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Innovation and Entrepreneurial Spirit: Leonard J. Arrington and the Impact of New Mormon  
History

John H. Brumbaugh

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Writing Mormon history has never been as easy as putting ink on paper. The historian Linda Sillitoe explained, “History is crucial in Mormonism.”<sup>1</sup> David Bohn elaborated on the former observation, “Every attempt to undermine the historical authenticity of the foundational events of the Mormon past constitutes an assault on Latter-day Saint self-understanding.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the reconstruction of Mormon history occurs in a spiritually-charged arena. The pen-welding warriors of this genre of historical analysis take titles like *New Mormon historians* and *Faithful historians*. At the center of the conflict within the Mormon historiography stands a farm boy from Idaho, Leonard J. Arrington. This man carried the study of Mormonism into new areas of scholarly acceptance. His entrepreneurial spirit led to innovation within the field and anti-modern backlash from outside the profession.

Leonard Arrington’s life growing did not foreshadow a successful career in LDS history. He spent his childhood in rural hamlet of Twin Falls, Idaho. Forgoing the standard Mormon rite of passage of a two-year mission, Arrington enrolled at the University of Idaho in 1935. He graduated from Moscow with a Bachelor’s of Science in Economics in Spring of 1939. The following Fall, the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill admitted the Idaho farm boy, where he completed his doctoral studies. After serving in World War II, Arrington accepted a teaching position at Utah State University. Concerned with where he should focus his research, Dr. Arrington sought the advice of Apostle/educator John Widtsoe in 1946. The guidance of the aging educator influenced young Arrington to study Mormon regionalism.<sup>3</sup> Widtsoe’s advice would lead to “one of the greatest single works ever produced on Mormon history and an

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Sillitoe, “The Successful Marketing of the Holy Grail,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1987), 98.

<sup>2</sup> David Earle Bohn, “Unfounded Claims and Impossible Expectation: A Critique of New Mormon History,” in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 228.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald W. Walker and others, *Mormon History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 62–63.

acknowledged classic of western historiography that has never been out of print since its appearance in 1958.”<sup>4</sup>

Twelve years later, Arrington published *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* with the Harvard University Press, which catapulted him to the center of the Mormon history world. A watershed event, *Great Basin Kingdom* represented a new way Mormon history could be written to reach out to broader audiences. Arrington sought complete objectivity. Avoiding the miraculous in LDS history, Arrington focused on finite facts. Academia wholly embraced Arrington’s innovative approach.<sup>5</sup> Yet his restraint caused a curious response among Mormon readers. Some assumed the author of the *Great Basin Kingdom* was either not Mormon or anti-Mormon attacking the church.<sup>6</sup>

*Great Basin Kingdom* marked the beginning of Arrington’s successful career in history. Reflecting on his career in 1977, Leonard Arrington called himself a “historical entrepreneur.”<sup>7</sup> He involved himself in all aspect of the historical profession; from leading the professionalization to taking opportunities to expand the field. Correlating with colleagues and graduate students, Arrington published numerous articles focusing on western economic history. He was a driving force in organizing the Mormon Historical Association (MHA) in 1965. He acted as president of the MHA during its first year. Arrington helped to reform the LDS Church Historical Office (CHO) in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> The innovations in work of history directed by Arrington created a new movement within the profession.

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Topping, *Leonard J. Arrington: A Historian’s Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>5</sup> For example see Thomas J. Alexander ed., *Great Basin Kingdom Revisited: Contemporary Perspectives* (Logan, UT: Utah State University, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Walker and others, *Mormon History*, 63–64.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard J. Arrington, “Historian as Entrepreneur: A Personal Essay,” *BYU Studies* 17, (Winter 1977), 194.

<sup>8</sup> Walker, *Mormon History*, 64–65.

Moses Rischin first identified the *New Mormon History* movement in 1969.<sup>9</sup> He saw Mormon historians putting aside their cohesiveness and cultural isolation for acceptance among professional historians. At the center of New Mormon History was Leonard Arrington. Instead of attacking or defending Mormon history, a New Mormon historian examined the past in hope of understanding it.<sup>10</sup> Recently, John-Charles Duffy, PhD candidate at University of North Carolina, outlined four defining characteristics of New Mormon history. From the outset, New Mormon historians seek common ground with non-LDS scholars. They seek to be objective and to avoid “pro- and anti-Mormon polemics.” Third, they view history through a naturalistic lens, neither proving nor disproving divine claims. Finally, New Mormon historians speak of faith and scholarship being in conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Arrington’s approach to Mormon history brought with it an acceptance from a general audience and from some members of the Church leadership. In 1967, he received a couple of letters from Alfred A. Knopf asking him to prepare a volume on the Church’s role in the settlement and development of the West. This was the first time a leading publisher had asked an active Latter-day Saint to produce a work on the Church.<sup>12</sup> Before he completed the project for Knopf, Arrington’s life took a major turn.

On January 6, 1972, First Presidency asked Leonard Arrington to be the Church historian.<sup>13</sup> The acclaimed historian, Jan Shipps explained this appointment was a groundbreaking event for Mormonism. The LDS Church had always had a Church historian, but

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<sup>9</sup> Moses Rischin, “The New Mormon History,” *The American West* 6 (March 1969): 49.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, *Mormon History*, 60–61.

<sup>11</sup> John-Charles Duffy, “Faithful Scholarship and the Mainstreaming of Mormon Studies,” (paper presented at the Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, UT, June 2006), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

the office had always been held by a member of the Twelve Apostles.<sup>14</sup> Appointing Arrington to the office was the first time a professional historian lead the CHO.

Arrington started his time as Church Historian by completing the reforms he suggested of the CHO in the 1960s, which divided the office into three divisions: Library, Archival, and Historical. Arrington established a connection with the historical community and developed a professional staff, known as the History Division. He began a publishing program that would produce volumes of well-respected academic work. Perhaps most importantly, Arrington increased access to previously restricted materials at the Church History Library.<sup>15</sup>

Arrington's tenure as Church historian was the idyllic time to be a student of Mormon history. Some scholars called Arrington era "Camelot" and others dubbed it the "Arrington Spring."<sup>16</sup> Douglas Alder captured the affect of Arrington's time at the CHO, stating that Arrington knew generally every person in the world that was working on Mormon studies. He shared files with these people and helped them find funds and publishing revenues. Following the entrepreneurial spirit, Arrington sold the Church on the concept of writing history instead of solely collecting documents. Since the 1930s, CHO had not published a single new work.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Arrington engaged young scholars with fellowships, helping to jump-start their careers. He invited non-LDS scholars in to use the Archives. Arrington built inroads with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. He encouraged full use of Church

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<sup>14</sup> Jan Shippo, "Richard Lyman Bushman, the Story of Joseph Smith and Mormonism, and the New Mormon History," *Journal of American History* 94, no.2 (September 2007): 501.

<sup>15</sup> Walker, *Mormon History*, 64–65.

<sup>16</sup> Stanford Cazier, "Honoring Leonard Arrington," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no.4 (Winter 1977), 58. Also see Shippo, "New Mormon History," 502.

<sup>17</sup> Walker, *Mormon History*, 65.

materials, arguing “that we had nothing to hide and that casting light on the subject from all directions would benefit” the Church in the long run.<sup>18</sup>

Many publications came out during Arrington’s era at the CHO, examining the public and professional reaction of two of these works will highlight the divisive nature of Arrington’s New Mormon History. *Story of the Latter-day Saints* and *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* both intended to be overviews of the history of the Mormon Church but were intended for two differing audiences: one for the general public and one for Church members. Dr. Arrington speaking about his time at the CHO said, “I felt that for our work to have national and Churchwide credibility...we [the History Department] had to do it the right way.”<sup>19</sup> The right way meant writing history objectivity, with naturalistic approach, and placing Mormon events in the broader context.

One of the first projects the Historical Department produced was a single volume history of the Church, geared for the Church readership. Ending a forty-five year CHO drought of publishing, *Story of the Latter-day Saints* replaced B.H. Roberts’s six-volume *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. James Allen and Glen Leonard, members of the History Division at CHO, authored the volume. *Story of the Latter-day Saints* hit stores July 12, 1976. *The Mormon Experience* developed from the original offer made to Arrington by Alfred Knopf in 1967. Written by Leonard Arrington and David Bitten, this book was intended for secular and non-Mormon audience. Sophisticated and well written, the volume attempted to place Mormonism within contemporary history. The Apostle Boyd K. Packer proofread the original manuscript of the work and suggested a slight twenty-five minor revisions,

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<sup>18</sup> Cazier, “Arrington,” 59.

<sup>19</sup> Leonard Arrington, “Coming to Terms with Mormon History: An Interview with Leonard Arrington,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no.4 (Winter 1989), 50.

an indication of ecclesiastical approval.<sup>20</sup> *The Mormon Experience* was published in 1979, to rave reviews.

Although both books sold well and received high praise professionally, academically accepted literature proved too divisive for some members of the Church hierarchy. Fundamentally, Arrington's work precipitated questions about the role of history in a religious community. Is history to promote the faith of church members? Or is it to provide an accurate reconstruction of the past? Many church members reassured Arrington that the History Division was doing good work, but a dark cloud was on the horizon.<sup>21</sup> A few members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the highest ranking organizations of church officers, disliked the work being produced by the Church Historian's Office. Following the publication of *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, animosity toward Arrington's Historical Division lead to the professional staff being downsized." Apostles Ezra Taft Benson and Mark E. Peterson criticized *The Mormon Experience* for being too secular and lacking inspiration.<sup>22</sup>

In 1980, Arrington's Church History Division was disbanded.<sup>23</sup> Access was again restricted to sensitive material at the Church Archives. Arrington moved to Brigham Young University (BYU). He recognized that the Church did not want to be put in the position of "approving" or "disapproving" what was written by the History Department. Arrington interpreted the move as a way to "preserve... academic integrity" of his work.<sup>24</sup>

Relocating to BYU did not reduce the conflict generated by Arrington's New Mormon history. In Provo, grappling between New Mormon historians and Faithful historians increased in

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<sup>20</sup> Walker, *Mormon History*, 67. Also see Arrington, *Church Historian*, 187 – 191.

<sup>21</sup> Arrington, *Church Historian*, 209.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 142 – 149. Also see Walker, *Mormon History*, 65 – 67.

<sup>23</sup> Arrington, *Church Historian*, 214.

<sup>24</sup> Arrington, "Coming to Terms," 50.



intensity. With disbandment of the CHO in 1980, the Faithful Historian or the anti-modernist gained favorable foothold in Mormon History. This group was energized by a speech by Apostle Boyd K. Packer in August 22, 1981. Denouncing New Mormon historians' quest for objectivity, emphasis on the human, and effort to bracket off the supernatural, Packer stated, "There is no such thing as an accurate, objective history of the Church without consideration of the spiritual powers that attend this work."<sup>25</sup>

A pair of zealous political science professors at BYU espoused Packer's views and pointed anti-modernist attacks at Leonard Arrington's New Mormon history. Louis Midgley wrote New Mormon history's attempted objectivity does not "always carefully consider whether they are inimical to a faithful-full response to the Mormon past."<sup>26</sup> In a sense, New Mormon historians challenge the foundational beliefs of Mormonism in a quest for professional rigor. Adding to Midgley's complaint about objectivity, David Bohn argued that historians could never really be detached from their subject matter.<sup>27</sup> Bohn and Midgley harassed New Mormon historians on BYU campus and followed some to their places of worship to argue the anti – modernist perspective and enlighten clergy and lay members of the dangerous teachings of New Mormon historians.<sup>28</sup>

Bohn and Midgley represented a group of academics called *Faithful historians*. These professionals wanted to represent a distinctively LDS perspective, rejected presumed objectivity, require non-Mormons to read history on Mormon terms, and spoke of faith and scholarship as

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<sup>25</sup> Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21, no. 3, (1981), 259 – 278. Also see Duffy, "Mainstreaming," 3.

<sup>26</sup> Louis Midgley, "The Acids of Modernity and the Crisis in Mormon Historiography," 202, in Smith, George D. *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992.)

<sup>27</sup> Bohn, "Unfounded Claims," 231.

<sup>28</sup> Jessie Embry (Associate Director, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University), in discussion with the author, August 2007.

harmonious.<sup>29</sup> Strengthened by Church leaders like Boyd K. Packer and Ezra Taft Benson, Faithful historians enjoyed a key advantage over New Mormon historians. Faithful historians never challenged foundational beliefs; instead they are intended to build the devotion of Church members. BYU Studies and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship are prime examples of Faithful history outlets. Renouncing objectivity, these organization functioned to “Describe and defend the Restoration through highest quality scholarship.”<sup>30</sup>

The tensions between Faithful and New Mormon approaches to history are entering into a new phase, giving new relevance to the innovation and entrepreneurial spirit of Leonard J. Arrington. Today scholars of Mormon history are looking for ways to “meet on common ground” with non-Mormon scholars. The analytical methods of award-winning monographs like Kathleen Flake’s *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* and Jared Farmer’s *On Zion’s Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* appear strikingly similar to methods imploded by Arrington and the New Mormon historians in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>31</sup> In September 2007, the prominent historian, Jan Shipps, called Richard Bushman’s *Joseph Smith: A Rough Stone Rolling*, the crowning achievement of the New Mormon history.<sup>32</sup> The CHO, which restricted access to their archival holdings after Arrington left in 1980 through the twentieth century, produced a full-disclosure book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre published in 2008 and released two volumes of the Papers of Joseph Smith, a project attempting to publish all writing of Mormonism’s first leader. Current negotiations to establish Mormon studies centers at universities throughout the United States

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<sup>29</sup> Duffy, “Mainstreaming,” 1–2.

<sup>30</sup> “Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Mission Statement,” accessed December 9, 2010, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/about/missionstatement.php>.

<sup>31</sup> Duffy, “Mainstreaming,” 6.

<sup>32</sup> Shipps, “New Mormon History,” 498.

highlights the increased in and funding for New Mormon history. Arrington's success using an objective, professional, and rigorous approach created an excitement for writing Mormon history that continues to influence the profession today.

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