
THE JUANITA BROOKS LECTURE SERIES

presents

The 34th Annual Lecture
LEONARD ARRINGTON,
CHURCH HISTORIAN:
Lessons Learned

by Gregory A. Prince, Ph.D

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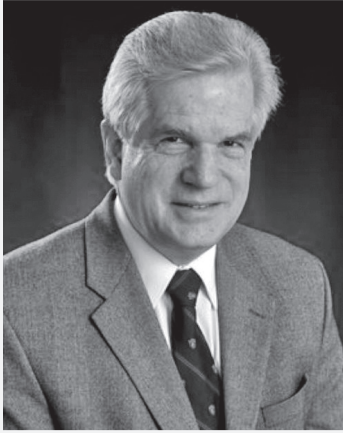
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Juanita Brooks was a professor at [then] Dixie College for many years and became a well-known author.

She is recognized, by scholarly consent, to be one of Utah's and Mormondom's most eminent historians. Her total honesty, unwavering courage, and perceptive interpretation of fact set more stringent standards of scholarship for her fellow historians to emulate. Dr. Obert C. and Grace Tanner had been lifelong friends of Mrs. Brooks and it was their wish to perpetuate her work through this lecture series. Dixie State University and the Brooks family express their thanks to the Tanner family.

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Gregory A. Prince

Gregory A. Prince was born in Santa Monica, California in 1948, but his familial roots are embedded deeply in the red sand of Southern Utah, with five generations of his ancestors, beginning with George Prince in the 1860s, having pioneered and lived in St. George and New Harmony. Dr. Prince enrolled in Dixie Junior College in 1965 and graduated as valedictorian in 1967.

After a two-year proselytizing mission for the LDS Church in Brazil, he enrolled in the UCLA School of Dentistry, graduating as valedictorian in 1973. He remained at UCLA for two additional years of graduate study in pathology, earning a PhD in 1975. He moved to Maryland the same year for a postdoctoral fellowship at the National Institutes of Health, and stayed at NIH for a total of fifteen years.

The primary focus of Dr. Prince's research career has been respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), the primary cause of infant pneumonia throughout the world. His pioneering work, which began with his doctoral research project, led to the founding of Virion Systems, Inc. and a collaboration with MedImmune, Inc. that resulted in the development of Synagis®, a drug that is currently the standard of care for preventing RSV disease in premature and other high-risk infants.

He is now working with Dixie State University and Soft Cell Biological Research to develop new antibiotics to address a global crisis of antibiotic-resistant "superbugs." He has authored over 150 scientific papers and holds three United States Patents.

His interest in Mormon history began when he was a student at Dixie and was introduced to his neighbor, Juanita Brooks. After moving to Maryland, Dr. Prince began to research the history of LDS priesthood, and in 1995 he published his first book, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood*. He subsequently published two biographies: *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (2005), which won the Evans Handcart Award for Western American History, and the Best Biography Award from the Mormon History Association; and *Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History* (2016), which won the Evans Biography Award, the most prestigious award in the genre of Mormon Studies. In addition, he has written over thirty monographs, articles, reviews and chapters in the same field.

Dr. Prince and his wife JaLynn are co-founders of the Madison House Autism Foundation, a Maryland-based 501(c)(3) public charity whose mission is to address the needs of adults with autism. The foundation is named for the youngest of their three children, Madison, who is autistic.

LEONARD ARRINGTON, CHURCH HISTORIAN: *Lessons Learned*

A half-century ago this month, the wife of my 86-year-old home teacher and next-door neighbor invited me, along with the other biology students at Dixie Junior College, to her home for dinner with a friend, Jay Seegmiller, who was a Dixie alumnus and a member of the National Academy of Sciences. She thought biology majors would benefit from an evening with a real biologist. That was my introduction to Juanita Brooks.

I begin this lecture on Leonard Arrington with a reference to Juanita Brooks both because of her unique status in this community and her lasting influence on Leonard. It was an uneven influence, for although at times Juanita clearly was a role model, at other times Leonard was irritated — even jealous — at who she was and what she represented. Think of Leonard as Fred Astaire — and those of you who knew Leonard will have to summon “alternative facts” to create the mental image — and Juanita as Ginger Rogers: not only dancing backward in high heels, but doing so as a stay-at-home mother in the 1940s who lacked the doctorate degree that Leonard had.

Juanita’s first influence on Leonard happened years before they met, and it helped to ignite an interest in Mormon history that led to his lifelong vocation. As a graduate student in North Carolina shortly before the beginning of World War II, Leonard encountered the scholarly story of Mormonism when he took classes in rural sociology. Among the articles he read was “The Waters In,” published in Harper’s Magazine and written by Juanita. He later wrote to sociologist Lowry Nelson, “I got so excited about the Mormon culture that I started reading other things that were in the national press.”

As a rising star on the Utah State University faculty in 1964, Leonard took pleasure in informing Juanita of the university’s decision to grant her an honorary doctoral degree, and commending her for her “inspiration, integrity, scholarship, and service.” Though

separated in age by a full generation, they were intellectual peers. Indeed, an informal survey conducted in 1977 by Mormon historian George Ellsworth ranked Leonard's *Great Basin Kingdom* as the best book of Mormon history, and Juanita's *Mountain Meadows Massacre* as the second-best.

However, when Leonard accepted the position of LDS Church Historian in 1972, he knowingly and willingly abdicated much of his prior intellectual independence, something that Juanita never did. That became a sore point for him. In a diary entry just weeks after he became Church Historian, Leonard wrote of a visit from Juanita. "I have the impression that during our long discussion she went out of her way to assure me that she was not interested in sensation mongering and that she did not wish to harm the Church in any of her writings. In other words she seemed to be trying to say in her proud manner that she seems reconciled to the Church and to the Gospel and would like the Church to have more confidence in her in this respect." She let Leonard know that she would like to work in his new department. He responded, in his diary, "If her name is cleared and we are given the right to employ her, I am still not certain that I would do so. I am more anxious to get young people with Masters Degrees who are vigorous and have fresh ideas. Perhaps I am saying that I want somebody more malleable, less stubborn, less controversial than Juanita Brooks."

Six months later, Leonard received a phone call from the president of Brigham Young University, Dallin Oaks, informing him that a faculty committee had recommended an honorary doctorate degree for Juanita. His response was less than glowing: "I told him that BYU had approved her as a lecturer in our [Charles] Redd series and that she was delivering the lecture next month and in this sense she was receiving deserved recognition. Perhaps that was all BYU needed to do this year." He also told Oaks of the animosity that church president Harold B. Lee and apostle Delbert Stapley had held towards Juanita for her having published on the *Mountain Meadows Massacre*. Leonard's diary entry concluded, "President Oaks said he appreciated my frankness on this matter and said that it was possible for him to recommend against her on the grounds that she had already received

an honorary degree from USU and on the grounds of her status as a Redd lecturer.”

Six months after the phone call from Oaks and nearly two years into his tenure as Church Historian, Leonard attended a banquet where Belva Ashton, the wife of Deseret News publisher Wendell Ashton, got under his skin when she essentially told him that his dream of writing objective church history from the inside was a fool’s errand. “She said, ‘Your writing can never be as objective and straightforward and honest as that of someone who doesn’t have to consider the wishes of the Church.’ She said how much she enjoyed Juanita Brooks. She said if she wanted to get a straightforward account of something, she would read from Juanita instead of from the Church Historian’s accounts. I said, ‘What is wrong with letting our own people have the freedom to write things honestly so that the members of the church can depend on what they say?’ She apparently feels that that is an impossible dream.”

Yet even as he bristled at the independence that Juanita had maintained and he had forfeited, he acknowledged her stature as a historian and biographer. In a 1975 diary entry in which he lamented the paucity of good biographies of LDS figures, he wrote, “The only really fine biographies, historically speaking, were Juanita Brooks’ biography of John D. Lee and Hal Schindler’s biography of Porter Rockwell.” It’s always shades of gray.

Leonard Arrington as Church Historian

Leonard Arrington was Church Historian for ten years — or five years — or not at all, depending on how you wish to split hairs. Along the way he accomplished some remarkable feats:

- Soon after being called in 1972, he began a process of rapprochement with the historians of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints that ultimately trickled up to the ecclesiastical realms and defused the theological warfare that had distracted the two major components of the Restoration for over a century.
- He made Mormon history accessible and believable by overseeing the writing of objective, well-written books and articles,

including the first survey history of Mormonism produced by the Church in over a half-century.

- He oversaw the democratization of Mormon history to an extent never before achieved. Lay people not only lined up to read newly published books and articles and attend history conferences; but also began to respond to Leonard’s “all are welcome” mantra and become producers as well as consumers of history.
- He spearheaded the formation of the Mormon History Association, the first of its genre; and promoted the creation of three literary organs: *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Sunstone*, and *Exponent II*.
- He became the ambassador of the “good news” of Mormon history, speaking to countless gatherings of church members in worship, professional and informal settings.
- He made the study of Mormonism acceptable within the academic world, and initiated an unprecedented increase in graduate students — both LDS and not — who researched and wrote on Mormon subjects, and who represent the foundation of the entire field today.
- He revolutionized the treatment of women in Mormon history by writing about it himself, at a time and in a manner that no one else did; and by recruiting women to work as professionals within the History Division, get advanced degrees, and become writers of the history of Mormon women.
- When one of those female employees, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, announced that she was pregnant, and thus assumed that her tenure within the History Division would be short-lived due to a church policy that terminated employment of women if they became mothers, Leonard stepped in, did his homework, and initiated the abolition of the policy, thus affecting the lives and careers of all women in church employment who wished to have children.

But he also hit some bumps and walls, and ultimately experienced the trauma of seeing the History Division that he had created undergo disassembly and dissolution. In looking back at his decade of triumph and tragedy, five lessons stand out as particularly significant.

Lesson #1: Amateurs are welcome

Although Leonard was a historian who brought to the task the tools of economic analysis — his doctorate degree was in economics rather than history — in the twenty-six years he taught at Utah State University, turf battles resulted in his never having an appointment in the History Department or being allowed to teach a course in Mormon history. Even before he was called to be Church Historian, he did to others what had not been done to him, and welcomed professionals and amateurs alike to join the newly formed Mormon History Association. Unlike nearly every other professional society, the MHA did not police its boundaries. The only requirement for membership was a sufficient interest in Mormon history to pay the modest membership fee.

In addition to encouraging amateurs to show up, he became a mentor to those who wish to take the plunge into research and writing. A year after Leonard became Church Historian, and while I was a senior dental student at UCLA, I had sufficient curiosity to want to scratch around in the marvelous Mormon collection at the Huntington Library. Upon learning that a Manuscript Pass was required in order to gain access to the collection of manuscripts, I sent a letter to the Historical Department that outlined my field of interest and asked if they would recommend me to the library. I had never met Leonard or one of his Assistant Church Historians, Jim Allen, and yet on the strength of my letter both recommended me to the library — and I was issued the coveted Manuscript Pass. The research that I began while a graduate student at UCLA eventually became crucial when I wrote my first book, a history of early LDS priesthood.

I later found that my experience as an amateur with no credentials in historiography was the rule, rather than the exception. It is likely that hundreds of enthusiastic amateurs were not only made welcome by Leonard, but encouraged and assisted in writing some of the finest articles and books to emerge from what Leonard's other Assistant Church Historian, Davis Bitton, referred to as "Camelot."

Another amateur was Linda King Newell. She recalled:

I can remember the first day I met Leonard. It was during the Christmas holidays of 1975. A friend of Val Avery's met me there. She knew somebody in the Church Archives and took me in and introduced me to her friend. That was the day that I met Leonard and Davis Bitton, and Dean Jessee, and Maureen Beecher. Leonard was just cordial and enthusiastic. I said that I wanted to do a biography of Emma Smith. That was the first day. That was my first step, going to the Church Archives. Val and I were a couple of housewives out of the kitchen. Neither of us had written anything more than a term paper. I told Leonard later, "I'll always be grateful that none of you laughed that day." He said, "Well, we just said, 'Let's see what they can do.'" ¹

What they did was to write *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet's Wife, "Elect Lady," Polygamy's Foe*, the definitive, award-winning biography of Emma Smith, published by a national press, Doubleday.

Many other amateurs eventually stepped forward to produce first-rate books and articles, aided either directly by Leonard, who suggested topics and gave freely from his voluminous personal archive; or indirectly as recipients of a welcoming hand extended by Leonard's protégés. Among their works are some of the finest in each subject:

- *Lost Legacy: The Mormon Office of Presiding Patriarch*, by Irene Bates, an amateur historian who earned a PhD in history at the age of 72; and E. Gary Smith, an attorney.
- *Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview*, and *Health and Medicine among the Latter-day Saints*, by Lester E. Bush, Jr., a physician.
- *Joseph's Temples: The Dynamic Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism*, by Michael W. Homer, an attorney.
- *Mormons as Citizens of a Communist State: A Documentary History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in East Germany, 1945-1990*, and *Henry Burkhardt and LDS Realpolitik in Communist East Germany*, by Raymond Kuehne, an administrator at the National Institutes of Health.

- *At Sword's Point: A Documentary History of the Utah War*, by William P. MacKinnon, a vice president of General Motors.
- *Gathering in Harmony: A Saga of Southern Utah Families, Their Roots and Pioneering Heritage*, and *The Tale of Antone Prince, Sheriff of Washington County*, and *Hosea Stout: Lawman, Legislator, Mormon Defender*, by Stephen Prince, a dentist.
- *Nauvoo Polygamy*, by George D. Smith, a businessman.

To this day the genre of Mormon studies continues to welcome amateurs. Robert Flanders, one of the foundation professional historians of the Latter-day Saint tradition, noted, “There are a lot of people at MHA like that. They have no professional involvement; they just finding it interesting. That’s where it’s happening. I know of no analogy for that anywhere else.”²

Lesson #2: History can inform testimony, but it is not testimony

Latter-day Saints use the word “testimony” in the way that other religious traditions use the word “witness,” in both cases referring to an inner conviction that one’s church affiliation is based upon an intangible certitude that it is the correct pathway for spiritual life. On the first Sunday of each month, church members are encouraged to stand and express their convictions in “Testimony Meeting.” Few, if any, activities of the institutional church are considered more important than assisting members to obtain or strengthen their testimonies.

Prior to Leonard being called to be Church Historian, the focus of the Church Historian’s Office consistently had been to promote testimonies through the use — albeit the often selective use — of the church’s historical record. The more church history was used to support truth claims, the more church members came to depend upon the burnished narrative. By moving from devotional to objective historiography, Leonard and his colleagues implicitly downplayed the role of history in engendering and reinforcing testimony. And in so doing, they stoked the fires of distrust that were already smoldering among a few very powerful apostles.

Leonard was transparent, sometimes to a fault. In writing the introduction to his first book, *Great Basin Kingdom*, he made very clear his skepticism of using history to create testimony:

A word to Mormon readers who will be troubled about my naturalistic treatment of certain historic themes sacred to the memories of the Latter-day Saints. The church holds, of course, that it is based on divine revelation.... [However,] it is impossible to separate revelation from the conditions under which it is received.... The true essence of God's revealed will, if such it be, cannot be apprehended without an understanding of the conditions surrounding the prophetic vision, and the symbolism and verbiage in which it is couched.... A naturalistic discussion of "the people and the times" and of the mind and experience of Latter-day prophets is therefore a perfectly valid aspect of religious history, and, indeed, makes more plausible the truths they attempted to convey. While the discussion of naturalistic causes of revelations does not preclude its claim to be revealed or inspired of God, in practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish what is objectively "revealed" from what is subjectively "contributed" by those receiving the revelation.

If Leonard's eventual antagonists within the Quorum of the Twelve had read even the introduction to *Great Basin Kingdom* — an unlikely event since at least one, Ezra Taft Benson, later admitted that he had not even read *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, which was the flash-point that ultimately led to the dissolution of the History Division — one wonders if they would have approved the professionalization of the Church Historian's Office that was part of the general reorganization of the church bureaucracy in 1971–72. Indeed, the same year *Story* was published (1976), Benson railed in a speech at Brigham Young University, "This humanistic emphasis on history is not confined only to secular history; there have been and continue to be attempts made to bring this philosophy into our own Church history. Again the emphasis is to underplay revelation and God's intervention in significant events." ³

What Leonard and his colleagues in the History Division were doing was to apply the accepted and current standards of

historiography to the writing of Mormon history, something that had never been done within the confines of the Church Office Building. What they did not understand was the magnitude of the threat to the status quo that this represented, and the backlash that it would unleash.

Lesson #3: It's the Twelve's show

In the final chapter of his autobiography, *Adventures of a Church Historian*, Leonard allowed that one of the things he would do differently would be to keep an open channel of communications to the Quorum of the Twelve. David Whittaker, who spent most of his career as an archivist at BYU, commented on Leonard's earlier lack of awareness of the role of the Twelve over the course of the church's history. "He was regularly reporting to the First Presidency, but he said he made the mistake of not keeping the full quorum on board. And I think he was right. He was innocent, maybe. I don't know. I've sometimes wondered how you can be such a great Church Historian, and not see how powerful and important the Quorum of the Twelve has been in our history." ⁴

Indeed, simple acknowledgement of the prominence of the Quorum of the Twelve might have paved the way towards an uninterrupted rollout of objective history. Although times and personalities had changed by 2008, the ability of Richard Turley and co-authors to publish a full-disclosure history of Mormonism's darkest episode, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, was dependent upon gaining the buy-in of the Quorum. By preparing the groundwork in such a way that the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve unanimously endorsed the project prior to its publication, Turley accomplished what Leonard, even in the headiest days of Camelot, could never have imagined.

Lesson #4: Nature abhors a vacuum

The problems devolving from Leonard's failure to engage the support of the Quorum of the Twelve as a group were accentuated by a situation that has affected the modern LDS Church four times: a power vacuum caused by the prolonged incapacitation of a church president. This problem first occurred in the last years of the administration of David O. McKay, and recurred with Spencer W. Kimball,

Ezra Taft Benson, and Thomas S. Monson. If Leonard had sensed the full implications of the power vacuum created by Kimball's repeated bouts of cranial hemorrhage, he likely would have been proactive in attempting to court favor of the senior apostles outside the First Presidency in whose hands his fate actually resided.

To understand the nuances of a power vacuum at the top of the LDS Church, it is useful to view the two highest councils of the church — the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles — as being components of what is often denoted the “Q15,” composed of the fifteen men within the two councils. Primacy in church government is determined solely by the length of tenure in the Q15. Since the church president, ever since the death of Joseph Smith, has been the longest-tenured apostle, his role is unchallenged — at least as long as he is “fit for duty.” But if a church president becomes incapacitated — and the aggregate time of incapacitation for the four above-mentioned presidents amounts to two decades — the power base can shift from the First Presidency to the Quorum. If the heir-apparent to the presidency is a counselor in the First Presidency, power will remain within that council, but in the case of all four incapacitated presidents, the successor was not in the First Presidency. (Joseph Fielding Smith was an extra counselor in the First Presidency in the later years of David O. McKay's life, but given his own incapacitation — he was 93 years old when he became church president — the next-senior apostle, Harold B. Lee, was the *de facto* heir-apparent, and essentially ran the church during Smith's brief tenure.)

As Spencer Kimball's health began to fail in the late 1970s, the developing power vacuum was not filled by his two counselors (Gordon B. Hinckley and Thomas S. Monson), but rather by the two most senior apostles, Ezra Taft Benson and Mark E. Petersen, both of whom were antagonistic to the objective history that Leonard and his colleagues were publishing. Since the other members of the Q15 knew that Benson would succeed Kimball as church president, they deferred to him on crucial matters such as the fate of the History Division. Leonard erroneously assumed that his original calling, which came from the First Presidency, would endure despite any

changes in church administration. If he had understood the implications of an actuarial table, he might have realized that his fate — and the fate of the History Division — resided in the hands of the two senior-most apostles, and not in the First Presidency.

*Lesson #5: Good scholarship will prevail,
but you may have to be patient.*

Although Leonard misjudged the response of the church hierarchy to the efforts of the History Division, he never doubted either the divine nature of his (and its) calling, and always felt that he was carrying out his stewardship in a manner that would ultimately please God — even when it finally became apparent to him that it had not pleased all of his patrons. Even as the storm clouds gathered in the run-up to the demise of the History Division, he remained confident that he and his colleagues were doing God’s will — even as he was overconfident that God would protect them.

Persons tell us that Elders Benson and Petersen do not like what we are doing and that if and when President Benson becomes president of the Church we might all be relieved of our positions. It’s almost as if the decisions of the bureaucrats were being made, not on the basis of what the Prophet wants, but on the basis of what the next Prophet wants. I refuse to believe that Elder Benson would fire us; I am convinced that we are doing what the Lord wants and that the Lord will not permit such a violent end to our work. I refuse to act on the basis of what might happen if Elder Benson became president. ⁵

Ezra Taft Benson, in effect, “fired” them several years before he became church president. Always the optimist in public, and even usually in private, Leonard on one occasion confided to Robert Flanders, a colleague from the RLDS Church, that he understood the reality that he faced:

One day Leonard said, “I have to drive to Provo this afternoon, Bob. Would you like to ride with me?” I said, “Sure.” We got out of town on the highway, and he said, “They are going to shut me down. I knew this would happen someday. I didn’t know it would be this soon. But I have tried to get everything in print that I could get in print while there was time.”

I don't think Leonard Arrington was capable of bitterness. But there was a depth of sadness. It was tragic, and you can't confront tragedy of that magnitude happily. ⁶

Yet, despite the sadness, there was also a deep-down realization that temporary setbacks would recede, for his mission had been just and he fulfilled it well. Shortly before his death, he sent me a handwritten letter whose final sentences confirmed his ultimate optimism: "It is satisfying and sufficient that people you regard as faithful servants approve. We felt that way with approval from the First Presidency and a majority of the Apostles." ⁷

ENDNOTES

- 1 Linda King Newell, interviewed October 25, 2009.
- 2 Robert Flanders, interviewed May 18, 2009.
- 3 Ezra Taft Benson, March 28, 1976,
<http://speeches.byu.edu/index.php?act=viewitem&id=1148>
(accessed January 30, 2014).
- 4 David Whittaker, interviewed May 22, 2008.
- 5 "Annual Comment on the History Division," *LJAD*, January 1, 1980.
- 6 Robert Flanders, interviewed May 18, 2009.
- 7 Leonard J. Arrington to the author, August 17, 1998.