

Book Review

The Collected Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lectures. (Logan: Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, Utah State University, 2005, ix + 283 pp., illustrations, index, author register, \$29.95 cloth.)

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Taken individually, the lectures comprising this collection are generally outstanding treatments of various aspects of Mormon history. Taken together, the volume stands as evidence that this particular field of inquiry both owes a great debt to a seasoned set of accomplished practitioners and is currently bristling with possibilities. If these lectures can be taken as a collective window on the “state of the field”—and I see no reason why not—the present is clearly a good time to be a writer or reader of Mormon history.

The Arrington lectures are a fitting tribute to their namesake, the late Leonard J. Arrington. Dubbed the “patriarch of Mormon studies in our generation” (p. 33), the “most distinguished historian writing about the Mormon past” (p. 71), “this behemoth of Mormon-Utah scholarship” (p. 159), and, simply, “this remarkable man” (p. 91) by the luminaries who followed him as lecturers, Arrington presided over the professionalization of Mormon history in the twentieth century’s second half, and his shadow clearly looms large still. The lectures, presented annually since 1995, are the result of Arrington’s personal request, when he gifted his formidable collection to Utah State University, that an annual lecture be inaugurated that would treat some facet of Mormon history. Arrington would, no doubt, be pleased with the results of his

request.

This compilation of the first ten lectures, arranged chronologically by date of presentation, includes pieces by eminent figures in Mormon and American history. All the authors, even the nonspecialists in Mormon history, assume general familiarity with the Mormon past. A few take for granted more extensive knowledge to the degree that readers unfamiliar with Mormon history or culture might be confused by unexplained terminology. Although several essays will thus be especially relevant to an LDS audience, some—especially those by Richard Bushman, Howard Lamar, Jan Shipps, Donald Worster, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich—will resonate with a much wider one. Though each essay was written to be read aloud, most translate well to the page.

Leonard Arrington himself gave the inaugural lecture and, in characteristic style, sought to bring together the worlds of faith and intellect—a task that might serve as a unifying theme for his entire career. He used brief vignettes of LDS notables to illustrate Mormonism’s capacity to accommodate both reason and revelation; and, in framing them as “partners” in Mormon history, he sounded a rallying cry quite familiar to the rising generation of LDS historians. Arrington posits a definition of “intellectual” that some might find overly capacious, to be sure—historians of American intellectual history might consider the label misapplied to Brigham Young, for instance—but that broadened perspective serves as one of his secondary arguments. He grants that Mormon leaders have tended to eschew the formal theologizing or kinds of systematic thinking that we might expect of nineteenth-century religious elites, but he nonetheless endeavors to reveal a Mormon past (in the nineteenth century at least) that “expanded the perspectives of largely uneducated people” (p. 3), that “did not fear intellectual inquiry” (p. 4), and that was “undergirded” by “empiricism” (p. 15) and “mental alertness” (p. 16). Whether scholars resonate with Arrington’s expanded category of the “intellectual” remains to be seen. His claim that Mormonism has consistently hallowed both revelation and reason despite “occasional confrontations,” too, might strike some as more hopeful than accurate, especially given his own memoir’s documentation of successive rounds of such conflict, but no one can question his conviction that such a “partnership” is both possible and right (p. 2).¹

Richard Bushman offers the most imaginative essay of the bunch.² He presses Joseph Smith’s conception of a temporal Zion into conversation with other early American ideas of space (geographical, not astronomical) to make a compelling case for the singularity of the Prophet’s vision. Bushman begins with a lively tour through the historical contexts

in which we might situate early Mormon spatial ideology and ends by finding the commodities market of antebellum Chicago, of all things, as perhaps the most fitting cultural analogue to Joseph Smith's temple-centered "vortex" of sacred geography. This was not Bushman's first foray into the cultural meanings of early American spaces, but it might be his finest.³ His expertise with early American culture enables Bushman at once to see Joseph Smith as an actual man in actual time and to ascertain effectively when the Prophet transcended his received culture. This brilliant essay surely points to one of these transcendences. Although much in American culture was "leveling" in the ferment of Jacksonian democracy, Joseph Smith articulated a people/place/ideal that not only demarcated a sacred center but also orchestrated a corresponding motion around it, with missionaries and the message of restored truth spreading away and converts, "good books," and all that was "lovely and of good report" flowing back.

Kenneth Godfrey (whose essay appears later in the volume) makes Bushman's point with a careful analysis of the material and ideational import of the Latter-day Saint temple in Nauvoo. Godfrey weaves largely familiar details with less-familiar ones to demonstrate that the temple dominated Nauvoo economically and symbolically as thoroughly as it did its skyline. Godfrey subtly calls for a reassessment of the Mormon Nauvoo experience in the process—one that will better account for the otherworldly focus of Mormon leaders despite their temporal Zion-building and political entanglements. Although Godfrey's piece sometimes offers details scattershot and without a forceful interpretive framework, he makes it impossible for any scholar to assume that he or she can comprehend Mormon Nauvoo and at the same time ignore its temple.

Richard Bennett plumbs the documentary record to usher readers into the meanings of the Mormon pioneer "exodus" to the Great Basin as the participants understood them at the time. Bennett's essay was both timely (given in 1997, the sesquicentennial of the trek) and classically within the "New Mormon History" tradition: he demonstrates laudable attention to little-known archival sources and respects the voices he finds there. Having recently penned *the* account of the trek, Bennett chose to focus his lecture less on the "externalities" of the sojourn than on what he called the "inner workings of thought and belief"—the religious significance of the journey as understood by the Saints themselves (p. 57).⁴ Bennett offers some unexpected gems, like the connections the Saints made between the exodus and the 1834 march of "Zion's Camp," and he concludes from both participants' diaries and leaders' sermons given en route that the trek constituted an extension of the Saints'

covenantal obligations to give their all to the building of God's kingdom on earth. Although most contemporary Saints will hardly be surprised by that conclusion, Bennett convincingly reveals a consensus—a “shared interpretation”—that must have bolstered trekkers as they wended their way (p. 64).

Howard Lamar, who, along with Leonard Arrington and others, willed academic “Western History” into existence in the mid-twentieth century, offers a fascinating portrait of nineteenth-century Utah theater and its influence on Mormon life and culture. The existence of the theater, in Lamar's telling, proved to outsiders (and themselves, I take it) that Mormons were “cultural and educated” when other Americans generally viewed the Saints as backward if not barbaric (p. 75). Lamar shows both how extraordinary it was to have something like the Salt Lake Social Hall in a frontier town of the 1850s (or the later Salt Lake Theater, for that matter) and how thoroughly American the Saints could be in their dramatic tastes (which were sometimes downright racy!). Ultimately, Lamar argues, the Saints supported the theater in Utah because they understood it as tending toward education and thus civilization, as a way to portray “nobility through virtue” (most of the Saints' plays were set in Europe), and as a means to laughter and the good life (the Saints displayed a consistently voracious appetite for comedies) (pp. 82, 86). Lamar acknowledges that his findings constitute a first step, but his conclusions and even his conjecturing in the essay's dénouement are sound evidence that this little-known aspect of Mormon community life begs further investigation.

Claudia Bushman offers a warm and readable account of Mormon domestic life in the 1870s. She appropriately calls attention to the fact that, given the tenor of postbellum antipolygamy sentiment, the “case for or against Mormonism rested on its women” (p. 92). As a result, Mormon households were charged with special meaning, and both the Saints and their observers took careful note of Mormon domestic spaces. Non-Mormon Elizabeth Kane, for instance, was both repelled and drawn to the LDS households she encountered in southern Utah. Bushman traces Kane's ambivalences with humanity and skill; I am tempted to think that Kane might serve as representative of non-Mormons generally in the combination of her deep misgivings about Mormonism and sometimes-grudging admission that the Saints seem to have gotten some things quite right. In the end, Bushman crafts her narrative with such sensitivity that I suspect most readers will find themselves caring much more about Mormon domestic life in the 1870s than they expected to.

Jan Shipp's “Signifying Sainthood,” like virtually all her writing on

Mormon history, is a joy to read. She blends personal anecdote and a touch of theoretical nuance in crisp prose that examines the ways Latter-day Saints have signaled membership in the Mormon community. The anecdotal component of the essay is a delightful autobiographical rehearsal of instances when Shipps herself both read and misread these significations as an “outside” observer living and, later, working in Mormondom. The interpretative or theoretical task she takes on concerns community formation and cultural boundary maintenance; her arguments rest on the assumption, correct in my view, that early Mormons were convinced that theirs was hardly another Christian church and hence needed to sharply demarcate themselves over and against more conventional American Christians. Charting this cultural distance making is only part of her task, however, as she astutely notes that various markers position one *within* Mormonism—she is right that there are “degrees of being Mormon”—and that Saints scrutinize each other as much as display membership for “Gentiles” (p. 162).

Shipps at the very least should be praised for her patience because “reading” Mormonism, as anyone who has tried to help newcomers navigate the strange cultural territory can attest to, is no simple task. Her prophetic impulses seem as sharp as her observer’s eye, as she predicts, again accurately in my estimation, that with the “Word of Wisdom” likely to be less of a boundary marker than it was in the twentieth century, given contemporary health trends, the Saints will, along with calling attention to their own Christianity (which might tend to mute LDS distinctiveness), probably continue to foreground both the Book of Mormon and the activities related to LDS temples to celebrate and delimit what is distinctively Mormon.

Donald Worster draws on his expertise in American environmental history to trace the ways Mormon country may have influenced two towering figures in nineteenth-century environmental thought, John Wesley Powell and John Muir.⁵ Using published and nonpublished sources relating to visits to postbellum Utah by both, Worster shows that Mormonism left no small impression on either. For Powell, the influence was direct and unmistakable. After his several trips to Utah in the 1860s and 70s, Powell offered a vision for western settlement that was decidedly unlike conventional American patterns and quite like the Mormons’ perspective. Powell, though personally repulsed by the Mormon religion, was nonetheless struck by the cooperative spirit in the Mormon villages, and Worster argues that Powell’s plan, presented to Congress as the *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* (1878), was a direct result of his exposure to Mormon country.

For Muir, the influence was less obvious and more indirect. Muir visited Utah briefly, and although he was so caught up with the natural beauty of the landscape that he seemed at times almost oblivious to the Saints, he was clearly struck with some aspects of Mormon family life. Worster understandably finds significance in the fact that scarcely two years after his stay in Utah, Muir temporarily left his wandering ways for marriage and family.

In the end, Worster seems as interested in calling these visits to the attention of environmental historians as anything—and rightly so. Even so, historians of Mormonism, generally aware of Powell if only for his uniquely positive appraisal of Mormon Utah, are nonetheless enriched by Worster's account of the impression Mormondom made on these two unforgettable figures.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich puts her own family history to work in exploring the ways that history (the documented accounts) influences memory (the stuff of family legend or public remembrances) and vice versa. Her essay, built around the tragic death of her own great-grandmother, is as moving a piece of human drama as it is intellectually provocative. If we would expect a celebrated academic historian to wax chauvinistic about history's virtues and memory's fallibility or penchant for sentimentality, Ulrich's essay asserts that memory, indeed, challenges history in important ways. Not only does memory "capture the emotional resonance of an experience" but also it sends us back to historical documents with certain questions that are by no means unimportant (p. 209). I agree with Ross Peterson's assessment that Ulrich's essay is "brilliant," especially for the ways it reminds us why we care about history at all (p. 226). I sense in Ulrich's tale that history and memory both fix us in relationships to people and places; in the end, good history is about self-discovery as much as about the recovery of a lost past.

Ross Peterson's lecture is strikingly similar to Ulrich's in some ways. His, too, is a personal history, and he similarly seeks broader understanding of both historical context and the project of historical inquiry itself. His grandparents' lives, too, are as tragic as the episode Ulrich describes. Even so, Peterson is far less successful than Ulrich in linking that family story to either its broader context or to the tasks of the historian. (Often, awkward prose is a distraction, too.) Still, the lives he documents are gripping, and the piece itself underscores the fact that Mormon history is in some ways still very much a family affair.

Given the general excellence of the volume, we can only hope that the Arrington Mormon history lectures will continue indefinitely and spawn additional volumes in the years to come.

Notes

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

2. Curiously, and sadly in my view, Bushman found Mormon hearers generally “less interested” in this essay than general audiences. Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 173.

3. See Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

4. See Richard E. Bennett, *We'll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus 1846–1848* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).

5. Worster's biography of Powell is excellent: Donald Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

