

AN OLIVE LEAF

“... plucked from the Tree of Paradise, the Lord’s message of peace to us.”
(See History of the Church 1:316 and D&C 88.)

“REVERENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY”

By Leonard Arrington

Since his controversial release as Church historian, in 1982, many have hoped that Leonard Arrington would tell his side of the story. In the just-released *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Illinois, 1998), the dean of Mormon history provides a well-written, engaging tale of the challenges when professionalism and ministering attempt to collaborate. This excerpt is from the concluding chapter.

THERE ARE MANY challenges in writing religious history. On the one hand, the historian must convey the facts of history in an honest and straightforward manner. The historian must strive against the conscious or unconscious distortion of events to fit the demands of current fashions; he or she must renounce wishful thinking. On the other hand, many religious historians wish also to bear testimony of the reality of spiritual experience. We all know by now that the pretense of “objectivity” can be a hypocritical dodge to cover up unspoken, perhaps even incorrect, assumptions.

Speaking for myself and, I think, for most of the historians who have worked with me, some tension between our professional training and our religious commitments seems inevitable. Our testimonies tell us that the Lord is in this work, and for this we see abundant supporting evidence. But our historical training warns us that the accurate perception of spiritual phenomena is elusive—not subject to unquestionable verification. We are tempted to wonder if our religious beliefs are intruding beyond their proper limits. Our faith tells us that there is moral meaning and spiritual significance in historical events. But we cannot be completely confident that any particular judgment or meaning or significance is unambiguously clear. If God’s will cannot be wholly divorced from the actual



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course of history, neither can it be positively identified with it. Although we see evidence that God’s love and power have frequently broken in upon the ordinary course of human affairs, our caution in declaring this is reinforced by our justifiable disapproval of chroniclers who take the easy way out and use divine miracles as a short-circuit of a casual explanation that is obviously, or at least defensibly, naturalistic. We must not use history as a storehouse from which deceptively simple moral lessons may be drawn at random.

I hope that LDS historians will be known for the sense of reverence and responsibility with which they approach their assignments. There should exist a certain fidelity toward and respect for the documents and a certain feeling for human tragedy and triumph. LDS history is the history of the Latter-day Saints, in their worship and prayer, in their mutual relationships, in their conflicts and contracts, in their social dealings, in their solitude and estrangement, in their high aspirations, and in their fumbling weaknesses and failures. We must be responsive to the whole amplitude of human concerns—to human life in all its rich variety and diversity, in all its misery and grandeur, in all its ambiguity and contradictions.

Undeniably, part of that human life is its religious dimension. Latter-day Saint historians will not do their subject justice, will not adequately understand the people they are writing about, if they leave out the power of testimony as a motivating factor in their lives. . . . The great histories of our people . . . must reflect both the rigor of competent scholarship and the sensitivity to recognize, as the New Testament records, that “the wind bloweth where it listeth” (John 3:8). ☐