

REVIEWS

Views of Brigham

Brigham Young: American Moses, by Leonard J. Arrington (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 522 pp., \$24.95; *Brigham Young and the Expanding American Frontier*, by Newell G. Bringhurst (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986), 246 pp., \$16.95, edited by Oscar Handlin.

Reviewed by Melvin T. Smith, a historian in Mount Pleasant, Utah.

BRIGHAM YOUNG: *American Moses* makes several important contributions. First, it relies on and quotes extensively from primary sources. Readers will glean a number of new insights. Particularly helpful is Arrington's chapter on Brigham's youthful life and its pioneering elements, a useful schooling for his later leadership.

In addition, Arrington notes the times and situations of the recently converted Brigham Young's commitment to Joseph Smith, which he interprets as filling the emotional gap left by the death of his first wife (p. 34); and later Brigham's assertion while serving a mission to Canada that "women should not govern me" (p. 36), a rather revealing statement in light of his later polygyny. Many of Arrington's useful insights occur in his introductions and summary statements, rather than within the chapters proper. Nevertheless, careful readers will discover them.

While Young seemed born to lead, Arrington observes that it was the Mormon Church that channeled Brigham's energies and directed them. His instinct for leadership emerges early in his Church career with the Missouri expulsion, the British mission, and his succession to the mantle of Joseph Smith. Each of these events

show a man who understood how to exercise power, and with it, his special brand of leadership. Arrington, unfortunately, ignores the leadership dynamics of the winter of 1846-47 at Winter Quarters where Young consolidated his power base.

A more serious problem exists in Arrington's analysis of Young's first ten years in the valley, a period when he served as territorial governor. Young's methods, his power, and his objectives were, during that decade, nor subject to either scrutiny or challenge. During that first free-handed decade, Young's leadership produced public endorsement of polygamy, the Reformation, the doctrine of blood atonement, treasonous political rhetoric, and the Mountain Meadows massacre. These issues receive inadequate treatment, especially the massacre.

Arrington also seems to credit Young with all the settlements made under his leadership—in fact, for nearly all of the achievements of Mormon pioneers. He depicts Young as a sort of omniscient prophet continuously counseling mothers and others, giving doctrinal dictums, making political maneuvers, or doing whatever else was needed. He is seen as a man who not only knew what was happening but made it happen. Such an approach requires the biographer to claim the bad as well as the good, however.

There is a degree of *déjà vu*, if not actual tedium, in the extensive review of LDS Church history, especially for those who have read the *Great Basin Kingdom* or *The Mormon Experience*. What readers get in this biography is a look at Mormon history with Young as both the central figure and the focus of all action.

Perhaps, it is that focus which brings Arrington in his "Epilogue" to a series of unanswered basic issues about the man he has portrayed in 400 pages. There he notes: "Perhaps Brigham's verbal ferocity masked a tender, softhearted person who was ashamed to admit his compassion out of fear that people would think him weak or cowardly. His caustic criticism of others may well have been an external projection of his discontent with his own ambivalence." Then Arrington queries, "Was he a kindly, benevolent, tenderhearted father figure or the sarcastic, hate-spouting chief of the Danites? As he systematically dressed down some people, even close associates, was he really chastising them, or was he, by chance, talking to himself?" (p. 407)

Unfortunately, most readers have anticipated answers, not questions from the author.

Here is a book that says much and yet leaves much unsaid and unanswered about Brigham Young. Even the metaphor "American Moses" is ambivalent. Moses led ancient Israel into the wilderness, not into the promised land. Should readers infer that Brigham's "Great Basin Kingdom" was not the promised land; and that the United Order, plural marriage, the political state of Deseret, the Deseret alphabet, and the Mormon separation from the world were concepts that had to be abandoned, much as ancient Israel had to shed its Egyptian influences before Joshua could actually lead them into Canaan? For Brigham's Saints, the promised land was statehood and equal status as a prosperous part of the United States of America, to which John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Brigham's twentieth-century successors guided them.

Brigham Young's attempts to create the kingdom of God on earth lasted up to his death in August 1877. Arrington sees that as Brigham's primary mission. But in 1877, Young's vision was turned back toward the apparent security and simplicity of early nineteenth-century America. That vision is also part of his legacy.

Arrington admires Brigham Young and treats him kindly; however, I am not sure that Governor Young would always recognize himself in this scholar's portrait, nor approve of it.

Newell G. Bringhurst's fine *Brigham Young and the Expanding American Frontier* offers readers a definite contrast. This book, much smaller than Arrington's, still provides readers with a great deal of information about Brigham Young. Perhaps Bringhurst's success lies in his consistent focus on Brigham Young, the individual, as his subject, rather than on Brigham Young, leader of the Mormon Church. Equally useful is the American frontier as a context for Bringhurst's discussion of Young's life and his contributions to American history.

It is useful to have the Mormon president presented as a part of the American westward movement. The results are persuasive. Young emerges as a man with vast pioneering experience, a dedicated, ambitious frontiersman whose life was impacted by the religious fervor of upstate New York, and focused with his conversion to Mormonism.

Bringhurst leads readers through the major national as well as institutional events that Young participated in and had to react to. One finishes the book with a genuine empathy for the Brigham Young, frontiersman, Mormon, polygamist, church president, colonizer, territorial governor, Indian agent, family man, and aging prophet.

The author elects to deal with nearly all issues, if only briefly. Young's racism is noted, his defense strategies, Mountain Meadows, his diplomacy, his arrogance, his pettiness, his courage, his kind fatherly concerns, and his conviction about his and the Mormon Church's mission, and his death. The stories are all there. Frequent anecdotes liven the reading and reveal an interesting human being. Bringhurst's Brigham is believable — a man to be admired and followed.

Read together the biographies are complementary.