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Knowing the Man in History

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The sixteenth annual Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture was dedicated to knowing the man in the history. In researching and recording history, Arrington contributed to our honestly understanding the past. In keeping his own diary, Arrington contributed to the understanding of what is now history to us. Many of the anecdotes revealed in the lecture, such as the story of his original prize hens and rooster, what he paid for them and his eventual return, record a time little likely to occur again. The common practices of the day become surprising customs to future generations.

The Lecture

“Our experience is that the Arrington diaries will reveal treasures,” said Susan Arrington Madsen and Carl Arrington. A collection of anecdotes comprised the lecture, the stories of his youth and education, mention of his time serving in war, details of growing up, and Arrington’s contribution as a historian. The lecture emphasized that the sweet and the sorrowful, the humorous and the hard were all a part of his life, in addition to the professional aspects of Arrington’s writing.

The first anecdote, from a postcard Arrington had sent home when a PFC in Rome at the end of WWII, illustrated that the diary includes more than just the traditional conception of a diary, and that the personal papers are supplemented by other primary documents, including opera tickets, photo copies of temple recommends, postcards, letters of correspondence, obituaries, editorials, and other “paper mountains” of a productive life.

His children reported that the diaries are an astonishing, almost daily achievement covering 36 linear feet, and nearly 30,000 pages. The lecture focused on different aspects of his life drawn from the first autobiographical note at age 10, to the last entry 10 days before his death.

As an infant and toddler he encountered a vast array of diseases, but it was his illness with influenza which, though the doctor predicted it would be fatal, Arrington’s mother believed he could be spared through a priesthood blessing, that helped Arrington feel he had “a sure sense of purpose”.

Arrington enrolled in the university, the first in his family, and supported himself through scholarships and work. In 1936 Arrington recorded a change in his spiritual attitude, a change of tolerance. Though previous to his experiences in college he had believed only his church right, “Now I realize there is good and bad, but mostly good, in all of them.”

Arrington served in North Africa in World War II, as a corporal, but married Grace a week before leaving in 1943. Demonstrating the ability for fluent prose, he wrote his wife 6,000 pages of letters in the three years he served.

After returning from the war, Arrington finished his PhD in North Carolina, the Arringtons moved to Utah, and then spent many years in Logan, years spent with generosity, humor, and activity. The family grew up on 810 North 1000 East, with the energy of Grace contributing at home to the industry of Leonard in his academic career and role as a father. Their children said, “We need to say, loud and clear, that Leonard was saved by Grace.”

In 1972, the Arringtons moved to Salt Lake City so that Leonard could serve as Church Historian. Arrington had what his children described as a remarkable memory. As historian, not only did he revolutionize Mormon studies, but he also wrote the stories of the people he met. True to life, the lecture covered stories ranging from the profound to the hilarious.

Diaries as History

Arrington kept this quote in his personal papers, “Life is changeless in unending change.” (John Masefield qtd. in L.J.A. Collection, Box 93 Folder 7 Item 13). He recorded a similar sentiment himself in a lecture speaking of supplementing official facts with diaries and personal narratives when writing history, “because it deals with the timeless problems of the human condition, we believe it has a relevancy that is not limited to time and place.” (“Marrow In Bones” 296) In the relentless run of time, history will always be the source of answers to the questions of what we are a part of, both in the comforting closeness of recognizing one’s heritage, but also in the distancing vastness of the lists of names that we can never comprehend. Some people time remembers.

Filling 103 Boxes, Arrington’s Personal Papers (Collection, Series 10) are a stunning portrayal of the massive paper trappings of a productive life. Only a few lives out of thousands can be preserved with such detail and with such access. Most of us lead lives not scrutinized under the eye of history. We become only the memories of our children, becoming in turn the mere memories of theirs, soon forgotten in the ebb of time. Past lives have to be forgotten, or there would never be room for new life. We’d be endlessly dedicated to reviewing the past, never making a present. But to preserve one man’s story, and to preserve it so well is enlightening. We find our own story on the pages of history.

Arrington believed that personal diaries ought to play a significant role in our interpreting the past. “If the purpose of history is the reconstruction of the past, these first-person, intimate accounts we are using are the sine qua non of history, the thing necessary to the re-creation of how it really was.... what goes on in the minds of people are the moving events of history.” (“Marrow in the Bones” 298).

Diaries convey part of history soon forgotten in the light of new truths and realities. Looking back at our past is looking at a bygone era. The way we were can never be again. But rereading the stories reveals surprises. Knowing the end of the story makes us reinterpret the middle. The perspectives of youth and age are often humorous. In my own diary, I recently found a passage where I lamented my “getting to be an old lady way too fast”. I was 13. Arrington’s diary also contains these humorous anecdotes, his grandiose opening label of “Inside you will find the interesting things in the life of Leonard Arrington” (Collection, Box 21 Folder 1 Book Leaf) reminding me of my own childhood labels, the matter of fact way I assumed my life would be an adventure. Arrington’s review of his FFA trip in 1934, a few pages in the diary, and many years, later, further reveals youthful attitudes. After a meticulous inventory of every cent he writes, “I lost five dollars sometime that night, and I’m sure he’s the guy that’s got it. Boy, if I could get my hands on him, I’d sure show him-very quickly-whether I was a dignified officer, or a tough little farmer. If I had to break his neck to do it-I’d get my money back!”

Past readings of ancestor diaries enlightened me that the day to day observations of yesterday’s common practices, often things added as a side note, record fascinating tidbits often neglected in larger history. Arrington’s diary proved the same. From his year as the Fulbright Lecturer in Italy he wrote this in November 12, 1958, “Difficult to understand the Italian toilet. Their homes and shops are scrupulously clean, but the toilets seldom are clean or function well...Why the neglect? We can’t account for it.” (Collection, Box 27 Folder 1 Item 78). January 12, 1959 he observed, “All men’s shoes are black. You can have any color, so long as it is black.” (Item 106).

These little facts don’t make or break history. But they paint a picture of a man and his time that all of his academic writings neglect to illustrate. The anecdotes he had collected for talks reveal what is seldom revealed in historical figures, namely, his sense of humor. One example is a list of how to make an A average (Box 93 Folder 7 Item 8) starting with apples are too obvious to, “P.S. You might try studying too.” Reading many of the jokes in the Folder 7

(labeled “Humorous Anecdotes for Talks”) I found myself laughing with his sense of humor. However, there were times when I either didn’t get a reference, or when the humor was outdated, revealing changed attitudes. The dated humor quietly reveals more about underlying attitudes of a historic past than many academic descriptions.

Arrington referred to diaries as “roots which hold us, individually and collectively, to our source, roots which hold the nourishment on which we subsist” (“Marrow in the Bones” 298). Diaries are a way to find ourselves in the pages of history. Sometimes we find ourselves in reflecting on what paper trappings, such as report cards, we share with the deceased person. But often we can find ourselves in the past because some things in life have not changed for any of us. The struggle with what to believe, the missed opportunity, the child naiveté, they are experiences common to all of us. The change is in the frightening crises of our times that replaced previous generations’ fears. The big movements of national events tell only part of our stories. Our lives are not confined to the movement of armies.

In the end, we keep preserving the past in a hope that what makes one life significant will reflect significance in our own. Arrington started his historical aims in trying to fill the scholarly void of a specific past. In his personal reflections, both those published in essays in the volume “Reflections of a Mormon Historian” and in his diary, it is clear that studying history, and its subsequent reflection, fills the void in our own stories.

An Honest View of the Man

Arrington’s honesty in his diary, and his voluntary donation of such honesty, reflects the attitude shown when he concluded, “Neither the humanist historian nor the religious historian can be a Pollyanna.” (“Clothe These Bones” 160). Some anecdotes related in the lecture are unflattering portraits. But Arrington finds these necessary to truth and history.

Arrington had a desire to write a “middle way, between the extremes of defending or attacking faith claims” (Walker 23), but it led to conflict with church leaders during his time as Church Historian. Ronald W. Walker, who worked with Arrington in the Church History Department wrote that “In 1976, Ezra Taft Benson warned against humanizing Church leaders. Such an approach minimized God’s ruling hand and undermined ‘our prophetic history’” (Reid and Walker 30).

Instead of undermining faith and divinity, as Benson warned, Arrington found the reverse, that seeing people as human was essential, to view the prophets and leaders as great men

and women, but also human beings was necessary (“Personal Reflections” 173). He did not judge mistakes to be a basis for saying someone wasn’t divine and inspired. Reflecting on the prophet Joseph Smith he observed the good and the bad. “In short, as is the case with most of us, his humanness had a very positive side that overshadowed the negative. Is it possible the Lord chose Joseph...precisely because of his human qualities, both those which we assess today as being positive and those we might regard as negative?” (“Personal Reflections” 175).

It can only be assumed that Arrington wanted this same standard used in an interpretation for his own life. In this regard, an honest appraisal is required. Nathan Oman states, “It is difficult not to like Leonard Arrington. By all accounts he was an exceptionally generous and decent man...In addition, Arrington was an enormously productive researcher and scholarly entrepreneur.” (201). But Oman points out that Arrington’s last days as church historian are idealized into the ending of Camelot, which he concludes is untrue.

Whether or not Oman is painting a more accurate picture than others in proclaiming the Church History Department no Camelot, is in many ways a moot point. We do not need to make cases for a perfect legend. We should accept, as Arrington did, that our imperfections can lead to the types of successes that we have. Though some wanted to remove passages of the diary, it is preserved intact in special collections. Leonard foresaw this, writing in 1974, when leaving the diary to the church, that it be sealed for a time, “Because it is frank and candid and aimed at helping historians in the future, some of its contents might be damaging to persons still alive” (Collection, Box 52 Folder 8 Item 2). It is to be an honest portrait of life, but in the end, even 36 linear feet of work is inconclusive. Writing the negative does not diminish the good in people and the world. We need more room in our lives for an honest reflection of the past. Diaries are one means to this end. For instance, Arrington’s collection of personal writings includes lists of New Year’s Resolutions. Finding these lists of goals and improvements allows us to compare the end with the beginning. Our own lists make us ask if we achieved any of those worthwhile goals which we committed to when we were young.

The lecture included a “mock dedication” Arrington had written after having met with opposition. It is honest. It shows real pain. But it shows humor in that very thing. What a strength to those of us hearing it, to see how some handle hard times. In a letter to his children, August 16, 1997, Arrington states:

“I have given some thought to my Arrington and Corn heritage. My mother and father...didn’t fuss unduly over things...When something went askew, they laughed. A trick of fate was not to be met with anger or irritation, but with a chuckle.” Arrington then states he hopes to be true to this legacy (Collection, Box 52 Folder 1 Item 34). Reading his story, I find that he did.

Without honestly accepting the good and the bad in our past, whether it be in worldwide events, church history, or personal accounts, we can never see the growth that comes over time. The words of a young man and the words of an old man can be enlightening, but only with honesty.

Conclusion

Leonard Arrington’s diaries are true to life in their diversity, their scope, and their honesty. They subtly teach the attitudes of a time while unfolding an account unlike any other. Newspaper clippings he read are preserved among his papers, comments like “yes” or “me too” found under the headlines (see the Collection, Box 52 Folder 1 for examples). Personal letters reveal interactions with family and friends. Diary entries record observations of common, but non-textbook, historical practices.

These papers stunningly illustrate that life includes so much more than what one writes in a journal or preserves in a picture. It is that newspaper article that made one think, and those anecdotes to start a talk. It is more than just the quality of penmanship or the academic essays. Arrington’s collection shows that a man can think so much more than he ever writes. As he argued in “Marrow in the Bones of History”, diaries reveal new qualities of the people written about (297). After a lifetime of writing about these qualities in other people and the church, perhaps there is no more fitting honor for this historian than to remember his life and its history.

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