

Book Reviews

Arrington, Leonard J. *Charles C. Rich: Mormon General and Western Frontiersman*. Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1974. 386 pp. \$7.50.

Reviewed by Rodman W. Paul, Harkness Professor of History at the California Institute of Technology, Pasadena.

Few trends in recent western historical writing have been as important or as encouraging as the boom in Mormon studies, and in this boom the Mormons themselves have played the principal role. As if tired of waiting for non-Mormons to provide objective new insights into the often controversial history of the Mormon people, young Mormon scholars have plunged enthusiastically into research and debate over their group's past.

In their efforts they have been helped greatly by several institutional changes. One was the founding of *Dialogue* in 1966 as a journal for serious and open discussion of the big intellectual uncertainties, including historical interpretations, that intelligent younger Mormons face as they carry into the late twentieth century a pattern of beliefs and attitudes that reflect the early nineteenth century and that came into being among a simpler, less educated population than today's oncoming generation. Almost simultaneously the Mormon History Association was established to provide a forum for consideration of historical issues, and to draw together the growing number of scholars with a special interest in that particular subject. A third change was the wise decision of the Church authorities to open the Church's rich archival collections to scholars, so that henceforth books and articles could be based on solid research rather than on inference and legend. Equally important was the decision to appoint as Church Historian Leonard J. Arrington, the ablest and best-known Mormon historian and the first professionally trained scholar to be

called to that post. Along with Arrington's new Church position has gone a "name" chair in western history at Brigham Young University and the directorship of the Center for Western History at that same university, so that Arrington now has an opportunity to exert a wide influence.

As part of his program to develop modern Mormon scholarship, Arrington has established a new Church-sponsored "Mormon Heritage" series, under his own general editorship, while at the same time he has contributed the present biography of Charles C. Rich as the first volume in Brigham Young University's new series, "Studies in Mormon History," which is under the general editorship of another well-known scholar, James B. Allen. Parenthetically it should be remarked that these two series take their place alongside a veritable galaxy of already existing publishing outlets at Salt Lake City, Provo, and Logan, with the result that there are more opportunities for publishing in Mormon history today than in any other field of western history. What's more, since the Church authorities have permitted Arrington to recruit a good-sized staff of professionally trained historians, in addition to those who were already on the faculties of Utah's several universities, there are probably more Utahns studying the Mormons today than there are Texans studying cowboys!

Arrington's biography of Charles C. Rich thus can be viewed not only as having significance in its own right, but also as constituting an illustration of the nature of the new Mormon historical scholarship. In choosing Rich as his subject, Arrington gave himself an assignment that was at once inviting and competitive—inviting because Rich has traditionally been regarded as being less controversial than most early Mormon leaders; competitive because Rich is one of the very few prominent Mormons for whom we have long had a passable biography, John Henry Evans' *Charles Coulson Rich: Pioneer Builder of the West* (1936). While Evans' book was laudatory and uncritical, it nevertheless had a sincerity and courage that made it attractive. Evans consciously asked himself the big questions: Why did Rich decide to become a Mormon? Why did he become a polygamist? Why did he obey every one of his Church's severe demands for service?

In reworking the story of Rich's life of dedicated service, Arrington has been able to study a much larger body of

primary material than was available to Evans. Significantly, Arrington tells us that "the most extensive collection of manuscript sources" for this book was in the Church Archives. In other words, the very publication of this volume is a justification for the decision to open the Church Archives to research. But so, too, does Arrington's use of the manuscripts show how much of an improvement the new scholarship is over the old. Where Evans was simple and almost casual in his use of evidence, and never documented his assertions, Arrington is careful, precise, and thorough, and backs up his text with forty pages of footnotes in fine print, plus a detailed bibliography that makes evident the comprehensive nature of his search for evidence. Where Evans handled his subject so uncritically and with so little detail that the reader was given no opportunity to sense any flaws in Rich's character or performance, Arrington marches determinedly forward with a careful and full description of each episode. He does not editorialize or speculate and rarely points to possible shortcomings in Rich or the Mormons; rather, his method seems to be to present the facts so fully that they will truly speak for themselves. In part this approach has been forced upon the author by Rich himself, for the latter seems to have been a taciturn man whose journals "usually told what he did and what he saw, but not how he did things, why he did them, or what his concerns were as an administrator. . . .

"In journal writing he was inclined to pay more attention to unique and remarkable sights than to his own problems and decisions."

If this sometimes leads to a kind of blandness, a striking example is the handling of Rich's extra marriages. After Rich and his devoted wife had gone through hardships together, suddenly we are told, in a chapter that deals primarily with the bloody collision between the Mormons of Nauvoo and their "gentile" neighbors of Carthage, Illinois, that in a period of eight days Rich acquired three additional wives, and a year later a fourth. With impressive understatement, Arrington comments merely that "Rich's new responsibilities must have seemed almost overwhelming in the face of the challenges confronting the Mormons." Way down at the end of the book, just before the short concluding chapter, there is a separate chapter entitled "The Wives and Families of Charles C. Rich."

Here one page is devoted to a cautious review of the very limited evidence as to how the first Mrs. Rich felt about polygamy and the other wives.

As this suggests, one of the consistent characteristics of the book is its subordination of the role of women, a subordination that probably reflects very accurately their actual role in nineteenth century Mormon life. Repeatedly Arrington points out that Rich was always being dispatched on some new mission for the Church, while leaving his wives to fend for themselves under conditions of real hardship. A thoughtful reader is left to wonder whether Brigham Young ever paused, in compassion, before exacting still another sacrifice of an already overburdened family that had given far more than its fair share. And equally the reader is left to ask himself, why did Rich always agree to go?

Another interesting problem is the question of miracles. Mormon history is replete with miracles, for the Mormons, like the Old Testament folk for whom they felt such a kinship, knew that the Lord was on their side and saw His hand in each fortunate occurrence. Again Arrington simply recounts the events as precisely as the evidence permits, and editorializes no more than to remark that the Mormons saw the working of the Lord's will in this or that particular happening. The famous seagulls, whom Mormon legend credits with saving the 1848 crop from an onslaught of crickets, suffer some reduction in importance when thus tested by contemporary evidence.

In summary, this is a book that is always honest, thorough, and sensible, but not much given to speculative probing. It is written in a style that is clear and pleasantly readable. In his bibliographical essay Arrington speaks of his book as a "history" of Rich, instead of using a more personal term such as "biography" or "life." The distinction is important, for the reader is brought tantalizingly close to Rich's personality without ever feeling that he truly knows the man. The details of Rich's life are here, but the very fulness of those details makes one long for the additional insights that could have been provided by interpretive analysis and by a more deliberate attempt to reconcile conflicting evidence. We are given abundant reason to appreciate that Rich was a fine leader, but it isn't clear how he won people's confidence save that he was careful and considerate. Again, we know that

he served often as a preacher and chairman of meetings, yet he does not seem articulate. He loved his wives and children and yet made them get along without him. He could be farsighted but also stubborn and literal. If only we could look into the mind and soul of this fascinatingly contradictory personality, how much we would understand about the Mormons of the heroic era!

Bitton, Davis. *Wit & Whimsy in Mormon History*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974. 72 pp. \$1.95.

Reviewed by Dennis L. Lythgoe, associate professor of history at Massachusetts State College at Bridgewater.

Davis Bitton does not pretend to present a complete volume of Mormon humor. Rather, he has compiled a small collection of passages that he especially liked, "curious situations," not necessarily "humorous in a strict sense," drawn either from early Utah newspapers or from material in the Church Historical Department. The concept is refreshing, and some of the selections are choice, even hilarious. Most memorable is the extract from Perrigrine Sessions' Diary of 1853 about Sarah Kirkman rattling a chain at night to frighten her husband into believing he was being punished for failing to say his prayers. Almost as amusing is an account taken from an 1880 *Juvenile Instructor* describing playful boys teasing a sleeping member in church. Priddy Meeks' colorful 1850 advice on dress standards could bring needed perspective to modern-day zealots. And the *Deseret News'* detailed, practical explanation of the Word of Wisdom is a gem.

However, the rest of the collection is inconsistent: many selections are just not funny, and several could have been deleted because they do not represent "Mormon" wit (e.g., an Irish letter reproduced in the *Deseret News* because it was "appreciated" by the Mormons). While John Pulsipher's terse proposal of marriage by letter is typical of pioneer days, others are more amusing. For instance, in his recent biography of Charles C. Rich, Leonard Arrington includes an 1837 letter written by Rich proposing marriage to Sarah Pea that is a treasure in Mormon literature.