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David Eccles: Pioneer Western Industrialist Leonard J. Arrington

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Book Reviews

ARRINGTON, LEONARD J. *David Eccles: Pioneer Western Industrialist*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University, 1975. Illus., appendixes, biblio., and index, 294 pp. \$7.95.

Reviewed by Lee Scamehorn, professor of history, University of Colorado.

Leonard J. Arrington's biography of David Eccles is the first book-length study of the pioneer western businessman who became Utah's first multimillionaire industrialist-financier. Eighteen chapters focus on Eccles' youth, marriages, family activities, religious experiences, and death. Some attention is also given to the reasons for Eccles' extraordinary success as a stimulator of economic enterprise and as an accumulator of wealth. His estate, appraised in 1913, amounted to nearly \$7 million.

David Eccles' business career began with a partnership that owned and operated a small sawmill in the Monte Cristo Mountains and a retail outlet in Ogden. He bought out his associates in 1881 and immediately expanded operations in Utah and Idaho. Six years later, he extended his activities into Oregon, erecting several small plants that were combined in 1887 as the mammoth Oregon Lumber Company. Railroads were corollary ventures, transportation being a prerequisite for commercial development of large timber tracts in a three-state region.

Sugar beets gained Eccles' attention in 1890 when he contributed to the Mormon Church's effort to open a factory at Lehi. The success of the Utah Sugar Company prompted Eccles to organize similar plants as community projects in Ogden and Logan. Another facility was established at LaGrande, Oregon. All three firms were consolidated in 1902 as the Amalgamated Sugar Company, in which the American Sugar Company and H. A. Havemayer owned controlling interest. However, Eccles remained the manager. He also joined Jesse Knight and E. P. Ellison in erecting a sugar factory in Canada. Eccles was the prime mover behind the plant opened in Lewiston, Utah, and, in 1912, relocated the LaGrande factory—which had suffered perennially from an inadequate volume of beets—to Burley, Idaho.

In the midst of the depression that followed the Panic of 1893, Eccles assumed control of the Corey Brothers Construction Company in order to save it from insolvency. That firm was subsequently reorganized as the Utah Construction Company. In 1903 it won a contract for building 700 miles of main-line track for the Western Pacific Railroad. At the time of Eccles' death in 1912, the enterprise was a leader in the heavy construction field, with projects underway throughout the United States and in many other parts of the world.

By the early years of the twentieth century, Eccles was recognized as a highly successful capitalist. His wide-ranging investments included, in addition to lumbering, railroad, sugar, and construction enterprises, food processors, banks, an insurance company, land schemes, livestock projects, coal mining ventures, electric light plants, retail stores, and the Grand Opera House in Ogden. "Hardly an industry," Arrington observes, "could be found which did not at one time or another interest David Eccles" (p. 117). His activities touched nearly every type of commerce or production.

Although Arrington's volume is subtitled "Pioneer Western Industrialist," his emphasis is on Eccles as an enterprising youth, husband, father, family man, and devout Mormon. Business interests, particularly what must have been strenuous efforts to create and control a far-flung industrial and financial empire, receive relatively little attention. Indeed, most of the information about Eccles' numerous enterprises—what they were, why they were organized, how they grew, and functions they performed—is found in the appendixes. This lack of integration is a serious shortcoming of the book, for it deprives the reader of an understanding of the interactions between Eccles' private and public lives, his roles as a Mormon and a family man, and his activities as the region's leading businessman.

Almost no attention is directed to Eccles' administration of business enterprises, his relations with employees, and his perceptions of markets or pricing policies. Many important questions are ignored or remain unanswered. For example, how did Eccles accumulate a personal fortune of several million dollars over a period of about forty years? Was he a robber baron who exploited natural resources, labor, and consumers for personal greed, or was he an enlightened industrial statesman who erected, in the form of a vast business empire, a monument for the benefit of Mormonism in particular, and mankind in general? Did he show compassion for employees and competitors, as well as honesty toward those who purchased

the goods and services generated by the many companies that functioned under his supervision?

Historians of the lumbering industry and public land policies have documented the widespread use of fraud by which private enterprises acquired timber land from the public domain in the late nineteenth century. Arrington recognizes the existence of these practices, suggesting that they resulted from "unreasonable and shortsighted" federal regulations governing public timber lands (p. 93). Blame for the plundering of natural resources, the author seems to say, rests not with individuals and corporations, but with faulty public policies!

Arrington implies Eccles, through his lumbering enterprises, engaged in fraudulent practices to obtain titles to timber lands. If, indeed, this was the case, the author should be more explicit. He does admit, however, that the Oregon Lumber Company, like its competitors, deliberately committed illegal acts in cutting trees from public land, and regularly bribed federal inspectors in order to avoid prosecution. The firm was eventually sued by the government, but escaped punishment on a legal technicality.

David Eccles: Pioneer Western Industrialist is not a business history. Arrington offers the reader little information about Eccles' activities as an industrialist-financier. The author appears to have written the volume for Eccles' descendants. Perhaps for that reason, the book is little more than a Mormon family history.