



7-2009

Leonard J. Arrington: A Historian's Life

Thomas G. Alexander

Gary Topping

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alexander, Thomas G. and Topping, Gary (2009) "Leonard J. Arrington: A Historian's Life," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 48 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol48/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Gary Topping. *Leonard J. Arrington: A Historian's Life*.

Norman, Okla: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008

Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander

Gary Topping, a professor at Salt Lake Community College, has previously published a number of books and articles on Utah environmental history and historians who have lived in Utah. In some ways, Topping's article on Robert Dwyer and his book on historians Bernard DeVoto, Juanita Brooks, Wallace Stegner, Dale Morgan, and Fawn Brodie can be considered precursors to this book.¹

In other ways, this book is also somewhat of a new foray; unlike most of the other historians Topping has treated, Leonard Arrington was neither a non-Mormon nor a lapsed Mormon. He remained an active Latter-day Saint throughout his life. Arrington served in numerous ecclesiastical positions, including as a counselor in a stake presidency and Church Historian—the only person whom the First Presidency has called to the position who was not also a General Authority. President Gordon B. Hinckley asked Arrington's widow, Harriet Horne Arrington, for permission to speak at his funeral, which she gladly gave.

In spite of the title, Topping's book is a selective intellectual biography rather than a complete "Historian's Life." In the preface, Topping clearly states, "I have confined my attention to those works that strike me as most important and also from which I can most efficiently and persuasively make the points I wish to make" (8). This procedure results in a book that touches on Arrington's early life and education but focuses almost entirely on his books and articles on Mormon topics, especially those about the nineteenth century. With the exception of Arrington's biography of Brigham Young,² the biographies Topping reviews are those commissioned by families, and all of them consider Latter-day Saints who lived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Topping examines works such as *Building the City of God*, *The Mormon Experience*, and *Mormons and Their Historians*, this book does not consider the extensive body of Arrington's work, often

written in collaboration with others, on twentieth-century Utah and Western economic and social history.

In the first chapters, Topping sketches out Arrington's life as an Idaho farm boy and notes the impact of his education and reading on his personal philosophy. Arrington came to see the views of Wisconsin economic historians like Richard T. Ely and John R. Commons as compatible with nineteenth-century Mormon economic philosophy and practice. He also admired southern agrarians who, like his professors at the University of North Carolina, championed rural life.

Arrington's dissertation, after much revision, became *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900*, published by Harvard University Press in 1958.³ In polishing the dissertation, Arrington owed a great debt to S. George Ellsworth, an excellent historical craftsman and his colleague at Utah State University. Ellsworth helped to reshape the dissertation into a book and assisted in stylistic improvements in Arrington's articles on Mormon economic history. In addition to outlining Arrington's achievement in *Great Basin Kingdom*, Topping provides critiques, some of which others have already made, which argue that *Great Basin Kingdom* most likely "exaggerat[ed] the degree to which Mormon cooperation existed" (93). He is undoubtedly right. Nevertheless, in defense of Arrington, Topping may have exaggerated Arrington's emphasis on Mormonism's accomplishments. After all, Arrington argued that various enterprises, including the Moab settlement, the 1850s sugar enterprise, the Iron Mission, and the Cotton Mission, all failed. But Topping correctly argues that the ideal settlement pattern Arrington outlined existed only in some of the settlements. Lowell C. (Ben) Bennion has already made that point in an essay for *Great Basin Kingdom Revisited*.⁴

Topping also points out that Arrington ignored much of the development of the West, especially that which was promoted by non-Mormons. Again, in defense of Arrington, non-Mormon activities lay beyond the scope of Arrington's book. Topping's point is well taken, though, since Arrington should not have excluded Mormon mining developments such as the activities of Jesse Knight, George Q. Cannon, and John Taylor. In his final judgment, Topping concludes (and justly so) that "the reality, expertly narrated in *Great Basin Kingdom*, is captivating, inspiring, and significant enough" (94).

The story Topping tells of Arrington's experience as Church Historian has been told before, and especially well, by Davis Bitton.⁵ Arrington's story is one of triumph and tragedy. In my view, the triumphs outweigh the tragedies, though Arrington suffered personally because of the treatment he received from critical Church members and leaders and the eventual outcomes of this underlying antagonism. Perhaps the greatest tragedy

was that the *coup d' grace* came from Elder G. Homer Durham, a scholar from whom Arrington expected a more favorable reception to the projects the Historical Division undertook. I well remember Arrington and me discussing our belief that Elder Durham would review the manuscripts we wrote with a scholar's eye while at the same time representing the General Authorities. Neither of us anticipated the results of Elder Durham's critique—the dismantling of the division and its removal to BYU in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, Topping is right in concluding, "One certainly cannot say the total experience of the History Division was catastrophic in any sense, for the flood of new publications has enriched Mormon historical understanding immeasurably" (130).

In my view, Topping is less than fair in some of his evaluations of *Brigham Young: American Moses*. In the first place, he expects Arrington to have been privy in 1985 to the work of Will Bagley, which was not published until 2002.⁶ Moreover, Arrington and his staff went carefully through Young's papers, and their examination demonstrated that Topping's assertion that Brigham Young "tacitly approved the [Mountain Meadows] massacre" (166) is a claim thoroughly ungrounded. Significantly, more recent research, of which Topping should have been aware, has shown that Young tried as early as 1859 to bring perpetrators to trial, but anti-Mormon federal officials thwarted both Young and friendly federal officials who agreed to help in prosecuting the perpetrators.⁷

Since Topping writes from outside the experience of practicing Mormons, one might excuse some unfamiliarity with Latter-day Saint ecclesiastical terminology, practice, and doctrine. The proper title of a member of the First Presidency is "President," rather than "Elder" (100). G. Homer Durham was a member of the presidency of the First Quorum of the Seventy, not an "apostle" (189). And drinking Coca-Cola, which, as Topping observed, Arrington loved, is not "a violation of the dietary rule of the Mormon Word of Wisdom" (23). Significantly, however, Topping is correct that Arrington rightly considered himself an orthodox and faithful Latter-day Saint.

With respect to the story of the sixteen-volume history of the LDS Church that Arrington fathered, Topping is only partly right. The LDS Church did not cancel the series as Topping believed. Rather, a number of authors did not complete their books. In a contract with Deseret Book, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve decided not to publish the entire series at that time, and each of the authors agreed to allow Deseret Book to reserve the right to publish the series at a later date. At the same time, the General Authorities and Deseret Book left the authors free to seek other publishers. Richard L. Bushman and I published with University of Illinois Press, while Deseret Book published some of the

volumes in the series, including those by Milton V. Backman, R. Lanier Britsch, and Glen M. Leonard. The major failing in the sixteen-volume history was with the authors who failed to complete their writing. Had those authors completed their writing, those volumes would have most likely seen the light of day.

On the whole, with the exception of the points I have made above, I believe that Topping stakes out a tenable position. On the other hand, had I written the biography, I would have been more favorable toward Arrington's work. I hasten to admit that I am an extremely biased observer. I love Leonard Arrington who, along with George Ellsworth, served as a mentor in my career. Drawing conclusions is Topping's right as an author, but I believe that Leonard Arrington deserves more credit, along with his collaborators, for opening the way to a professional exploration of twentieth-century Mormonism (through the sixteen-volume history) and Utah history through the extensive research he did on David Eccles, William Spry, the sugar industry (all of which Topping considers), as well as defense installations, mining, and general economic development.

I would recommend this book as a starting point in evaluating Leonard Arrington and his work, though I believe a full-scale biography is still needed.

Thomas G. Alexander (Thomas_Alexander@byu.edu) is the Lemuel Hardison Redd Jr. Professor of Western American History Emeritus at Brigham Young University and has authored or coauthored dozens of books and over a hundred articles.

1. Gary Topping, "Robert J. Dwyer and the Writing of Utah History," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 71 (Winter 2003): 4–19; Gary Topping, *Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

2. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985).

3. Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

4. Lowell C. Bennion, "A Geographer's Discovery of *Great Basin Kingdom*," in *Great Basin Kingdom Revisited*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1991), 109–32.

5. Davis Bitton, "Ten Years in Camelot: A Personal Memoir," *Dialogue* 16 (Autumn 1983): 9–33.

6. Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

7. Thomas G. Alexander, *Brigham Young, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Latter-day Saint Investigation of the Mountain Meadows Massacre*, Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture Series no. 12 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007).