

Eugene England and the Rise and Progress of Mormon Letters

By *Richard H. Cracroft*

This essay overviews Eugene England’s many contributions toward the creation of a vibrant Mormon literary culture as a founder and contributor to journals and various organizations, as Mormon literature’s primary anthologizer, as well as through his own writing. It appeared in the tribute issue *Sunstone* published shortly after England’s passing.

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For years I have been wailing for someone to do justice in recording in song and story and painting and sculpture the story of the Restoration, the reestablishment of the kingdom of God on earth, the struggles and frustrations, the apostasies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions of those first decades [of Mormonism].

—SPENCER W. KIMBALL¹

EUGENE ENGLAND, IN his 1995 essay, “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects,” noted, “It is remarkable that what many see as the first major blossoming of a mature Mormon literature commenced about the time” President Kimball called upon Mormon artists and writers to do justice to the story of the Restoration (see quote above).² Equally noteworthy, Mormon literary criticism also began to blossom about this time. Indeed, Gene’s remarkable contributions to these ends constitute the single major literary force and influence during the last quarter of the twentieth century—an era in which Mormon letters, slow aborning, stood up, stretched, and self-consciously fluffed its youthful feathers. And, “Mark this, Brother Rigdon,” future literary historians will bear me out: Eugene England was the principal fluffer!

Gene England was for Mormon *belles lettres* what his friend and contemporary Leonard J. Arlington was for Mormon history—and more so. The following is a clustering, though not comprehensive, of Gene’s phenomenal accomplishments as a founder, organizer, editor, and promoter of literary journals and institutions; as a teacher, literary scholar, and anthologizer; and, above all, as a superb writer of personal essays.

FOUNDER AND PROMOTER OF JOURNALS AND INSTITUTIONS

IN 1966, GENE rallied a small coterie of like-minded LDS students at Stanford University to found, edit, and publish *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.

The first issue created a sensation among Mormon intellectuals, and the journal soon boasted nearly eight thousand subscribers. Dialogue gave voice to young Mormon thinkers seeking to find a course between the heady and decidedly liberal doctrines of Mormon eternalism and continuing revelation, and the nagging anguish evoked by the Church's conservative policies that, among other things, prohibited blacks from holding the priesthood. Gene was aghast when his pure intentions for effecting honest and open dialogue turned divisive and garnered the opprobrium of leaders he loved and honored. Indeed, reading *Dialogue* became, for some, an indicator of faithlessness and disloyalty, a transgression on par with reading the *Salt Lake Tribune* or voting Democrat. Gene's move to St. Olaf College in 1970 necessitated his relinquishing the editorship to Robert Rees.

Dialogue opened the door for other publications, such as *Carpenter*, *Exponent II*, *Mountainwest*, *Seventh East Press*, *Student Review*, *This People*, and *Sunstone*. Gene's involvement with the Sunstone Foundation would reap for Gene an even stronger whirlwind, when, in the early 1990s, BYU and CES faculty were cautioned not to participate in Sunstone symposiums. This restriction pained Gene, who by then was serving on the Sunstone board of trustees. Gene only very reluctantly agreed to comply when personally asked by then-BYU President Rex D. Lee. But in the last few years preceding Gene's final illness, he had retired from BYU and was working as Writer in Residence at UVSC. And continuing to believe in the need for independent LDS journals, Gene again became very active in Sunstone, trying to revitalize the sagging organization.

On 27 February 1999, *BYU Studies* held its fortieth anniversary celebration, at which Gene was honored as the all-time most-published contributor. The honor uncovered a delightful academic irony, as the success of *Dialogue* had inspired BYU President Dallin H. Oaks to upgrade the *BYU Studies* budget and emphasize its importance in a conscious attempt to give LDS scholars an acceptable and viable alternative publication venue to *Dialogue*. (Indeed, some of us had dubbed Gene the "inadvertent midwife" to the rebirth of a rejuvenated *BYU Studies*.)

Gene was also an enthusiastic supporter, contributor to, and board member of *Wasatch Review International*, and he recently performed important roles for *Irreantum*, the official journal of the Association for Mormon Letters. For several years, Gene published a well-received book review column in *This People*, and he was a frequent contributor to *Exponent II*. He also regularly contributed to *Literature and Belief*, the journal of BYU's Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature.

In 1976, Gene joined other LDS literary scholars in founding the Association for Mormon Letters. He became one of its first presidents, served for several years as a member of its governing board, and regularly presented papers or participated in panels at the annual meeting of the association. Gene also helped establish an AML section of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association. In 1998, he was named an Honorary Lifetime Member of the AML.

TEACHER. CRITIC, ANTHOLOGIST OF MORMON LITERATURE

S OON AFTER JOINING the English department at Brigham Young University, Gene began teaching, among other courses, "The Literature of the Latter-day

Saints.” Gene usually taught two large sections of the popular course each year, often inviting many LDS and other contemporary writers to speak to his classes. He continued this practice when he moved to UVSC, quickly establishing the Mormon literature course. While there, he was also instrumental in laying the foundation for a religious studies program at UVSC. In recognition of his service, the college has recently inaugurated the Eugene England Religious Studies Lecture Series in his honor. Gene always saw literature as a means of personal expression, and he made the writing of personal essays integral to all of his courses. When he retired from BYU, many students praised Gene for his contribution to then intellectual and spiritual coming-of-age.

In his 1981 Charles Redd Center for the American West lecture, “The Dawning of a Brighter Day”: Mormon Literature After 150 Years,” Gene defined Mormon literature, explored the sources and literary potential in Mormon theology, history, and culture, and suggested the possibilities for the “dawning of a brighter” literary day.³ Fifteen years later, in “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects,” he incisively surveyed LDS literary history and assessed how far we had come and our hopeful prospects. These landmark essays will be a foundation and enduring point of departure for future literary historians. In 1996, Lavina Fielding Anderson teamed with Gene to edit *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature*.⁴ This volume collected the best in late twentieth-century Mormon literary criticism and will be the basis for Mormon literary studies of the twenty-first century.

Among his several scholarly articles on Mormon literature are “[Douglas] Thayer’s Ode to a Redtail Hawk”⁵; “Wilderness as Salvation in [Levi] Peterson’s *The Canyons of Grace*”⁶; “Beyond ‘Jack Fiction’: Recent Achievement in the Mormon Novel”;⁷ and his recent “Born Square: On Being Mormon, Western, and Human” about Wallace Stegner and Mormon literature.⁸ Among his several treatises (and a book of testimonies) on the Book of Mormon as literature is his “A Second Witness for the Logos: The Book of Mormon and Contemporary Literary Criticism.”⁹ Gene also wrote three short biographies of Levi S. Peterson, Leslie Norris, and Douglas H. Thayer for the *Dictionary of American Biography: Twentieth-Century American Western Writers*. In fact, one of my last conversations with Gene before his death concerned the proofs of a biography for the dictionary of his dear colleague, friend, and fishing buddy Douglas H. Thayer. “I want to be sure that is published,” he said. It was.¹⁰

Gene counted among his most important contributions to Mormon letters making available to a large readership the work of Mormon writers. He took genuine pleasure in promoting the writings of LDS authors. He delighted, for example, in Gideon Burton’s efforts to reprint important works of Mormon literature under the imprint of Tabernacle Books. He was proud of his and Dennis Clark’s anthology, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*,¹¹ the only anthology of its kind; and of his *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories*.¹² in which he collected stories by Mormon authors he thought deserved to be described as literary. He took every opportunity to encourage and to tout the work of deserving Mormon authors. I again note his and Lavina Fielding Anderson’s compilation of literary criticism, *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature*.

MORMON ESSAYIST

EUGENE'S MOST NOTABLE contribution to Mormon *belles lettres* and culture is in the personal essay—unquestionably Gene's personal favorite among literary genres. He wrote and published a small number of fine poems, some of which are included in *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, but again and again he'd press the personal essay. He wrote in "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects,"

It is the personal essay that seems to me to have the greatest potential for making a uniquely valuable Mormon contribution both to Mormon cultural and religious life and to that of others. Our theological emphasis on life as a stage where the individual self is both tested and created and our history of close self-examination in journals and testimony-bearing provide resources that have mainly been realized in great sermons and various forms of autobiography but increasingly find expression in powerful informal essays and personal and family storytelling.¹³

Fortunately for all of us, Gene gathered his personal essays into four fine collections. The first, *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience*,¹⁴ contains sixteen essays intended to demonstrate, he writes in the preface, "what the resources of the personal essay can be in a Mormon's search for self and community." The essays treat a number of Mormon themes, including withholding the priesthood from blacks, participation of Mormons in war, and our view of the roles of men and women.

In the essay "Enduring," he concludes with a tender but unblinking look at the plight of men and women tumbling amidst the whirlpool human condition, yet who are expected to endure it all in faith and hope and charity. Gene's essays shun facile, ready answers but always offer hope and love and the stiff upper-lip that keeps chaos and confusion at bay.

Perhaps Gene's most famous essay leads his second collection, *Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel*.¹⁵ This classic treatise argues that "the Church is the best medium, apart from marriage . . . for helping us gain salvation by grappling constructively with the oppositions of existence. . . . The Church is true because it is concrete, not theoretical. . . . In the life of the true Church, as in a good marriage, there are constant opportunities for all to serve, especially to learn to serve people we would not normally choose to serve—or possibly even associate with—and thus there are opportunities to learn to love unconditionally." In the book's other essays, Gene celebrates the openness and love of President Spencer W. Kimball, and wrestles with themes of humility, repentance, obedience, hope, and "intelligent discipleship." Every page calls us toward becoming full participants in the community of Saints.

In his third collection, *The Quality of Mercy*,¹⁶ Gene explores questions such as: How can we learn mercy as we serve in callings and interact with others? How can we show mercy to our spouses and children? How can we help victims of hunger,

poverty, disease, and war? How can we truly love our enemies, even a Hitler who caused the degradation and death of millions?

This collection also contains what is perhaps Gene's most vulnerable and introspective essay, "Easter Weekend," as well as celebrations of the merciful lives of Arlene Crawley, Lowell Bennion, and Jesus Christ.

In the preface to Gene's final collection, *Making Peace: Personal Essays*,¹⁷ he writes: "This book . . . is about ideas and ways of thinking that can help make peace. It is itself an effort to make peace. It brings together my most direct efforts, as a Christian, a literary critic, and a husband and father living in a violent, yet marvelous century, to test and explore central contraries of my life."

These eleven essays, dedicated to the memory of "Howard W. Hunter, Peacemaker," include "Healing and Making Peace—in the Church and the World"; "Perfection and Progression: Two Ways to Talk about God," in which he attempts to harmonize the two views of God as *absolute* and God as *progressing*; "On Bringing Peace to BYU with the Help of Brigham Young"; "Why Utah Mormons Should Become Democrats: Reflections on Partisan Politics" (Gene was a nominal Republican); "Monte Cristo," one of *his* favorites, and "The Prince of Peace," one of *my* favorites.

In the past year, additional essays have appeared. "On Being Mormon and Human"¹⁸ is another of Gene's attempts to understand his Mormonness within the context of his humanness. In "Playing in the Dark: Mormons Writing about Blacks and Blackness," which appeared just before his death, Gene reviews the image of the African American in Mormon literature and calls for us to build "the true Zion community Joseph Smith envisioned," and for us to slough off Mormon racism, which is "still haunting us, still hobbling our language and popular theology . . . and still largely avoided in Mormon literature."¹⁹ To the very end, Gene's was an urgent voice in the wilderness, calling our attention to the painful gap between our Christian profession and our stubborn and short-fallen reality.

ALTHOUGH GONE FROM us, Gene remains the planet nearest Kolob in our Mormon intellectual and literary firmament. His contribution to Mormon letters and culture is indelible, incomparable, and enduring. Still, Gene is larger than the aggregate of his contributions, considerable as they are. The gospel of Jesus Christ that he embraced was an all-encompassing social and spiritual gospel. And he embraced the gospel with an eye-single intensity and whole-hearted enthusiasm. He practiced what he preached. He was a friend to all, and so much more so if we were the underdog, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the waif, the heart-hurt or soul-sufferer—and who isn't, at times? In short, Eugene England was a Latter-day Saint, the likes of whom most of us will probably never see again. But, thanks to his soul-stirring eloquence, through his writing, we can glimpse his great soul and feel his enduring influence always.

NOTES

1. Spencer W. Kimball. "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," *Ensign* 7 (July 1977): 3–5.
2. Eugene England, "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," in *Mormon Americana*:

A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States, ed. David J. Whitaker (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995). 456

3. Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day': Mormon Literature after 150 Years," *BYU Studies* 22 (Spring 1982): 131–60.

4. Eugene England and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996).

5. Eugene England, "Thayer's Ode to a Redtail Hawk," *Mormon Letters Annual, 1983* (Salt Lake City: Association for Mormon Letters. 1984). 42–53.

6. Eugene England, "Wilderness as Salvation in Peterson's *The Canyons of Grace*," *Western American Literature* 19 (Spring 1984): 17–28.

7. Eugene England. "Beyond 'Jack Fiction': Recent Achievement in the Mormon Novel," *BYU Studies* 28 (Spring 1988): 97–109.

8. Eugene England, "Born Square: On Being Mormon, Western, and Human." *Literature and Belief* 21, no. 1–2 (2001).

9. Eugene England, "A Second Witness for the Logos: The Book of Mormon and Contemporary Literary Criticism," in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, vol. 2, eds. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City Deseret Book, 1990), 91–125.

10. Eugene England, "Levi S. Peterson," "Leslie Norris," "Douglas H. Thayer," in *Dictionary of American Biography: Twentieth-Century American Western Writers*, ed. Richard H. Cracroft (Detroit: Brucoli-Clark-Layman/The Gale Group, 1999).

11. Eugene England and Dennis Clark, eds., *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989).

12. Eugene England, ed., *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

13. England, "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," 477.

14. Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself* (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1984).

15. Eugene England, *Why the Church Is As True As the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986).

16. Eugene England, *The Quality of Mercy: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992).

17. Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995).

18. Eugene England, "On Being Mormon and Human," *Sunstone* 118 (April 2001): 76–78.

19 Eugene England, "Playing in the Dark: Mormons Writing about Blacks and Blackness," in *Colloquium: Essays in Literature and Belief*, eds. Richard H. Cracroft, Jane D. Brady, and Linda Hunter Adams (Provo, Utah: BYU Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, 2001), 341–46.

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Mormon faith is grounded in literal theophanies, concrete historical experience, and tangible artifacts (including the Book of Mormon, the irrigated fields of the Wasatch front, and the great stone pioneer temples of Utah) in certain ways that make Mormons more like ancient Jews and early Christians and Muslims than, say, Baptists or Lutherans. They provide the major poles of current critical discussion in Mormon letters and the major rubrics for describing what seems central to Mormon literature at present and throughout its history. Issues. [10] The debate presently articulated most forcibly by Cracroft and Jorgensen has continued for at least twenty years. Towards a Mormon Criticism." The Association for Mormon Letters Annual, 1994 (Salt Lake City: AML, 1994): 227-33; Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 32.3 (Fall, 1999): 33-43; complete text accessible on the Mormon Literature Website at <http://humanities.byu.edu/mldb/gbask.htm>. Some other important and representative literary criticism of the Book of Mormon includes: George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," 245-62, and Richard Dilworth Rust, "All Things Which Have Been Given of God . . ." For some analysis see Eugene England, "Brigham Young as Orator and Intellectual," in *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986; Salt Lake City: Tabernacle, 1999), 93-108.