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Conversations with Mormon Historians

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CONVERSATIONS WITH MORMON HISTORIANS

Craig L. Foster

Review of Alexander L. Baugh and Reid L. Neilson, eds., *Conversations with Mormon Historians*, Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, in cooperation with Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, 2015. pp.580 + xv, including index. \$34.99.

Abstract: *Conversations with Mormon Historians is a compilation of interviews with sixteen Latter-day Saint scholars. The book reveals why they went into their chosen professions, their rise to prominence as historians, and their thoughts regarding important topics such as the Prophet Joseph Smith and the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

Part of understanding history is to understand the historians who wrote it. In other words, to truly grasp historical interpretations and perspectives, we need to know the historians behind the works of historical writing. Only then can we recognize how and why various historical events and people are being portrayed.

The field of Mormon history, like any other field of study, has its luminaries. Perhaps the best known and respected of these is the late Leonard J. Arrington, recognized for years as the leading Mormon historian and labeled by some as the founder of New Mormon History. It appears, however, that Arrington never mentioned New Mormon History in anything he published, nor is there anything in his papers at Utah State University indicating he paid much attention to the debate over what exactly constituted New Mormon History. Arrington, who passed away in 1999 after a stellar career, was a LDS Church historian and the founder and first president of the Mormon History Association. He earned a plethora of accolades and awards for his groundbreaking research and publications.

Arrington, however, was not alone in well-earned recognition and respect. Over the years there have been a number of men and women

who have, for lack of a better phrase, become stars in the field of Mormon history and who deserve special notice for their contributions to better understanding the Latter-day Saint story.

Conversations with Mormon Historians presents the histories of sixteen “remarkable men and women who have made careers out of researching, writing, and teaching about the past” (vii). It contains interviews previously published in *Mormon Historic Studies* and *Religious Educator*. All sixteen historians were born and raised in the United States as a part of the Silent Generation — those born between 1925 and 1942 (vii) — and have either passed on, retired, or are in the twilight of their careers.

The sixteen historians in the book are Thomas G. Alexander; James B. Allen; Richard Lloyd Anderson; Milton V. Backman, Jr.; LaMar C. Berrett; Claudia L. Bushman; Richard L. Bushman; Kenneth W. Godfrey; Dean C. Jessee; Stanley B. Kimball; Carol Cornwall Madsen; Robert J. Matthews; Max H. Parkin; Charles S. Peterson; Larry C. Porter; and Laurel Thatcher Ullrich.

A compilation such as this leads to questions about the criteria for inclusion. Why these particular sixteen scholars were selected while others (such as Davis Bitton, Glen M. Leonard, Jan Shippo, and Ronald W. Walker) were excluded is unclear. These four scholars were also members of the Silent Generation, and they are well respected for their important contributions to LDS history. The volume could have been enriched by their additional insights.

Nevertheless, the exceptional historians discussed in this book have been able to unite their work with their passion, making a living doing what they would have otherwise done for pleasure. In the process, they “inherited and helped lead what has been termed the ‘New Mormon History’” (viii). This approach is described as attempting to present history in a dispassionate, professional way, avoiding the polemics of previous generations.¹

Admittedly, such an approach to religious history is fraught with the potential problems of producing a history either too defensive — or too critical — of that which is held in sacred reverence by millions. The historians discussed in the book have traversed this proverbial minefield with varying degrees of success.

Obviously, each interview is a work unto itself, independent of the others; some interviews are better and more informative than others.

1 D. Michael Quinn, ed., *The New Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), viii.

Nevertheless, there are several interesting points this reader took away from the interviews as a whole. The first is that most of these historians came from humble origins and rose to prominence among Mormon scholars through perseverance and hard work. The second is how small the world of Mormon scholarship really is. And the third point is that, for almost all of these scholars, their research into early Mormonism reinforced and strengthened their testimonies of both Joseph Smith and the gospel.

A number of these historians grew up in rural and small town environments. James Allen, for example, lived for a time in Star Valley, Wyoming, and then spent his teen years in Logan (37). Kenneth Godfrey grew up on a small farm in northern Utah (234), and Dean Jessee grew up in Springville where he “learned the fine arts” of gardening, milking cows, hauling hay, irrigating, digging ditches, shoveling manure, and other necessary farm activities (278). Stanley Kimball was born and spent his first fourteen years in Farmington (309), while Robert Matthews was from Evanston, Wyoming, and grew up doing farm work and construction (384). Charles Peterson was from Snowflake, Arizona (450), and Laurel Thatcher Ullrich grew up in Sugar City, Idaho, where her father farmed (532).

Most of those who were born and raised in larger cities like Salt Lake City; Los Angeles and Oakland, California; and Portland, Oregon also experienced humble, sometimes difficult beginnings. Most noted in their interviews being born in and experiencing both the difficulties of the Great Depression and the lean years of World War II where, whether on the home front or on the battlefield, they learned about sacrifice and service. Richard Anderson spent his World War II military service in the southeast United States (76) and LaMar Berrett served in the Battle of the Bulge and then fought his way across Germany into Czechoslovakia (128–29). Milton Backman enlisted in the Maritime Service, but World War II ended before he could actually serve. Instead, he served a year and a half in the Korean War (106–7).

The world of Mormon scholarship is relatively small, and it is not surprising these various historians knew each other. Nor is it surprising that Leonard Arrington impacted the careers of almost all of these sixteen scholars. What was surprising to this reader, however, was how many other connections to important Mormon scholars existed in the group.

Thomas Alexander, for example, considered George Ellsworth to be an early mentor (9). So did James Allen, who also considered

Eugene Campbell an early mentor (38–9). Both Ellsworth and Leonard Arrington taught at Utah State University. LaMar Berrett was influenced by both Gustive O. Larsen and Richard Poll (131), and Larson also had a great influence on Kenneth Godfrey (247). Godfrey also studied under Milton V. Backman; in fact, it was Backman who encouraged Godfrey to research and write about Nauvoo (249). Backman, Campbell, Larson, and Poll all taught at Brigham Young University.

Carol Madsen's graduate committee included Davis Bitton and Brigham Madsen (359-360), both of whom taught at the University of Utah. Hugh Nibley was both a mentor and good friend to Richard Anderson (82). Max Parkin became interested in history because of T. Edgar Lyon (414). Parkin also took classes from Richard Anderson, Milton Backman, Richard Bushman, Truman Madsen and Hugh Nibley (416). Charles Peterson became interested in history because of Richard Poll (459), but was greatly influenced by LeRoy Hafen (463). Laurel Thatcher Ullrich was influenced by Lowell Bennion and his writings, but also considered both Richard and Claudia Bushman to be close friends and mentors (546, 540).

Ullrich was not alone in citing fellow Latter-day Saint scholars as close friends, colleagues, and mentors. Throughout their careers, almost all of the sixteen scholars found opportunities to associate and collaborate with each other. LaMar Berrett marveled about his own career: "... to think that I worked with some of the giants in scholarship at BYU is incredible to me" (136). It was, no doubt, a sentiment some of the others held.

But what was most significant to this reader were the comments by these historians that their study of Joseph Smith and the early history of the Church reinforced and strengthened their faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of these individuals had the opportunity to use their impressive knowledge and skills on the Joseph Smith Papers project. Through their research, they gained an appreciation for Joseph Smith, the man and the prophet.

Milton Backman described Joseph Smith the man as unpolished and not well educated but who, as a prophet, "dictated the Book of Mormon and unfolded remarkable revelations" (113). Richard Bushman remarked, "No one book, no one biographer, can encompass a figure as complex as Joseph Smith" (187). He then explained how an idealized version of Joseph Smith would be vulnerable to unrealistic expectations, but more in-depth research into the prophet had helped Latter-day Saints

understand that “a flaw in Joseph Smith doesn’t shake our foundation. We are ready for a more realistic Joseph” (188).

Max Parkin also studied Joseph Smith with a scholarly, open approach. He explained, “I gained a resolve to be forthright and encouraging with any student who might have his or her own issues with our religious heritage. I would also try to avoid building spiritual traps for students, as we teachers sometimes do, carelessly teaching things that later have to be untaught” (420–21). Parkin described his own initial crisis of faith as a result of reading Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*, but explained that doing his own research had allowed him to come “out of the struggle with a greater understanding of Joseph Smith and with tougher spiritual convictions” (420).

He was not alone. LaMar Berrett announced, “My testimony is built on a study of the Prophet Joseph Smith. I’m a believer ...” (144). Dean Jessee admitted that during his long career in church history, his interest in Joseph Smith “has been paramount,” and the more he saw of the original sources from Joseph Smith, “the more convinced I am of his veracity” (303). Richard Anderson stated that his “confidence that Joseph Smith was a true and truthful prophet” came in part from his extensive research, and he believes that “Joseph is a credible witness, fully supported in his testimony of core Restoration events by other credible witnesses” (102).

Perhaps Larry Porter put it best when he said, “For an LDS historian, there is an added increment if you are a believer, and that is that the Spirit can confirm things of personal import relative to the establishment of the gospel” (528). That is something LDS members, historians or not, can take away from this book.

Conversations with Mormon Historians is an important book for anyone interested in Restoration history and historiography. One hopes that in the future there will be another volume or two containing interviews with Mormon historians from later generations, particularly those who fell just outside the Silent Generation — Jill Mulvay Derr and Richard L. Jensen, for examples — who could add their insights and testimonies to a fascinating and important subject for all Latter-day Saints.

Craig L. Foster earned an MA and MLIS at Brigham Young University. He is also an accredited genealogist and works as a research consultant at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. He has published articles

about different aspects of Mormon history. He is the author of two books, co-author of another, and co-editor of a three volume series discussing the history and theology of plural marriage. Foster is also on the editorial board of the John Whitmer Historical Association Journal.

