



# From the BATTLEFIELD to the VATICAN to the CLASSROOM: The Story of Eldin Ricks

by Richard O. Cowan

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**E**ldin Ricks was the thirteenth person to join BYU's religion faculty. Although many of today's readers may not recognize his name, he was well known to his contemporaries, and his contributions to Religious Education and Church members' study of the standard works were substantial.

He was born March 26, 1916, in Rexburg, Idaho, but his family subsequently moved to the Los Angeles area, where Eldin graduated from high school. Following his mission, Eldin decided to finish his college education at Brigham Young University and graduated in 1941 with a bachelor's degree. He then began teaching English and seminary at Overton in southern Nevada.

Even before going on his mission, Eldin had contemplated becoming a chaplain in the army reserve but was told that he would need an undergraduate college degree, plus three years of graduate study and three years in active ministry. With the outbreak of hostilities, however, the requirement for graduate study was dropped. This meant that Eldin's college degree, two years in the mission field, and one year as a seminary teacher qualified him to be a chaplain, and he was eventually assigned to duty in North Africa and Italy.

The World War II requirement that servicemen had to register either as Catholic or Protestant posed a challenge for the Latter-day Saint chaplain. There was

no way Chaplain Ricks could readily identify members of his faith. He devised a unique and effective solution. He painted a beehive and the word Deseret on the side of his Jeep. These symbols would probably mean nothing to most but would be readily recognized by Latter-day Saints. This tactic worked and many young men and women immediately established contact with him.<sup>1</sup>

While visiting Rome in August 1945, a few months following World War II, Chaplain Ricks had a unique experience. He and three other Latter-day Saints planned to attend a public audience with Pope Pius XII at which up to two thousand people might be present. He first went to visit Beth Davis, whom he had met at BYU and who was then working at the United States Mission to the Holy See



Opposite: The 1954 chaplain school Ricks attended at Fort Slocum in New York. (Eldin is the far left on the fourth row.)

Left: Eldin Ricks as an army chaplain in 1943–44.

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(comparable to an embassy at the Vatican). After chatting for a little while, he casually remarked to her, “Beth, we’re on our way over to see the pope.”

“Oh, would you like to see the pope?” she responded.

With surprise, he realized that she might be able to arrange a personal visit. “Beth, if you could arrange a private audience for us, I’d love you for life,” the young chaplain remarked.

Beth introduced Chaplain Ricks to her superior, suggesting the possibility of arranging the audience. Rather skeptically, the woman asked about the purpose of the visit. Having wondered for some time what it would be like to meet the pope and give him a copy of the Book of Mormon, he answered, “To present the pope with a copy of Mormon scriptures.” Eldin held his breath until she acknowledged that this would be a good reason. She said, however, that such visits were arranged from two to six months in advance and asked the chaplain when he would like to schedule the appointment. “It doesn’t matter to us,” he replied, “as long as it is before two o’clock tomorrow afternoon.” She laughed, doubting whether this would be possible, but instructed him to call back later that afternoon. After calling, he was delighted to learn the appointment had been made.

At 12:30 the next afternoon, Eldin and his companions were at the Vatican. After passing through a series

of rooms, they were just outside the chamber where the pope granted private audiences. They were told that it was customary for visitors to kneel and kiss the pope’s ring. They wanted to be courteous but felt it would not be appropriate to do either. Finally a bell tinkled, and they were ushered in. Pope Pius XII extended his hand in greeting, and the visitors shook hands with him. He initiated the conversation by asking how long they had been in Italy. Then, after visiting about his trip to the United States a few years earlier, the pope offered to give his guests souvenirs of their visit: crucifixes, missals (books containing what is said and sung during mass), or other mementos. After accepting these gifts, Chaplain Ricks announced: “We too would like to leave a souvenir of our visit with you. We have visited St. Peter’s Cathedral, and there we see the treasures brought by the rulers and representatives of many nations. Our gift by comparison is of very little value in dollars and cents, but the message it contains is of infinite value.” Eldin then handed the pope a copy of the Book of Mormon and explained that it was a record of God’s dealings with a branch of the house of Israel that inhabited ancient America.

“Do you mean that Christ was in America?” the pope inquired.

“Yes, sir,” the chaplain affirmed. Eldin then reminded the pope of Christ’s promise to visit “other sheep” as

Right: Ricks wanted to meet Pope Pius XII to give him a Book of Mormon.

Below: In 1953 Sidney B. Sperry and Eldin Ricks led BYU's first Travel Study tour to the Holy Land. In coming years he would visit the Holy Land over twenty-five times.



recorded in John chapter 10. The pope seemed sufficiently interested that Eldin reached for the book and turned down the page at 3 Nephi chapter 8, explaining that here was the record of how the Savior's promise had been fulfilled.

As Eldin returned the book to him, the pope asked, "You mean I may have this?"

"Yes, sir," Eldin eagerly affirmed, "we wish it to be our gift to you, and we urge you to read it. It is a message for all people everywhere, and we are certain of its truth."<sup>2</sup>

Back in civilian life, Eldin took graduate classes and taught religion part-time at BYU before receiving his master's degree at the University of Southern California in 1949. That same year on June 9, he married Irene Hailes from Salt Lake City. Like Eldin, she had military experience

during World War II, having served as a member of the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service. Elder Harold B. Lee, the Church's Servicemen's Coordinator, brought them together by assigning them to a committee planning programs for returning military personnel. Eldin and Irene became the parents of four children.

In the fall of 1949, Eldin also began his career as a teacher of religion at BYU (just three years after Hugh B. Brown and Hugh Nibley had joined the faculty). For the next thirty-two years, Eldin Ricks served as a beloved professor, teaching and sharing his testimony with thousands of students.

In 1953 Sidney B. Sperry and Eldin Ricks led BYU's first Travel Study tour to the Holy Land. Eldin had first visited Palestine while serving as a chaplain in North Africa. In coming years he would visit the Holy Land over twenty-five times, and this significant part of the world would become an important area of focus in his personal research.

The scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon, were an important area of emphasis. After only three months in the mission field, he had the idea for what

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would become his most popular publication: "As I examined several different scripture aids, I noted that the emphasis was almost exclusively on Bible references. I began to form lists of my own that also included references from latter-day scripture." He believed this project would be of benefit to missionaries and gospel students everywhere. Therefore, after his mission, he worked on it "during every available free moment for the next three years." The first edition of his *Combination Reference* appeared in 1943, and many more editions followed. This book became a trusted tool for generations of missionaries and was translated into other languages, the first edition in Spanish appearing in 1951. As a missionary in the early 1960s, President Cecil O. Samuelson said the volume was "a tremendous help in my studies, talk preparation, and general understanding of the scriptures."



He added, “These were the days before the Topical Guide published with our current editions of the scriptures was available. The little *Ready Reference* was a very handy and convenient tool. I pay great tribute to Eldin Ricks for his tremendous contributions in teaching the gospel and helping others teach the gospel.”<sup>3</sup>

Eldin Ricks had a significant impact on the religion curriculum at BYU. In 1960 a committee suggested that the basic religion course should be “in Doctrines and Principles of the Gospel and Practical LDS Living.”<sup>4</sup> A group of faculty members, however, strongly believed that the Book of

Mormon should be the basic course. The relative merits of each proposal were discussed vigorously and at great length in religion faculty meetings through the remainder of that year. In November several faculty members, including Eldin, wrote to university president Ernest L. Wilkinson and the Board of Trustees advocating the Book of Mormon course.<sup>5</sup> On March 15, 1961, Elders Harold B. Lee and Marion G. Romney of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles strongly recommended that “the basic course required for all freshmen at the Brigham Young University and in every other Church school be the Book of Mormon.”<sup>6</sup>

During the 1960s, Eldin authored his New Testament and Book of Mormon study guides, which were used by thousands of students in coming decades. *The Case for the Book of Mormon Witnesses* appeared in 1961. Other publications followed. In *King of Kings*, he presented a harmony of the Gospels’ accounts of the life of Christ. He authored an appendix for his special wide-margin edition of the Book of Mormon suited for in-depth study and note taking. He prepared a complete electronic database for the scriptures, which proved a significant resource when the Church published its new edition of the standard works in 1979–81. Eldin’s *Thorough Concordance of the LDS Standard Works* was published by FARMS in 1995 after his death.

Professor Ricks retired from the Religious Education faculty in 1981. “Eldin Ricks was a great, kind man—a real scholar,” affirmed Dean Robert J. Matthews. “As a teacher he was very thorough. He did not leave one stone unturned.”<sup>7</sup>

Brother Ricks died of heart failure on September 7, 1992. His contributions, however, live on. Although most present BYU students may not know his name, they are nevertheless being blessed by the scripture-based curriculum he helped put in place. Similarly, Latter-day Saints around the world are strengthened by study resources in the standard works that are built on the foundation laid by Eldin Ricks. ❧



Left: The first edition of the *Combination Reference* appeared in 1943, and many more editions followed. The first edition in Spanish appeared in 1951. Courtesy of Richard B. Crookston.

Below: Eldin and Irene Ricks in 1986.



1 Irene Ricks interview, April 23, 2008, interview by Richard O. Cowan.  
2 Eldin Ricks interview, November 4, 1983, interview by Richard O. Cowan; recording in author’s possession.  
3 Cecil O. Samuelson to Richard O. Cowan, April 28, 2008.  
4 General Education Committee Report, May 1960, 2.

5 For extracts from this correspondence, see “Historian’s Corner” herein.

6 Harold B. Lee and Marion G. Romney to the Church Board of Education and BYU Board of Trustees, March 15, 1961.

7 Thomas McHoes, “Former BYU Teacher Dies at Age 76,” *Daily Universe*, September 10, 1992.