

Leonard J. Arrington: Reflections on a Humble Walk

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HISTORY ITSELF—AND HISTORIANS IN PARTICULAR—will for years to come continue to assess the importance of Leonard J. Arrington to Mormon and western thought. From 1972, when he was appointed Church Historian, to his retirement as a member of the faculty of Brigham Young University in 1997, I worked with Leonard as editor, researcher, and writer, one of a staff which ranged between eight and fourteen in the production of the history of the Latter-day Saints. Elsewhere, notably in his recent autobiography, *Adventures of a Church Historian*,¹ is recounted the administrative circumstances under which we worked. Here I offer my own immediate and personal perspective on the man, cameos, if you will, or film clips—moments observed and experienced in the life of this man, who was both a keystone and lodestar to the scholars and thinkers of Mormonism.

Because Leonard was always busy with his various projects, speeches, articles, books, and administrative necessities, and because of his innate modesty, he seldom took time to share with his staff at the History Division the philosophical underpinnings of his faith and work. So for our own celebration of a particular event in Mormon history, we invited him to “preach us a sermon.” The place was significant—the top of Ensign Peak, just north of Salt Lake’s Temple Square. By its pyramidal shape Brigham Young had recognized the valley as “the right place”; thence he had brought his intimates of the Twelve just days after their arrival, not merely for a better perspective of the territory, but to thank God in the true order and to endow one of their number who had missed the opportunity in the Nauvoo temple. Recently a path to the peak has been paved, but at the time we went, access was up a steep trail made rugged

1. Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

by spring run-off gulleys and sliding stones. Leonard struggled his way up with the rest of us younger staff, and there he revealed to us his thoughts on the role of the historian in interpreting to the Church and to the world the sacred history of the Latter-day Saints. We sat, literally and figuratively, at his feet, disciples to his leadership.

I don't remember so much what he said on that occasion. What remains for me as though encapsulated in that moment are the values he espoused, the faith which motivated him, and the devotion he brought to the writing of Mormon history.

All his life, every opportunity that presented itself, Leonard turned into an education. Tending chickens became study of the economics of the poultry industry; shoveling "gold dust," as he called the dung from the cow barn, to earn his way through college fed his curiosity about agricultural economics; and questions about his own religious background took over his life until he could answer them in what became his doctoral dissertation and *Great Basin Kingdom*, standard work on Mormon life and history for a quarter of a century. Four hundred articles and twenty-odd books later, Leonard still honored his rural beginnings. In retrospect, he seems a genetic and environmental anomaly. Not that his parents were unintelligent, nor his growing up less than enriching—but what are the odds that a child, third of eleven, on a poor farm in Idaho will develop into the intellectual center point of a society of ten million people?

From the beginning of my work with this Idaho chicken farmer, I regarded him with a mixture of awe and delight. Leonard refused titles of honor or regard and observed hierarchical protocol only when it would serve the advancement of the History Division. "Call me Leonard," he would say to anyone he met. "How shall I answer the phone?" I asked as I filled in for a secretary not yet hired. "'Dr. Arrington's office?' 'Brother Arrington's office?' 'Office of the Church Historian?'" "Just say 'Leonard Arrington's office,'" he compromised. Then as I was leaving for the day, he answered the phone himself: "Millard Fillmore," he intoned with a wink to me.

"All chiefs and no Indians," complained the Church's personnel department of our history division. Leonard's style of leadership was so democratic as to be near anarchy. Each of his staff worked at his or her own pace on projects we had chosen ourselves—with his approval, of course—and made regular reports, not only to him, but to each other in staff gatherings around his desk. Perched on the arm of the tan vinyl sofa or leaning against Leonard's ample bookcases, we would discuss each other's research, sharing files and findings, and adding to our mutual understanding. It was revelation to me, coming from academia where scholars' research notes are their well-guarded stock in trade, to see the cross-fertilization which Leonard fostered among Mormon historians. Of

all Leonard Arrington's legacies, that commitment to sharing and enrichment of research and scholarship might well be the most lasting. It didn't matter to him what persuasion researchers brought to the work. LDS, RLDS, and non-LDS scholars—as long as they were honest and fair and diligent in their efforts—would receive liberally of his time, his ideas, his files, and his monetary resources.

And all with good humor. If the eleventh commandment reads, "Thou shalt not take thyself too seriously," Leonard obeyed it along with all the others. His weight, for instance. A delivery person brought a pile of white pastry boxes past our desks and into Leonard's office one summer afternoon. Immediately he called us in for what we assumed would be another staff meeting. "I just topped off two hundred pounds," he exulted, "so celebrate with me." Whereupon he opened the boxes to reveal chocolate pies, his favorite, and served huge pieces to us all.

Promoting a more responsible telling of the Mormon story by church magazines and manuals, Leonard and his senior staff met weekly with editors, gently leading them to more scholarly reporting. He persuaded them first to allow footnotes in historical and theological articles; then to admit that Joseph Smith's and Brigham Young's poor spelling had nothing to do with anything that mattered, so we could publish their holographs; then to let the unspoken be said: polygamy, law of adoption, varying accounts of the first vision. Under his patient coaxing, the editors grew in their faith that the Mormon story, taken whole, warts and all, was a splendid story deserving to be told honestly and openly.

Leonard had a lively sense of fairness. It was not just to keep me on task as editor that he challenged the LDS church employment policy against hiring mothers of small children. I was pregnant and had been warned that I would lose my job the moment my baby was born. Carefully Leonard campaigned, first to make an exception for me and then to change the policy permanently in order that mothers and fathers, not personnel officers, make the decision about the mother's employment. He won. My Jane Doe case overturned a policy discriminatory against women. Leonard's sense of justice was satisfied.

Not that Leonard was a feminist—at least not at first. It was the accuracy of his reading of the documents, not the mode of the day, which led him to include in his histories women and their activities alongside men and theirs. Leonard anticipated the coming into being of women's history by publishing in 1955 an outline of women's contributions to the economy of Mormon communities. His famous "Blessed Damozels" piece in the pink *Dialogue*² and the dedication "To Leonard Arrington: he takes

2. Arrington, "Blessed Damozels: Women in Mormon History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 22-31.

us seriously" in *Mormon Sisters*,³ the book which marked the beginning of the new Mormon women's history, identified him early with the feminist cause.

Refining his thinking was a constant with Leonard. Like the time during general conference when one of the members of the Twelve had devoted his address to well-worn platitudes "honoring" women. "Wasn't that wonderful?" Leonard enthused to Jill Mulvay and me at our desks the next morning. In unison we blurted, "No, Leonard, it wasn't." Without hesitating, Leonard plunked himself into a chair and demanded an explanation. In stereo, Jill and I, both his juniors and his subordinates, lectured our boss on the damage done to women by just such paternalism.

I wonder if we who have so richly benefitted from Leonard's generous sharing of himself realize our debt to Grace and their children and later to his second wife Harriet, who were perforce deprived of his time with them. Saturdays spent in the Church Archives turning page after page of the Journal History are lost to children who might have wished their father at home.

Not that Leonard neglected his children. All three, James, Carl, and Susan, told in funeral remarks of his attentions to them. Tenaciously eager that every kid get all the opportunities, he coached baseball. "Run 'er down, Carl-waynie," he would call to encourage his second son.⁴ James, his first-born, was a young Laurence Olivier in his father's eyes, though James recounted to us that he knew of the arrival of his parents for his San Francisco opening as King Lear when, on his entrance in the role of that demanding old man, he heard a muffled chuckle from the fifth row center. There was an intensely loyal family. Ever in my mind is the memory of Leonard, sitting in the mourner's bench at Grace's funeral, hardly waiting through the last "Amen" to rush to the rostrum and embrace his pregnant daughter Susan in tears at her mother's passing. Decorum be darned—his Susa-belle needed comforting, and so did he.

There was in Leonard, however, one selfishness which endured to the end. His core optimism would not permit him to share, even with his most intimate friends and colleagues, his deepest concerns for the office and the task of Church Historian. He would come back from meetings or conferences, call us together, and tell us whatever laudatory comments he had heard of our work. Criticisms, whether justified or not, he kept to himself. During the last years of Camelot—that golden decade so named by Davis Bitton for the opening of the archives of the Church and the minds of the Saints—Leonard faded noticeably. We saw it happening, but

3. Claudia Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters* (Cambridge, MA: Emmeline Press, 1976), 25-41.

4. Funeral Address by Carl Wayne Arrington, Hyde Park, Utah, 17 February 1999.

were basically ignorant of the exact situation, and powerless to forestall the inevitable. Even his wife Grace, whom Leonard loved with a story-book passion, was no sharer in those heavy secrets. We watched her weaken and die, a seeming sacrifice to the cause. "My heart is breaking for Dad," she wrote to their son Carl in 1980 as the former holder of the office of Church Historian, sustained by the body of the church in the 1972 general conference, was renamed simply director of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute and then transferred to BYU as a professor of history. "The Church Historian is dead."⁵ Grace never sent the letter—she, too, had learned to carry her burdens unaided.

My last letter from Leonard Arrington, written just before he died,⁶ closed with, "I've been ill for a while but trying to get better." You dear and splendid man, I thought then, how could you possibly be any better? No one of my acquaintance answers better Micah's rhetorical definition of the righteous person: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

Walk on, Leonard. You have shown the way. We follow.

5. Grace Arrington to Carl Wayne Arrington, 16 October 1980, photocopy courtesy Susan Arrington Madsen.

6. Leonard Arrington to Maureen Beecher, 27 January 1999, in author's possession.

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