

A Note on Reviewing Books

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In sorting through some of the books owned by the late Dale Morgan, I came upon a typescript of his review of Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958). He praised the work with such remarks as "I cannot imagine that anyone seriously interested in Mormon history . . . will be able to do without it" and "as a good descriptive work, *Great Basin Kingdom* is an immense accomplishment." However, and much more important, he performed the real task of a book reviewer: that of giving a tough evaluation of the work. He pointed out, for instance, that while the subtitle stated that the work was an economic history of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1930, the period before Utah was "treated in only the most sketchy manner, and without much real comprehension of the operative economic factors." He also chided Dr. Arrington that his omission of non-Mormon economics was actually unrealistic for the task he proposed to complete. Finally, Morgan wrote that Dr. Arrington, unable to resist the wealth of information he had amassed, took it along the "road toward conversion into a general history of the Mormons in Utah—without, however, following through as he would have had to do had the writing of such a history been his announced purpose."

In every sense, this review is that of a superb scholar reviewing an equally eminent scholar. The reviewer has three basic functions: (1) to inform both readers and practicing scholars that the book is available and to tell them whether it is worth purchasing or not, (2) to evaluate the work so that the reader has a guide to its strengths and weaknesses,

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and (3) to notify an author that his book will be subjected to a good critical review to force him to be more honest in the work. What was disquieting about reading Mr. Morgan's fine review is the fact that it pointed up the real lack of tough reviews of most of the works published recently by Mormons on Mormonism. Possibly part of the problem is that most authors and reviewers are well acquainted with each other, both belonging to the Mormon History Association and, in many cases, being on the same faculty. One has the disturbing fear that the lack of critical reviewing could be in the hope that the reviewer's own works will be treated kindly, or that it will be uncomfortable to face a colleague after having just torpedoed his work.

An example of such weak reviewing are the reviews in *BYU Studies*, *Utah Historical Quarterly*, and *Dialogue of Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, edited by F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair and Paul M. Edwards (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973). It is a collection of essays on Mormonism, only a few of which are of any quality; the rest are pedestrian, adding little to the knowledge of Mormonism. After studying the book, I was interested in what the reviewers had to say. The first review I read was in *BYU Studies*. I was appalled that the reviewer saw none of the faults that I thought were so evident. In this case the problem was a tactical one. As noted above, no book should be given to a friend or a close colleague of the author. It places too great a burden on the reviewer and the result too often is less than critical, as was the review in *Studies*.

The second review was in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*. It also praised the book calling it refreshing, for an obscure reason. What enchanted this reviewer most was that the work contained essays by both LDS and RLDS scholars, and he used an obscure meaning of the word "essay" to show that it is just a beginning of this kind of scholarly collaboration.

The reviewer in *Dialogue* had lavish praise of the work, noting that the material had not been published elsewhere. In this he might be technically right, although most of the material is certainly available elsewhere. The problem in this review is that it is in the wrong place. If it were in a newspaper or general periodical, it would point the uninformed to

aspects of Mormonism. But for the mature reader of *Dialogue*, a much more serious review should have been done.

It is not my purpose to review *Restoration Movement*; however, its reviewers certainly demonstrate graphically the problem of the lack of critical reviewing. One does not expect a hatchet job such as the one in *Dialogue* on Gustive Larson's *Americanization of Utah for Statehood*; one must hope for reviews done with fairness, such as Thomas Alexander's review of the same work in *BYU Today*.