

An Honorable Testament to a Legacy

Gregory A. Prince. *Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016. 540 pp. Hardcover: \$39.95. ISBN: 9781607814795.

Reviewed by Dallas Robbins

Upon completing *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* in 2005, Greg Prince was uncertain of what his next project would be. After speaking in the Logan Tabernacle, he was approached by Susan Arrington Madsen, a daughter of the iconic Mormon historian. Susan invited Greg to breakfast the next day to discuss whether he would be interested in writing her father's biography. Eleven years later, readers now can enjoy the fruits and labor born out of that morning conversation.

What makes writing a biography of Leonard Arrington so irresistible is that his personal and research papers were made available to the public in the fall of 2001 at the Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library. His papers by any standard are enormous, an embarrassment of riches for the researcher, 319 linear feet of material, described once by Leonard to his friend Carol Lynn Pearson as "a diary of perhaps fifty large notebooks, the most sensitive part of which is that kept from 1972 to 1982 when I was in the Church Office Building. I record many conversations, perhaps even some with you! They also include, besides books and pamphlets, magazines, and other published material, a large number of typescripts of things I have copied, or things others have copied and given me Xeroxes or carbons of" (460). Also there are the letters Leonard wrote to his wife during his school and military years and weekly letters he would send his children throughout his life. In addition, Greg Price conducted numerous interviews to write the story of "arguably the most important figure in twentieth-century Mormon historiography" (ix).

That sentiment that Leonard Arrington is the "most important figure" in Mormon historiography is one that I have thought of on occa-

sion when the debate or discussion arises, but the longer that Leonard is no longer with us, I think it may be taken for granted that he indeed is so. The fact that Greg Prince never again refers to this laudatory label for the rest of book is a testament to the obvious strength of the story that he tells, because as the life of Leonard unfolds over the course of more than five hundred pages it becomes so blatantly self-evident that to bring it up once again is an insult to the reader. And in the spirit that Leonard Arrington possessed, insulting the reader would be embarrassing in the least and a sin at the most.

But starting with such a high note of praise from the beginning, a reader may fear that this work may border on hagiography, which, considering the subject's own pursuit of honest, fair, and professional history, would be an unfortunate irony. Thankfully, Prince does not do this but exemplifies the "warts and all" style that addresses both Leonard's own strengths and weaknesses. Prince paints a portrait of an optimistic personality that may at times have been oblivious about how to navigate corporate or bureaucratic relationships and of Arrington's own personal struggles with faith and reason, most problematically with Book of Mormon historicity. Prince even goes at length discussing Leonard's use of ghostwriters and the mixed quality of his historical output over the years, including a very strong chapter on the weaknesses of his later masterpiece, *Brigham Young: American Moses*. One is reminded that, in spite of Arrington's amazing influence, research, and generosity, he was not perfect any more than the historical figures he loved to write about.

The story of Leonard Arrington and his years as Church Historian has been told often by colleagues and history buffs and for long enough that it has become a morality tale that prepares the budding young Mormon historian of the challenges she or he will face while writing fair and honest history. Leonard's vision was simple:

Is there any area of the history of the Church and its leaders which deserves being cloaked in half-truth or consigned to chilly silence?

Our office has the conviction that any aspect of the history of the Church can be discussed frankly and analyzed in depth at least among mature scholars. . . . As long as the narration and analysis is kept within perspective it ultimately will be a contribution toward spiritual uplift and understanding. Inevitably, interpretations on some points will differ among those committed to the same standards of research, religion, rationality, and revelation, but the differences should be occasions for reflection and reassessment rather than retrenchment or fear. (177–78)

Unfortunately, this vision wasn't shared by all. The story of Leonard's calling to Church Historian in 1972 and the eventual (if not inevitable) "release" in 1982 is a tragic story that has taken on mythic proportions. But in reading Prince's work, one is reminded that it wasn't all just good guys versus bad guys; it was always more complex, the tensions rooted in the motives of real people on both sides of the aisle making modest strides in writing history they believed would be in the best interest of the Church and the Saints. In this struggle we see certain apostles, primarily Mark E. Petersen, Ezra Taft Benson, and Boyd K. Packer, as the antagonists to Leonard's plans of what Mormon history should be. But we also see other General Authorities who, if not vocal, were more sympathetic and aligned with Leonard's strengths, such as Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, even Bruce R. McConkie (who supported Leonard's desire that Church History staff publications should not be subject to the correlation committee). I suspect that the full breadth of this struggle among differing factions and personalities is difficult to capture on the page, though in the chapter "What Went Wrong" Prince has probably done the best analysis so far, exploring many ideological, social, corporate, and generational factors that turned "Camelot" into a fated story with only one possible outcome.

Even though Prince's book is more than just about the "Camelot" years, they roughly make up almost half of the book. They are incisive, capturing the promise and hope of those early years, along with the

grinding frustration of cancelled projects, conflicting plans, mixed messages, and eventual exile to the BYU campus under different auspices. Even though I have read this story before in Leonard's autobiography, revisiting it again with Prince's broad research on display, I truly felt the immense injustice that was brought down on such a truly beautiful and genuine man. Leonard was always an optimistic person, approaching situations and people with the best intentions and a generous spirit. To see him endure the bureaucratic and authorial gauntlet he did for so many years is profoundly tragic. That the Church now is more forthright with its history is ironic in that the fruits now available—the Joseph Smith Papers Project, the Gospel Topics Essays, etc.— can all be traced back to the soil Leonard planted and tended to over forty years ago. He was a man ahead of his time who saw the future more clearly than the myopic authorities who complicated or squashed his projects so many years ago.

Though many readers may gravitate toward those chapters that recount Leonard's years as Church Historian, as a reader and admirer of Leonard from afar, I was more gripped and delighted by the personal stories that Prince has put together. To begin, we have several chapters that delve into Leonard's family, early life, college years, and his service during World War II in Italy, along with his courtship and marriage to Grace. An entire chapter dives into the development of his work that put him on the map of Mormon history: *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900*. As a dedicated scholar of economics, Arrington developed into a historian, despite never having taught a single history course in his career at Utah State University. Much is given to his early relationships with books, scholars, colleagues, and friends that contributed to his development as a historian who was both “faithful” to his church while at the same time upholding the highest standards of professional and academic history. There are even personal stories that reveal the character behind

the historian. For example, Leonard's first wife, Grace, was not LDS, though it didn't seem to bother him in the least. In fact, while living in Logan he would rotate his church attendance, one week attending his LDS ward and the next with a Protestant congregation, in order to make Grace comfortable in the land of the Saints. She later converted to the LDS Church in spite of Leonard's not seeming to worry about or convince her that she should do so.

Some other character-revealing moments for Leonard include when, as Church Historian, a member of his staff, Maureen Ursenbach, got married and soon after was expecting her first child. Church employment policy was firm that any new expecting mother would have their employment terminated. Leonard and Maureen both fought this policy, which made its way through the Church's legal counsel and eventually forced the Church to eliminate the policy for good and later provided women with several weeks of maternity leave after which they were welcome to resume employment.

The last chapters in the book cover the last decades of Leonard's life as a man who always stood above the fray of conflicts. Many moments in Church history are covered, recounting Leonard's involvement and/or commentary about the things that weighed on his mind, such as the Sonia Johnson excommunication, the 1978 priesthood "revelation," the Mark Hoffman bombings and forgeries, the September Six, plus other events too numerous to list here. And we get many personal struggles that he faced in his later years, such as the death of his first wife, his fear of retaliation for publishing his autobiography, his declining health, and even some personal angst he felt toward certain Church practices that he detailed in a list in his journal. In addition to all of this, there are numerous personal moments from his life that surprised me, delighted me, or usually both and are well worth the price of admission.

Leonard Arrington's legacy is known and appreciated by many. But there are still many who are not aware of his contribution to Mormonism. Fortunately, Greg Prince does a wonderful job in making that story

interesting, relevant, funny, gripping, tragic, and consequential for us today. It is a story that even those who are familiar with it may lose sight of, and a biography like this reminds us to think on it more often. But more than Leonard's influence in Mormon history, it was the personal moments shared in this biography that have given me a much deeper appreciation for the man and person that he was. Leonard was truly a great historian but also a great man, and the world of Mormonism is immeasurably blessed to have had his influence and contribution. Prince's biography is an honorable testament to that legacy.



[“The Dean of Mormon History”: One Viewpoint](#)

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Reviewed by Dennis L. Lythgoe

Greg Prince published *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* in 2005 to mostly critical acclaim. His study of Mormon historian Leonard J. Arrington is patterned after that work in its style, its largely undigested interpretations, and even its large format size. It did not matter that he never personally knew McKay since the latter was a famed Mormon prophet, but it makes a significant difference in his Arrington book that he never really knew his genial subject. He only met him casually at unspecified Mormon history meetings.

Although Arrington was extremely familiar to Mormon historians and Mormon history buffs, he was not universally known to Mormons in the same way as President McKay. That point is of major significance