oral history — the technique of tape-recording interviews with people who were involved in matters of historical importance. We persuaded Gary Shumway, a Church member and history professor at California State University (Fullerton) with oral-history experience, to spend some time with us in the summer and get our program launched. Thanks to his careful training and high standards, an oral history program was begun. Many of us participated in it by conducting interviews. One of the choice experiences of my life was nine sessions of interviewing T. Edgar Lyon, beloved Institute of Religion teacher and a historian himself. Bill Hartley was placed in charge of this program at first. Later it was placed under the direc-

tion of Gordon Irving, who continues to direct it. A generous donation from the descendants of James H. Moyle helped pay for processing and other expenses. With many hundreds of interviews now completed, including many by Charles Ursenbach in Canada and other volunteers, the James Moyle Oral History Program can stand comparison with the best in the country.

Another area that quickly became one of our acknowledged provinces was women's history. We employed Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, who had just been awarded a Ph.D. by the University of Utah, and one of the assignments she undertook was a life of Eliza R. Snow. Leonard had already shown himself open to recognizing the important role of our pioneer women which, taken together with the increasing prominence of women's studies and women's issues generally, made it natural to encourage work along this line by Maureen and others. Eventually Jill Mulvay Derr and Carol Cornwall Madsen joined the staff and made their own contributions. Other researchers on fellowships and volunteers added their bit. It is an understatement to say that the past ten years have raised our consciousness of the role of women in Mormon history.

In two respects the History Division was a refreshing change from the academic environment. For one thing, the emphasis on research and publication was much more intense. Although universities expect such work to go on, it is usually recognized that teaching and administration are equally important. At the Historical Department, research was the name of the game. Projects were underway, many of them moving ahead simultaneously. As we got together formally and informally, progress reports were given. Not a year passed without many articles (and occasionally books) being published. The other difference I noticed between the History Division and the university settings I am most familiar with was the conviviality, the congeniality, and the collegiality. While not totally lacking in academia, they are often almost indiscernible. Good cheer, encouragement, interest, pride in the accomplishments of any individual in the group were strong features of the History Division. It was a heady atmosphere.

When one remembers that all of this was assumed to be not only professionally meritorious but also a fulfillment of a commission from the Church, based on the idea that the time had come to write the history of the Church in a professionally competent manner, it is perhaps understandable that we often had the strong feeling that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

A project that had been suggested in meetings with Elder Howard Hunter even before 1972 was a sesquicentennial history of the Church. Not since B. H. Roberts had published his *Comprehensive History* in 1930 had there been a multi-volume, in-depth survey. His history, however excellent, had been superseded in many respects, and he had had very little to say about the events of the twentieth century. Given the opening up of new primary sources and the contributions of a new generation of historians after World War II, the time seemed ripe for a new monument to Mormon history. Proposals were made, approved, and, after many discussions, sixteen authors selected to pro-

duce as many volumes. It was never assumed that they would all appear in the year 1980, but some, perhaps two or three, were to be ready by that year, the others following at a pace of two or three a year until the entire set was complete. This project had the full backing of the First Presidency. At a kick-off dinner sponsored by Deseret Book, the authors gathered with their wives, enjoyed a delicious repast, and listened to a positive address by Elder Thomas Monson. One statement from his talk might have been considered an omen. "Measure twice and cut once," he cautioned. But there seemed every reason to believe that a superior history, one that could stand comparison with any other, was about to appear and remain standard for many years to come.

In our very early meetings we recognized a need for something to replace Joseph Fielding Smith's *Essentials in Church History*, whose inadequacies were apparent to the serious student. We decided that two separate one-volume treatments of our history were needed, one for members, the other for nonmembers. Certain phrases and ways of expression we have in the Church would make it very difficult for a single book to serve both purposes. After a period of musical chairs in which different individuals were proposed as authors, it was decided that the volume for Church readers would be produced by Jim Allen and Glen Leonard. The other work, intended primarily for nonmembers, would be written by Leonard Arrington and me.

The Story of the Latter-day Saints, Jim's and Glen's volume, appeared in 1976. It is a marvelous book. Well organized, thoroughly researched, full of little known facts, always concerned with putting the events in an intelligible context, it can be read with profit by anyone. As was appropriate for its intended purpose, it is permeated with an underlying faith in the restored gospel, although, of course, the authors constantly remembered that they were writing history, not delivering a sermon. A superb bibliography in the back of the book enables interested readers to seek additional information on all topics treated in the book. Although scholarship continues to accumulate additional titles each year, I still recommend this book as the place to start. The authors received countless letters, including some from students in places like Ricks College and Brigham Young University. Not written as a textbook, *Story* was nevertheless serving a useful purpose in many Church history classes.

The other book, entitled *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in New York in 1979. Leonard and I were happily surprised at the favorable reception and the almost unanimously favorable reviews. It sold in bookstores across the country. The History Book Club offered it to its members and sold several hundred copies. One month over six hundred public libraries bought copies. The respected firm of Allen and Unwin brought out an edition in England. Finally, it was published in a Vintage paperback edition. It is our hope that in universities and among general readers, *The Mormon Experience* will be recognized as authoritative for several years. We have reason to think that it has done much good, winning friends for the Church, respect for our LDS history, and even some conversions. The whole experience was a "high." I hope that through it all I

retained some vestige of humility, a saving sense of humor, and an awareness that in the course of human events all things are temporary.

I am not mentioning all the titles of books and articles we produced. Suffice it to say that we all rejoiced in achieving the purpose for which we had been appointed. The evidence was there as title after title appeared. As Ronald Esplin has put it, we know how hard we worked, we know our prayerful intent, and in good conscience can say that we were not unprofitable servants.

In addition to publications and the delivering of papers at conventions of professional associations, many of us gave talks in sacrament meetings, at firesides, and to study groups, service clubs and literary societies. We did not see this as a burden but an opportunity, though it did take time and effort. Leonard was called upon most frequently, but the rest of us also spoke several times a year. The slant would vary with the audience, of course, but a persistent message seems to have come across that our Mormon history was something rich and inspiring, that it deserved the attention of competent historians, and that those historians who had studied it in greatest depth were still people of faith and commitment. We thought we were doing something good.

I have been discussing various aspects of our activities from 1972 on. Much of what I have said continued to be true right down to 1982: the publication program, the sense of achievement, the collegiality, the giving of speeches. But there is a downside to this story, what I might refer to as the "decline" of the History Division. The remainder of this essay will mention some aspects of that gloomy episode.

In turning over in my mind the series of experiences that led to the demise of the History Division, I discover that I am still too close to them, too emotionally involved, to be regarded as anything but an *ex parte* witness. Some experiences I choose not to detail. Recognizing my own lack of objectivity, I will offer just a few observations.

From the beginning, we detected some negative rumblings. A Church Office Building bureaucrat who regarded himself as an expert on the law of consecration and stewardship showed up in my office one day and asked for some information about the precise number of temples that were supposed to be located in the City of Zion. I am sure that my comments, to the effect that any statements by Joseph Smith along those lines were probably tentative, did not sit well. We were puzzled and dismayed when an outspoken General Authority criticized us for including the entire text of a Brigham Young letter alluding to a Word of Wisdom problem. However, we were neither disappointed nor disheartened. Were they not simply the inevitable pricks and stings that come when you do anything of interest or importance?

One member of the Historical Department, a librarian, regularly went through anything we published, underlined passages he considered inappropriate, and sent these annotated copies to his personal contacts among the General Authorities. We were certainly aware of this and simply hoped that small minds would be so recognized by those in positions of responsibility. We had our own channels of clearance and communication and never regarded our-

selves as immune from criticism. But the behind-the-scenes, over-the-back-fence rumor-mongering was insidious.

Some self-appointed critics were simply manifesting a generalized prejudice against academics. It is not hard to understand that employees who had come up the ladder at a time when training was not a prerequisite would feel threatened by university hot-shots with their Ph.D. degrees and their claims to know how things should be done. Maybe we brought some of it on ourselves, although I think we were not guilty of looking down on those who were faithful workers in their different roles.

It is my guess that some of our detractors had the mental picture of us as a conspiratorial, anti-Church cabal that sat around trying to figure out ways to cause trouble, to embarrass the Church, to undermine and destroy. I can state categorically that such a picture was a nightmare reflecting fears and suspicion but did not bear any resemblance to the facts.

It did not help that the decade of our existence was a time when Jerald and Sandra Tanner were publishing a variety of works with the specific purpose of refuting or embarrassing the Church. Those ex-Mormons had begun their publishing activity before the Historian's Division was ever created, and they would continue it long after. But the two activities were going on simultaneously. Some of the documents they published left the archives in unethical ways. We were not responsible for that. We did not sympathize with the Tanners. But in a very vague and general way one can imagine how "the troubles of our Church history" could be seen in terms of both fronts. I was dismayed when an honor's thesis produced by a University of Utah student lumped the work of the historians of the History Division (for which he showed little appreciation) together with the publications of the Tanners. For him, it was all "the New Mormon History." Guilt by association is a devastating thing, as we discovered.

There were other straws in the wind. With the publication of *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, the generally favorable reception was tempered by criticism. When Elder Ezra Taft Benson addressed a meeting of institute teachers, he mentioned three deficiencies in that work without mentioning it by name. He did not like the use of *primitivist* to describe the widespread nineteenth-century attempt to get back to the original apostolic church. With respect to the coming forth of the Word of Wisdom, he did not like mentioning the context of temperance activity and health practices of the 1830s, although the authors of *Story* made it clear that God was still behind the eighty-ninth section. And the word *communitarian* to describe practices and institutions such as the United Order was frowned upon; too close to "communism," one imagines. These criticisms, however oblique in not mentioning the title of the book, were far more formidable than anything earlier. They came from a highly placed apostle and were delivered to educators of the Church.

To understand why we did not throw in the towel immediately it must be remembered that scarcely a day passed without positive, favorable reaction. People throughout the Church enjoyed what we were doing, found it interest-

ing, and were encouraged with the model we provided of high-quality research and continued loyalty. Responses came by letter, by telephone, and in personal conversation from ordinary members, bishops and stake presidents, various employees within the Church Office Building, more than a few people high in the ranks of the auxiliaries, and even some General Authorities. I have no desire to compromise anyone by waving lists of endorsers, but perhaps it can be understood that even in the face of some criticism we could continue to think that basically we were on the right track and were fulfilling the mission to which we had been called.

On one occasion the question of publishing articles in *DIALOGUE* came up. An issue had appeared in which the History Division had been represented by three or four names, probably one or two articles and one or two book reviews. It might have been concluded that *DIALOGUE* was out of bounds, but the result of the discussion was acceptance of an informal guideline: no single issue would contain more than one (perhaps two) pieces by History Division people. That seemed fairly reasonable. The same applied to *Sunstone*.

One of my personal disappointments was the lack of mutual respect and a willingness to discuss. Never were our critics willing to sit down and talk over matters with us. If we were inaccurate, we could be so informed. If a book had errors, they could be corrected in future revised editions. If we were violating the procedures set up by Elder Dyer back in 1972 and approved by the First Presidency, we could be told about it. But such conferences did not occur. I may be pardoned a personal suspicion that critics, especially those who have not put in the same hours of back-breaking research in the archives, are afraid to discuss such matters across the table with historians who have done their homework. But civilized standards would presumably find room for some such discussion if differences of opinion arose.

I can state objectively that the decision was made to scuttle the sixteen-volume history (actually allowing it to find its own outlets over a period of years), to sharply circumscribe the projects that were approved, to reject any suggestions, however meritorious, for worthy long-range projects, to allow the division to shrink by attrition, and finally to reassign the remaining historians to a new entity, the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History, which would be affiliated with Brigham Young University. The adoption of the new institute title took place in 1980. The move to the BYU campus started then and was finally completed in the summer of 1982. I had retained my University of Utah professorship throughout and in August of 1982 resumed it as my exclusive professional appointment.

Leonard J. Arrington was called as Church Historian in 1972. He was sustained at general conference that year and for the next couple of years. In 1975 he was named "Director" of the History Division but was not released as Church Historian. He carefully avoided using the Church Historian designation himself but did not correct the many people who still used that as his title. Finally, in 1982, he received a letter honorably releasing him. That same year

Elder G. Homer Durham, who had been managing director of the Historical Department of the Church since 1977, was named Church Historian.

If you visit the East Wing of the Church Office Building you will find in the hallway a gallery of portraits. These are the Church Historians, from Oliver Cowdery to G. Homer Durham. But where is Leonard Arrington? Nowhere to be seen. The official explanation is that to be a Church Historian one has to be a General Authority. A brief period of our history, awkwardly embarrassing to someone, is thus erased. Orwell's Truthspeak did not have to wait for 1984.

But there are some things that cannot be erased. The record of research and publication of a little band of historians during just a few short years is there for all who are interested to see. It is a simple fact that the most important contributions to our Mormon history were either produced by or encouraged by the Historian's Division. For the foreseeable future other writers will have to use these works as their point of departure; they cannot claim to have prepared themselves for their own contribution without paying attention to them.

The historians continue to live on, doing history, some of them affiliated with the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute. Even though not located as conveniently to the archives and even though teaching responsibilities will now inhibit their production, they will continue to be publishing scholars. Others have scattered elsewhere and will likely produce some books and articles of importance. A new generation of energetic young researchers is already appearing on the scene. I think I am right in saying that they see themselves as continuing the tradition of honest scholarship associated with the Arrington years.

The Mormon History Association continues to prosper as a center and encourager of work in our history. An independent group, it brings together professional historians and buffs, LDS, RLDS, and nonmembers, the devoted and the doubting, bishops and apostates. Each year its convention seems more impressive than the last. Leonard, Jim, Dean Jessee, and I, all of whom have served as its president, can feel encouraged that an organization continues to promote the kind of forthright, confident research we have been identified with.

In the spring of 1982 announcement was made of the formation of the Leonard J. Arrington Foundation for Mormon Studies. With contributions from generous donors who wish to show their support of honest but loyal scholarly activity, this independent foundation can assist in the publication of primary sources and scholarly works that would not find outlets in the usual channels.

But it is especially in hearts and minds that the ten golden years will continue to live on. I will be eternally grateful for an opportunity that comes to few people. The close friendships and camaraderie remain. The countless expressions of good will and enthusiastic support will not be forgotten. When we find ourselves on the other side of the veil, however much condemnation I may