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Nathan B. Oman

William & Mary Law School, nboman@wm.edu

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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."¹ 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.² 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.”³ 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.⁴

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.