

## REVIEWS

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### **Prophet, Seer, Revelator, American Icon**

Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens, eds. *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. ix, 284 pp. Paper; \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-536976-2

*Reviewed by Kirsten M. Christensen*

First, a confession and a little context. I am not a scholar of Mormonism, just a Mormon who is also a scholar (of medieval mysticism, it so happens). I am interested in but mostly unfamiliar with the growing body of Joseph Smith scholarship. As a result, I am unable to reference that tradition in this review or to argue how these essays augment or contrast with other work, although it is worth noting that the essays themselves do a fine job of that. Rather, my role, as I see it, is to respond to these essays both as an educated non-specialist and, perhaps most importantly, as a member of the Church who seeks “greater knowledge” (Abr. 1:2) regarding our founding prophet. This collection is a compelling read on both fronts, and I expect to recommend it to my colleagues in religious studies and history and to friends and family in and out of the Church.

The striking cover art of this volume is worth as much reflection as any of the essays.<sup>1</sup> The painting, *Monday, 24 June 1844, 4:15 a.m.: Beyond the Events*, is the work of Italian-born LDS artist Pino Drago (b. 1947) and won second place in the Church’s first international art competition in 1987. The dimensions and current exhibition location of Drago’s oil-on-canvas painting are not provided on the cover or elsewhere in the book. It features a highly stylized portrait of the Prophet, who nearly fills the entire left half of the picture. He is sitting, resolutely upright and finely dressed, in an almost entirely unfurnished room, one elbow resting on the surface of a brilliant green table or counter, the fingers of his other hand spread across his knee. The image clearly evokes another well-known but undated portrait of the Prophet, attributed in many sources to David Rogers.<sup>2</sup>

In Drago’s depiction, a lush, red drape falls from ceiling to floor behind Joseph, covering about one-third of the painting. Also behind the Prophet, and just past the drape, two short steps lead into another empty room that includes a small window, possibly obstructed by a few bars, and through which the Nauvoo Temple is partially visible. On the right side of the painting hangs a portrait of an Italian renaissance nobleman, whose posture mirrors Joseph’s. The image of the nobleman is unabash-

edly modeled on the *Portrait of Ugolino Martelli* (ca. 1535), a Florentine humanist, by Agnolo di Cosimo (also known as Il Bronzino).<sup>3</sup>

According to a *Liahona* article on the Church art competition, Drago's painting "depict[s] a decisive moment in the hours prior to the Prophet's martyrdom."<sup>4</sup> That moment is undoubtedly the Prophet's famous declaration that he was "going like a lamb to the slaughter . . . but . . . calm as a summer's morning," made in the early morning hours of Monday, June 24, 1844, as he and seventeen friends left Nauvoo for Carthage.<sup>5</sup> Incidentally and unfortunately, the Drago painting is mislabeled on the back cover of the book as "Monday, 24 June, 1833," a date that will likely cause more than a few readers to wonder what events the title references, not to mention to puzzle at the Nauvoo Temple visible through the window in the background.

A 1992 *Ensign* article on symbolism in LDS art describes the painting as

communicat[ing] some of the eternal lessons associated with the Prophet's martyrdom. Joseph's face is partially in shadow, partially in light, reflecting both his concern with dying and the assurance that his life is in Christ's hands. The hand on his knee is tense, as if clinging tightly to life, while the other is relaxed as he faces the next world. The open window and the Nauvoo Temple in the background represent divine revelation and Joseph's establishing the earthly foundation of Zion. The portrait of a nobleman contrasts the uninspired man's limited capacity to make contributions with the Prophet's legacy of enduring accomplishments.<sup>6</sup>

The presence of the nobleman is perhaps the most striking feature of the painting, from my perspective. Although it takes up a large portion of the wall on which it hangs, the figure of the nobleman himself, who looks toward Joseph Smith, is diminutive next to the looming figure of the Prophet, who gazes directly and piercingly at viewers. The nobleman sits with a stylus and paper in one hand, his other hand resting on a book, behind him architecture and art suggestive of Renaissance Italy. The *Ensign* interpretation above seeks to juxtapose the "uninspired" nobleman with the Prophet, but another interpretation, especially in the context of this volume, seems just as compelling, namely one that links Joseph to deep intellectual engagement and history-altering changes, such as those we associate with the Renaissance and which one can hardly call "uninspired."

Other features of Drago's painting also invite contemplation and admiration. The sparsely furnished room in which Joseph sits, not to mention the bars on the window, evoke the jail that housed him before his death, even as that connection is disrupted by Joseph's elegant attire and regal deportment. The folds of the lush, red velvet drape just behind Jo-

seph suggest movement, perhaps evoking the veil that would close Joseph's life only days later. Our eyes are drawn to the light on Joseph's face but then immediately move to the partially visible temple, a concrete manifestation of Joseph's legacy (albeit not completed at Joseph's death) and the picture's thematic, if not actual, vanishing point, and to which the steps in the room seem to lead. The editors should be commended for choosing this lesser known and highly evocative image of the Prophet.<sup>7</sup>

Next we can note a few features of the book's organization and other technical aspects. Although it makes for a more visually appealing page layout, the use of endnotes, rather than footnotes, is not reader friendly. Following the notes is a fourteen-page index. I came across seven typographical errors in the volume, including one instance of "belief" when "unbelief" was intended (132). This number is small, I suppose, but nonetheless surprising for a volume of this quality.

The fifteen essays are numbered and divided thematically and usefully into three parts: "American Prophet," "Sacred Encounters," and "Prophetic Legacy." The introduction, with its own chapter number, gives a wonderfully succinct yet exuberant summary of Joseph Smith's life, the state of scholarship, and the essays, and is thus a highly practical guide to the volume.

Richard Brodhead's essay, "Prophets in America circa 1830: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nat Turner, and Joseph Smith," is the first of several essays that engage the issue of authenticity, which for Brodhead remains "in some crucial sense beside the point" (17). Although authenticity is not a major concern for Brodhead, I raise it here because it is a—perhaps *the*—major concern about Joseph Smith for most LDS. Was he authentic? Real? True? If not, then what else falls with him? The issue of authenticity arises again and again in this volume, sometimes to be engaged vigorously, at other times to be put aside, as by Brodhead. This putting aside of the authenticity question will likely be enough to keep many Church members from reading this book, a lamentable fact, since, as those more familiar with Joseph Smith scholarship will likely attest, a willingness to move the focus away from authenticity allows other facets of Joseph's legacy to be given richly nuanced consideration. Indeed, perhaps the greatest contribution these essays make to believing members of the Church is their demonstration that by *needing* Joseph to be authentic, we obscure much else about his magnificent gifts and legacy. A more fruitful approach would be to allow the historical and human contours—both vast and intimate, messy and moving—that these essays lend to the often unidimensional Joseph of standard Church presentation to increase,

rather than undermine, our reverence and gratitude for the authenticity we accept as a starting point.

Brodhead's essay, a comparison of Joseph Smith to two of his contemporaries, is a gripping read, laying out the very different paths taken by Turner (whose revelations led to a bloody slave uprising), Emerson, and Smith, while, in the process, using these disparate contemporaries to shed light on the "history of prophetism in their time" (18), a time that saw a "rush of prophetic activity" and in which "the category of the prophetic was unusually accessible in America" (20). Brodhead articulates a wonderfully cogent description of prophetic identity, a concept that should be of enormous interest for members of a Church that claims to continue to be led by prophets. Brodhead's reassessment of Emerson is a major contribution, especially his analysis of the very different results of prophecy for Emerson (the dissolution of religious institutions) than for Smith (the restoration of them "as the vehicle through which the Spirit performs its saving work," 28).

Klaus J. Hansen's essay, "Joseph Smith, American Culture, and the Origins of Mormonism," argues for the emergence of Joseph's "genius" both within and transcending his historical context. Following comparisons of Joseph to Samuel Johnson and Abraham Lincoln, Hansen argues in particular for the importance of Joseph's "desire to redeem his father" (44) as a site where culture and religion met with particular sharpness and poignancy. Hansen's provocative essay raises as many questions as it answers and indirectly suggests many avenues for additional inquiry. It also includes a plethora of facts and details about the early days of the Church that reminds us that, even with the flood of Joseph's visions and revelations, the uniformness and stability of today's Church did not (or not always) drop pre-formed out of the heavens, but rather emerged and evolved within a dynamic cultural context.

Richard Dilworth Rust's essay, "I Love All Men Who Dive': Herman Melville and Joseph Smith," like the two contributions that precede it, illuminates the accomplishments of Joseph Smith in surprising ways by comparing him to another contemporary. Rust, a literary critic, focuses on the writings of both men, which compels us to think of Joseph Smith not just as a passive prophetic receptor but, indeed, as a writer with creative gifts and agency. Rust contrasts in particular motifs of darkness, which both men knew well from their personal trials and which manifest in a pervasive gloominess for Melville, but which for Joseph are powerfully connected to images of light.

Catherine Albanese's essay, "The Metaphysical Joseph Smith," argues that metaphysical religion owes a significant and unacknowledged debt to Joseph Smith. She describes Mormonism as a "combinative" reli-

gion, like others in its day, but one that emerged as uniquely successful thanks to Smith's "prodigious religious creativity" and corporate strengths. In her words, "Mormons did metaphysical religion in community" (71).

James B. Allen's "Joseph Smith vs. John C. Calhoun: The States' Rights Dilemma and Early Mormon History" is an absorbing study that provides a fascinating look at the context that motivated Joseph's candidacy for the U.S. presidency. In Allen's reconstruction, Joseph saw the failure of Missouri to protect the Saints as an insurrection that deserved, indeed demanded, federal intervention. When his correspondence with the likely presidential candidates convinced him that none of them could adequately support this stance and thus be able to make a difference for the Saints, Joseph declared his own candidacy. In this essay, more than any of the others, we see Joseph in largely unfamiliar roles: activist, lobbyist, opportunistic but deeply and sincerely engaged politician, and, above all, as a fiercely protective shepherd of his relentlessly persecuted flock.

Part 2, "Sacred Encounters," begins with Richard Lyman Bushman's contribution, "Joseph Smith and Creation of the Sacred." He suggests that Joseph's appeal to the "generation of seekers" (94) of his day (and by extension of ours) lies in the "new sites for encountering the sacred" (95) that he offered: sacred words (the Book of Mormon, the books of Moses and Abraham, the revelations that became the Doctrine and Covenants) and sacred places, both geographic centers for the gathering of the Saints and temples. In contrast to Rust's depiction of Joseph as a creative, *creating* writer, Bushman suggests that the power and success of Joseph's sacred words lie in his passivity—in fact, in his almost complete absence from his texts. He shows us a Joseph who received his own revelations "along with everyone else" (98) and presented the Book of Mormon as the product not of his own creation but rather of his obedience to divine directive. Moreover, he explains that Joseph was almost completely absent from early Church tracts, which focused instead on the sacred words of the Book of Mormon, as if they had emerged miraculously without Joseph as intermediary.

Joseph's conception of sacred space differed dramatically from other sacred spaces of the day, which generally appeared, Bushman explains, at sites of "repeated sacred happenings." In contrast, "Smith's Zion [the declaration of Independence, Missouri, as the New Jerusalem] was created in a stroke . . . on an open plain at the edge of American settlement" (102).

Bushman's arguments should resonate deeply with believing Saints, even though they are expressed in a novel way. For us, Joseph's passiv-

ity—his role as a vessel rather than an agent—is generally assumed, and his success thus points not to tactic or strategy (i.e., consciously leaving himself out) but to divine wisdom. Intentional or not, Bushman’s moving articulation of these features of his success imbues Joseph with renewed richness.

In “Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude,” Terryl L. Givens focuses on the process, not the “products,” of Joseph’s prophetic role (107). He argues that Joseph grew incrementally into his understanding of this role, having “no clear intimation of future projects and heavenly callings” (113) in the immediate wake of his first vision. Givens further presents a prophet for whom historical time—more than the moment of restoration in his own day—is everything, because of his “integration of the divine into the historical” (111). This reversal of the time line, or Joseph’s inclusion of ancient (not just Christian) truths and traditions in the restoration—what Givens calls “a gospel plenitude that transcended, preceded, and subsumed any and all earthly incarnations” (116)—is a major theological distinction, but one that has also made it hard for scholars to systematize Joseph’s work.

Douglas Davies’s “Visions, Revelations and Courage in Joseph Smith” is a learned but somewhat bewildering articulation of “the notion of courage as a means of analyzing the part played by visions and revelations in the unfolding of Joseph’s life” (119). The confusion comes from the vast array of theories and thinkers Davies calls on to support his case—arguably too many for a single article. And although he mentions sociologist William Whyte at the outset as a major source, along with theologian Paul Tillich, of “analytical insights” (120), Whyte does not turn up until near the end of the article, while a dizzying array of other theorists appears in the meantime.

Still, Joseph Smith emerges sometimes surprisingly, but generally uniquely elucidated, from Davies’s theological and methodological thicket. In particular, Davies casts convincing light on the emergence of the Mormon emphasis on Gethsemane as the locus of atonement as an outgrowth of the First Vision. Specifically, he argues that the powerful experience of an “impasse” (the question of which church to join), for which the First Vision provided an answer, allowed Joseph to identify directly and powerfully with the Savior’s own “impasse” experience in Gethsemane. He further suggests that this identification “was energized by Joseph’s experience of personal and bloody suffering as a child” (131) when he was held in his father’s arms during the unanesthetized surgery on his leg. Thus, Davies argues, the symbols of blood, struggle, and paternal support coalesced for Joseph in the First Vision and informed his theology of Gethsemane.

In “Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition,” Margaret Barker and Kevin Christensen partner to illuminate the deep connections between Joseph’s temple traditions and those of the Old Testament. Barker’s contribution is rich and erudite, overflowing with enlightening etymologies and lovely, literal translations of both canonical and apocryphal texts that highlight a specific instance of intentional theological muddying over time, namely of the crucial concept of seeing (and being seen by) God. In a nutshell, the Deuteronomists did not believe God could be seen; the visionaries did. Much of what has been transmitted in the canon came through Deuteronomist hands, resulting, Barker convincingly shows, in the obfuscation of crucial passages discussing theophanies.

Christensen’s portion of the essay explores what these early debates can tell us about Joseph’s visionary experiences and LDS temple worship and scripture. A particularly enlightening section argues that Mormon theology uniquely blends the numinous (awe-inspiring experiences that stress the otherness of the divine from the beholding individual) and the mystical (experiences that stress unity and that tend to transcend difference between the individual and the divine).

Barker’s learned contribution, which launches immediately into her “independent reconstruction of temple theology” (161, Christensen’s term) would have benefited, I believe, from a brief introduction linking the ancient and early Christian material to Joseph Smith. As it stands, those links are established only in Christensen’s essay (eighteen pages in), leaving readers to wander a bit through Barker’s fascinating, but detailed, and at times dense, analysis.

Part 3, “Prophetic Legacy,” begins with Laurie Maffly-Kipp’s “Tracking the Sincere Believer: ‘Authentic’ Religion and the Enduring Legacy of Joseph Smith Jr.,” in which she calls the concept of sincerity into question, considering it more often a problem than a solution. Her questioning, in particular, of the frequent scholarly conflation of Joseph’s sincerity with the truth of Mormon teachings should immediately engage LDS readers, since we naturally, and perhaps unfortunately, do the same thing. The dilemma in equating Joseph Smith’s sincerity with religious legitimacy, as Maffly-Kipp succinctly puts it, “means that any personal failing of Smith calls into question the truth of Mormonism itself” (185). When put so baldly, the dangers seem both immediate and avoidable.

Maffly-Kipp offers an array of other, potentially more useful, “framings for the exploration of Mormon history” (177), beginning with shifting the chronological focus of studying Mormonism away from the First Vision. She views the vision not as the origin of the faith but, echoing

Givens, as a culminating event in the sweep of history. A second proposal is to focus the study of Mormonism's narrative away from leaders and toward ordinary believers, which leads naturally to her third possibility: focusing on "diversity of experience rather than unity of purpose" (186). Fourth, and relatedly, she suggests a more pointed focus on family histories, rather than religious history. And finally, she argues that an emphasis on the "new geographies" that exist in the Church's now vast cultural and ethnic landscape will "yield different historical narratives" (186) whose value is not inextricably linked to the sincerity of a single figure (what did Joseph Smith believe or think he believed?), even if that figure is the founder of the movement. Doing so, she suggests, may actually allow us to "see more in Joseph Smith and in Mormonism by recognizing that our focus has been relatively narrow" (187).

Richard Mouw's essay, "The Possibility of Joseph Smith: Some Evangelical Probing," is an intriguing selection to follow Maffly-Kipp's, since the "sincerity question" is, on a basic level, central to Mouw. But as an Evangelical who rejects Joseph Smith's claims, he nonetheless seeks "to create . . . some space between the liar-or-lunatic options" (191). Although his stated audience is fellow Evangelicals, sensitive LDS readers will quickly find that his suggestions for openness and tolerance have profound relevance for us in our interactions with believers of other traditions. It is moving to see an Evangelical grapple with Joseph Smith as Mouw does in his attempts to "create space" for understanding. It struck me as I read that we do very little grappling with other religions' core beliefs, and even far too little with our own. Mouw's challenge to focus away from antagonism and fear-based interactions toward an agenda that instead allows us to ask what it is "about [others'] teachings that speaks to what they understand to be their deepest human needs and yearnings" (193) should guide our every interaction with believers of other traditions.

Mouw further encourages us to "at least try to show that some of the features [of another religion's beliefs] are not unlike elements" that we accept in other contexts (196), including our own. His comments reminded me of an experience I had several years ago, when, as a faculty member at the University of Notre Dame, I accompanied a group of BYU students who were visiting Church history sites in the Midwest on a tour of our beautiful campus. We stopped at the grotto, a replica of the site at Lourdes where the Virgin Mary is reported to have appeared repeatedly to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, less than forty years after Joseph's first vision. I stood at the back of the group as an LDS graduate student thoughtfully explained the significance of the site for faithful Catholics and was stunned to hear a student ahead of me guffaw audibly and say to a companion, "They actually *believe* that?!" The irony of a Mor-



mon's scoffing at a vision struck me as more than a little profound. Mouw's compassionate essay gives us sorely needed approaches for gentler, more Christ-like encounters with believers from other traditions.

"The Prophethood of Joseph Smith," a powerful essay by non-Mormon Wayne Hudson, takes Joseph Smith's role as a prophet of God "as the beginning and not the end of our investigations" (202). Here again the question of Joseph's sincerity arises repeatedly, but Hudson deftly and confidently diffuses it by claiming that "even someone who has a testimony of the truth of his revelation" can admit that "Joseph was not perfect, and his inspiration varied in quality and reliability" (203) and that "taking Joseph's prophethood seriously does not imply . . . adopting an uncritical attitude toward more controversial aspects of his career or an unwillingness to undertake forms of inquiry that may not immediately benefit his reputation" (206). Fascinatingly, Hudson also advocates that Mormons study prophets of other traditions as an avenue for more fully understanding the innovations of our own.

Reid Neilson's essay on "Joseph Smith and Nineteenth-Century Mormon Mappings of Asian Religions" provides an intriguing look at a particular historical moment in the decades following the organization of the Church. That moment was the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, attended by the First Presidency (Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph F. Smith) and B. H. Roberts. Neilson paints an arresting picture of the parliament, at which "the Mormon leaders were awed by the exposition's international spectacle and astonished by the richness of the Asian religions they encountered," most notably by the "striking Christian parallels" (218), for which they now had to account. Previously limited encounters with Asians or Asian religions meant that the Church had espoused what Neilson calls the "light and spirit of Christ theory" (216), which originated with Joseph Smith and includes the belief that God's children in all traditions had access to divine inspiration and would thus be given the opportunity to enter God's kingdom. In a nearly tectonic shift in response to the World's Parliament, the Church adopted a "diffusionary hypothesis" (218), in which Christian teachings originated in the Garden of Eden and became increasingly diffuse through generations of apostasy and wickedness. Moving the origins of Christianity back to the creation (the expanded timeline also discussed by both Givens and Maffly-Kipp) allowed Church leaders "to avoid the timing issue of Christian parallels found in non-Christian religions" (219). Neilson notes that the huge theological and rhetorical shift resulting from the parliament was undertaken by "unfazed Latter-day Saints" (220) who later evangelized across Asia.

The volume concludes with David J. Whittaker's "Studying Joseph

Smith Jr.: A Guide to the Sources,” a remarkable compilation that consists of useful sections categorizing and describing the wide array of genres and media among the sources (manuscripts, journals, letters, etc.). It concludes with an extensive and enormously useful bibliography of published sources, which is similarly organized by genre/media. If this marvelous guide is not already available as a stand-alone and also as an on-line publication, it should be.

It would be gratifying to see this book on the shelf of every ward library, not to mention at every LDS bookstore. This volume has enormous potential to dramatically increase our respect for Joseph Smith. We may already see him as chosen and prophetic, but the fact that he influenced American history, not just American *religious* history, makes him a figure worthy of study as a great man, as a harbinger of huge social and cultural shifts, even as a genius—without apology and by non-Mormons with no religious agendas. This view may be news to many Latter-day Saints, but it is news that we should all hear. The professional experience and disciplinary diversity of the scholars who contributed to this collection are dazzling, as is the range of theoretical and methodological approaches they bring to their reappraisals of our Prophet. As a scholar and a believer, I am deeply grateful for their efforts.

### Notes

1. Large image of the book cover, <http://www.amazon.com/Joseph-Smith-Jr-Reappraisals-Centuries/dp/0195369769> (accessed October 7, 2009).

2. Well-known image of the Prophet available on the Church’s website: [http://www.lds.org/Static%20Images/rogers-joseph-smith\\_MD.jpg](http://www.lds.org/Static%20Images/rogers-joseph-smith_MD.jpg) (accessed October 7, 2009).

3. Bronzino, *Portrait of Ugolino Martelli*, c. 1535. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Angelo\\_Bronzino\\_057.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Angelo_Bronzino_057.jpg) (accessed October 7, 2009). I thank David Price, University of Illinois, for directing me to Bronzino’s oeuvre.

4. [No author named], “A Rich Visual Harvest,” *Liahona*, August 1988, 19; [http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?hideNav=1&locale=0&sourceId=53748b5c1dbdb010VgnVCM1000004d82620a\\_\\_\\_&vgnnextoid=f318118dd536c010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD](http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?hideNav=1&locale=0&sourceId=53748b5c1dbdb010VgnVCM1000004d82620a___&vgnnextoid=f318118dd536c010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD) (accessed October 7, 2009).

5. *History of the Church*, 6:554–55.

6. [No author named], “Arts: Seeing beyond the Surface,” *Ensign*, October 1992, 39, [http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?hideNav=1&locale=0&sourceId=7ba89209df38b010VgnVCM1000004d82620a\\_\\_\\_&vgnnextoid=2354fccf2b7db010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD](http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?hideNav=1&locale=0&sourceId=7ba89209df38b010VgnVCM1000004d82620a___&vgnnextoid=2354fccf2b7db010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD) (accessed October 7, 2009).

7. Drago’s portrait is reproduced on the Church’s website (see notes 4,6) in reverse. I cannot confirm the orientation of the original. My description refers to the image as it appears on the cover of the book under review here.

## Mordred Had a Good Point

Gary Topping. *Leonard J. Arrington: A Historian's Life*. Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Company, an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. 251 pp. Cloth: \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-87062-363-9

*Reviewed by Nathan B. Oman*

It is difficult not to like Leonard Arrington. By all accounts, he was an exceptionally generous and decent man. His *Great Basin Kingdom* was a kind of Big Bang of Mormon historiography, doing more than any other volume to create the New Mormon History. In addition, Arrington was an enormously productive researcher and scholarly entrepreneur, churning out articles and monographs at a prodigious rate and helping to found such institutions as the Mormon History Association and the *Journal of Mormon History*. Finally, he was a mentor of rare abilities, indentifying, encouraging, and supporting dozens of junior scholars who went on to make major contributions to our understanding of the Mormon past. Not surprisingly, Garry Topping's generous—even at times hagiographic—biography is sure to please those who remember Leonard personally. In recounting Arrington's intellectual and professional career, however, the book also provides a useful moment of reflection on the turbulent world of Mormon studies in the last decades of the twentieth century.

With one exception, Arrington's life was largely devoid of the kind of drama that makes for a page-turning biography. Reading the book, I was reminded of a comment by William Blackstone's most recent biographer. Blackstone was the first university professor of English law; and through his four-volume *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, he had an enormous influence on the development of law in the United States and Britain. Nevertheless, his biographer observes, "Blackstone's relatively short lifespan was not saturated with drama or sensation."<sup>1</sup> The same could be said of Arrington's much longer life. With the exception of his dramatic tenure as Church Historian, what excitement there was in Leonard Arrington's life lies in the story of his intellectual career and his contribution to the scholarly study of Mormonism.

Arrington was first and foremost an economic historian, and Topping does a workmanlike job of running down the influences on Arrington's early thought. The book, unfortunately, makes little or no attempt to place Arrington's intellectual training in the broader history of eco-

conomic thought. In many ways, Arrington's graduate training in economics came just prior to a sea change in the discipline. When he arrived in North Carolina from Idaho to begin his graduate schooling in 1939, economics was dominated by thinkers whose intellectual roots lay in the Progressive Era. By the end of the 1930s, their ideas dominated not only the academy but also public policy. In retrospect, it has become common to see the New Deal as a triumph of Keynesian economics. At the heart of Keynesianism is a general equilibrium model of the economy that insists that the state can alleviate the business cycle by propping up aggregate demand in times of downturn through deficit spending. While the New Deal provided public relief through iconic programs such as the Works Progress Administration, the heart of its economic program did not lie in Keynesian pump-priming. Indeed, Franklin D. Roosevelt ran a deficit for only one year during the 1930s, and it was a minor one at that.

Rather, what the Progressive economists prescribed in the Great Depression was the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, which aimed to cartelize all of the major sectors of the American economy and subject them to "rational" control via a system of exhaustive administrative regulation. Once purged of the "wasteful . . . irrationality" of the unrestrained market, so the thinking went, business would pick up and prosperity would return. The original NIRA was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, but FDR succeeded in bullying the court into abandoning its hostility to the New Deal and pushed forward with similarly motivated policies. By 1939, when Arrington began his graduate studies, however, the Progressive economics that he began studying had, in many ways, reached the point of intellectual exhaustion. Unable to defeat a depression from which the rest of the world had already emerged, it had little to offer the Roosevelt administration in terms of new policy prescriptions. Of course, in September of that year, the Wehrmacht invaded Poland, and the resulting demand for armaments meant that FDR began pursuing what amounted to a Keynesian policy by default, eliminating unemployment through the draft and weapons production. This, however, was never the policy urged on him by Progressive economists.

Nevertheless, the economists who influenced Arrington at North Carolina, such as Richard T. Ely, belonged firmly within this waning tradition. Intellectually they were hostile to the neoclassical economic theory of Alfred Marshall and others, whom they cast as apologists for the rapacious robber barons of the Gilded Age. Indeed, their general hostility to economic theory can be seen in their repeated calls for greater "rationalization" of the economy by state actors which was justified with thick, factual descriptions of economic activities unencumbered by for-

mal economic arguments.<sup>2</sup> Describing the work of one of the giants in this field, Richard Posner—a federal judge, professor at the University of Chicago, and leading scholar of law and economics—has written: “I once tried to read Willard Hurst’s magnum opus, a massive tome on the history of the lumber industry of Wisconsin, but didn’t get far. The book is a dense mass of description—lucid, intelligent, and I am sure scrupulously accurate, but so wanting in theoretical framework—in a perceptible *point*—as to be unreadable, almost as if the author had forgotten to arrange his words into sentences.”<sup>3</sup> Posner’s assessment, of course, is uncharitable, but it does capture something of the intellectual world in which Arrington came to scholarly maturity. By 1950, the Progressive school in which he was trained would be decisively on the wane, replaced by the general equilibrium theory of John Maynard Keynes and the turn toward formal modeling championed by such works as Paul Samuelson’s *The Foundations of Economic Analysis* (1947). At this point, however, Arrington was already immersed in the Church archives doing the primary research that would result in *Great Basin Kingdom*.

There is thus a sense in which, from the outset, Arrington was alienated from the scholarly world that had trained him. Topping notes that, by the end of his tenure as an economics professor at Utah State University, Arrington had trouble attracting students to his classes and felt cut off from a profession that had turned increasingly to “econometrics.” (“Econometrics” technically refers to the use of statistical methods to empirically test economic theories. I suspect that Topping is using the term loosely to refer to the mathematical and formal turn in economics.) Arrington’s great contribution, of course, was not as an economist but as a historian. However, he tied his historical narrative decisively to the particular view of economic development that he inherited from the Progressive economists he studied in graduate school. Put in the starkest terms, economic history could be seen in terms of a Manichean struggle between the competing forces of a rapacious and heartless individualism and a wise and generous communitarianism. In this narrative, the robber barons of the Gilded Age epitomized the wickedness of the marketplace, while the Progressives and New Dealers epitomized the benevolent power of collective action.

In their nineteenth-century communitarian exertions, Arrington interpreted the Mormons as proto-Progressives, the keepers of a communitarian heritage that would eventually redeem the nation in the New Deal. As Topping summarizes the argument: “As government regulation emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the Progressive movement’s means of restraining individualistic capitalism and later as the New Deal’s means of reforming American economic institu-

tions in the interest of the common good, Mormonism became once again a useful model. . . . Brigham Young was a harbinger of Franklin Roosevelt!" (63–64)

The narrative has proved beguiling to two generations of scholars precisely because it places Mormonism at the center of what is for many an appealing ideological narrative about American history. One of its great virtues is that it allows left-leaning Mormon scholars beset with ideological anxiety about the decidedly conservative political culture of twentieth-century Mormonism to tell a story that places nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints on the side of the Progressive angels. The irony, of course, is that Arrington was almost literally in the last group of economists whose formal training was structured around the Progressive narrative. By the time that *Great Basin Kingdom* appeared in 1958, the consensus among economists was that economic salvation lay less in collective control—the old ideal of Mormon cooperatives and the government-administered cartels envisioned by the NIRA—than in fiscal stimulus on the Keynesian model. Arrington (and Topping), however, seem blissfully unaware of this irony, which is just as well. It would be difficult to cast the parsimonious Brigham Young as a prophet of counter-cyclical deficits and automatic stabilizers.

Despite its allegiance to an anachronistic model of economic thought, however, there is no denying the immense power of Arrington's work in *Great Basin Kingdom*. He brought to light a mass of new information and provided it with a coherent narrative (Posner's critique of Progressive economists notwithstanding). Even if that narrative has been problematized by later historians, as Topping rightly notes, it provided a fruitful starting point for future developments. One of the striking aspects of Topping's telling of Arrington's career, however, is the extent to which the story after *Great Basin Kingdom* becomes one of institutional as much as intellectual struggle. After the completion of his magnum opus, Arrington never reconsidered his master narrative of Mormon history. While he continued to perform the spade work of Mormon scholarship, it is almost as though his major interpretive work was completed with the publication of his first book. Even his later biography of Brigham Young does not seek to revisit the conclusions that he reached in *Great Basin Kingdom*.

Given the circumstances under which he worked, however, it is nothing short of remarkable that Arrington was able to continue producing scholarship as he did. His teaching load at Utah State was heavy, and the institution provided very little support for his scholarship. The result was that Arrington turned to a variety of studies and biographies commissioned and, more importantly, funded by corporate sponsors and de-

cedents. Furthermore, much of this work was less authored by Arrington than supervised by him. Indeed, to an extent that is shocking to contemporary academic norms, Arrington attached his name to books that were very nearly researched and written in their entirety by secretaries and research assistants. To be sure, none of these ghost writers has ever accused Arrington of skullduggery, and he was always effusive in his praise of them in the prefaces to the volumes (which he did apparently author). Nevertheless, his biographies of David Eccles and especially Edwin Wooley, for example, were largely penned by others. Indeed, it is jarring to read Topping's forthright narrative of the extent of Arrington's distance from these projects, only to be followed by his discussion of what these ghost-written books reveal about Arrington's thought. If he was indeed as distant as Topping suggests, it would seem that the answer to that question must often be "not very much." Indeed, the David Eccles biography entirely abandons Arrington's earlier Progressive framework for economic history, telling the story instead as a rags-to-riches glorification of American capitalism and individualism. Topping cites a private letter by Wallace Stegner on Arrington's book, which noted that David Eccles might just as easily have been cast as a home-grown example of the ruthless robber baron (156).

Ultimately, rather than looking in the production of these works for insight into Arrington's thought or sentimentally criticizing him from the point of view of the contemporary academy, it is best to see what they reveal about the institutional basis of Mormon studies in the 1960s and 1970s. Arrington ran into difficulties in part because he lacked strong institutional support for his research, turning instead to wealthy benefactors with strong agendas of their own. Arrington had the freedom to pursue a professionally peripheral research agenda such as Mormonism at Utah State in part because the university did not expect its faculty to actively produce scholarship. The price was a lack of real institutional support. Tellingly, Topping recounts how, when Arrington considered leaving USU for the more supportive environment of the University of Wisconsin, the calculations included abandoning Mormon history for more mainstream topics (98). Given this dynamic, the production of scholarship on Mormon history required a heroic effort from under-supported academics such as Arrington. This lack of an institutional base is also evidenced by the fact that the field included so many independent scholars, such as Juanita Brooks or, later, Lester Bush.

Given the paucity of any strong institutional support, the invitation to serve as Church Historian in 1972 came to Arrington literally as a god-send. At last, an institution with substantial resources was willing to support the production of scholarship on Mormonism. The story of Arring-

ton's tenure as Church Historian has assumed the status of myth within Mormon studies. In the influential phrase applied by Davis Bitton, one of Arrington's assistant Church historians, it has become "Camelot," a place where scholars were given free rein in the archives and substantial resources to pursue the production of a range of works on Mormon history. The story, however, is always told as tragedy. In the end, Arrington and his associates fell victim to reactionary forces within the Church hierarchy implacably opposed to honest history. The result was the humiliating relocation of Arrington and his staff to the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at Brigham Young University, restricted access to the Church archives, and a suspicious attitude of Church officials toward Mormon intellectuals that culminated in the September Six, a group of six writers excommunicated in September 1993.

Topping's treatment of this key period, however, is unusually shallow. I suspect that he (and perhaps Mormon historians in general) are still too close to these events to treat them as history. One expects a historian to approach his subject with a certain balance, attempting to understand the motivations and forces that give rise to events from a variety of perspectives. In his treatment of Camelot, however, Topping makes no effort to offer such a perspective. Rather, his interpretive framework is, from first to last, that offered up by the participants on Arrington's side of the events. In this story, the historians pursue a noble goal that is ultimately sabotaged by irrational and vindictive "right-wingers" and "red baiters" within the Church hierarchy. Toward the end of the book, Topping quotes a letter from Arrington's son Carl, explaining clearly who were the villains in the story: "G. Homer Durham was a scumbag and invertebrate. Gordon Hinckley is a shrewd and lying S.O.B. BYU is a bastion of mealy-mouths and apologists. Joseph Anderson was a fog who could be hoodwinked" (203). To be sure, Topping quotes the letter to contrast it with Arrington's moderate stance; and in his telling, Topping's tone is more even-handed. Nevertheless, his interpretation of events essentially coincides with that of Arrington the Younger, although his prose lacks the vituperative verve of Carl's polemic and reads rather more like partisan middle-brow journalism. His footnotes reveal that the only primary sources consulted for the chapter were the Leonard J. Arrington Papers at Utah State University. For example, he does not seem to have consulted the G. Homer Durham papers in the Marriott Library at the University of Utah, despite the fact that, as a member of the Seventy, Durham presided over the dismantling of Arrington's Camelot, ultimately replacing him as Church Historian.

The problem with Topping's narrative of events is not that he offers a critical assessment of the actions of Church leaders. Clearly, some



members of the Quorum of the Twelve reacted violently to such ultimately innocuous works as James B. Allen and Glen Leonard's *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976). It is also true that Arrington found himself in a bureaucratic battle with more powerful and wily players in the Church hierarchy. The immediate result was a lost decade and a half of scholarly access to key sources and a destructive climate of paranoia within Mormon studies. The long-term results may be seen today in the relative paucity of scholars in their forties at work on Mormon studies. We have the grand old men and dames who came of age during Arrington's tenure and a group of younger scholars for whom its vicissitudes are history rather than memory. There does, however, seem to be something of a lost generation of scholars—those who might have been graduate students in the 1980s and early 1990s—who were scared away from Mormon history.

The problem with Topping's Manichean narrative, however, is that it ultimately clouds our understanding of the events themselves. Hence, after informing his readers that the historians had no more implacable foe than Elder Boyd K. Packer, Topping tells us that "surprisingly" he gave a favorable report on *The Mormon Experience*, which Arrington co-authored with Davis Bitton. The event becomes inexplicable precisely because it does not fit into Topping's neat and Manichean narrative. Rather than dig deeper to make sense of events, however, Topping is content to stick with the interpretative framework bequeathed to him by the refugees from Arrington's Camelot. Admittedly, he would have faced a formidable research problem in trying to assemble sources giving a more complete picture, but the main barrier seems to have been Topping's absence of interest.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from his apparent lack of curiosity about the thinking and motivation of many of the key players in the drama surrounding Arrington's History Division, Topping also lacks critical distance when it comes to evaluating the ultimate merits of the project. The problem, of course, is that it is far from clear that the model made scholarly sense. The goal was to create what amounted to an academic center within the Church bureaucracy itself. Top scholars would be Church employees writing for both a scholarly and a Church audience. The model, however, has rather obvious drawbacks. First, because scholars would depend for their livelihoods on the Church, they would be unusually vulnerable to any pressure from ecclesiastical superiors, pressure that would inevitably be magnified within the bureaucracy by the institutional desire to align resources and policies with any directives from the Brethren. Given such realities, many non-Mormon readers would inevitably treat the productions of the system with suspicion. It also, however, placed the Church in

the awkward position of being tied directly to the particular interpretations put forward by its employees. Given these facts, it was naive to suppose that Church leaders would not take an interest in the work being produced by the History Division, judging it not simply in intellectual terms but also according to pastoral criteria.

Of course, there is a powerful argument to be made (one that I find persuasive) that open intellectual inquiry into Mormonism's past, including those aspects of the past that make some uncomfortable, is ultimately a good pastoral strategy. Ultimately, however, this is a theological and pastoral debate rather than a historiographic one. Furthermore, even accepting the religious and ecclesiastical value of such work, it is not at all clear why such inquiry is best done under the direct auspices of the Church. It is easy to understand how the ready access to archives and resources made Arrington's History Division seem like a lost Camelot; but in retrospect, the model itself seems ill conceived. At the end of the day, both the Church and its scholars are better off if, generally, the best and the brightest of its historians do not work for the Church. The Church benefits from not having to worry about the extent to which this or that interpretation of the past is "official." For their part, scholars are better off if they can offer their interpretations in the provisional and continually evolving manner of the academy, free of ecclesiastical anxieties and non-Mormon suspicion. According to Topping, Elder G. Homer Durham made this argument when the History Division was moved to BYU (124). Topping's narrative, unfortunately, lacks sufficient distance from its story; and in his simplified telling, Elder Durham is cast as Mordred. Despite the messy and acrimonious end of Camelot, however, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that he had the better argument.

In 2005, the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute was reabsorbed into the LDS Church History Department in Salt Lake City. Topping notes the fact but adds sadly that, rather than pursuing the grand plans of Arrington's History Division, their work was to be confined to the production of the Joseph Smith Papers (227 note 55). Nostalgia for Arrington's History Division, however, should not obscure the fact that what seems to be emerging in Salt Lake is a new model for how the Church relates to Mormon scholarship. Rather than providing scholarly interpretations through its employees, it seems to be providing an infrastructure of published documents and modern library space for scholars who are not employees to explore the Mormon past. In the end, this strikes me as a much more sensible model than Arrington's glittering Camelot. Indeed, for all the romance and drama associated with the History Division of the 1970s, that ill-begotten institutional arrangement is not Arrington's greatest legacy. Rather that legacy lies in revealing the Mor-

mon past as a fit subject for serious scholarship and in providing two generations of scholars with an interpretative framework to use, attack, and—one hopes—ultimately progress beyond. In short, Arrington as author and historian is a more compelling figure than Arrington as the center of a lost golden age. On the ultimate merits of Camelot, I suspect that history will side with Mordred.

### Notes

1. Wilfrid Prest, *William Blackstone: Law and Letters in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press) 4.

2. It is a testament to the anti-theoretical character of these thinkers that they do not even appear in the standard textbook on the history of economic theory. See generally Mark Blaug, *Economic Theory in Retrospect*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

3. Richard Posner, *Overcoming Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 427.

4. Such efforts might have revealed, for example, that Packer has generally had a far more positive assessment of the value of Mormon history than Topping suggests. Packer has, for example, been one of the chief proponents in the upper councils of the Church for historic preservation, working to protect pioneer buildings from the often mindless destructiveness of the Church Building Department.