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“The important fact is that I always felt Danish”: Preserving Ethnic Memory in Virginia Sorensen’s Mormon Novels

Sarah C. Reed

American author Virginia Sorensen (1912–91) grew up a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Manti, Utah, in Sanpete Valley, a place known as “Little Denmark” because it was a major center for the Danish immigrant community in Utah. In 1956 she described her hometown like this:

Even now if you go to see the fine white Mormon Temple that dominates the landscape night and day you will likely be shown about the grounds by somebody with a Danish name, perhaps even with a Danish accent. He will tell you about the famous spiral staircases in the towers which were built by skilled Danish craftsmen not long ago.... My first school principal and ward choir-leader was Brother Johnsen. My sister studied piano with Mr. Jensen. We ate bread baked in a Danish bakery with a sign like a pretzel over the door. There was a Danish Pasture, a Danish Wood, a Danish Ditch in our neighborhood. People held Danish meetings and bore testimonies in a Danish-English language that we children found side-splitting. They also subscribed to a Danish magazine called *Bikuben* and loved the works of a Danish poet C. C. A. Christensen who once studied in the Royal Academy in Copenhagen.¹

Sorensen here describes the culmination of the Danish American Mormon community after decades of interactions. Following the adoption of a liberal constitution protecting freedom of religion in 1849 in Denmark, Mormon missionaries found success in converting Danes to their “American” religion. As a part of the expansive theological imperative to gather the “Saints” to Zion, thousands of Mormon Danes immigrated to the United States and settled throughout the Mormon cultural region. So great were their numbers comparatively,

that for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Danes made up 10 percent of the foreign-born population of Utah. Immigration from Denmark peaked around 1900, but by then communities around the region had formed around their shared Danishness, like the town described by Sorensen as so clearly branded as “Danish.” These communities were made up of not only native Danes, but second- and third-generation Danish Americans. As one of the subsequent generation, Sorensen describes her relationship to this ethnic identity:

The important fact is that I always *felt* Danish ... The Danes in my father’s family were important to me and I saw more of them, always, than I did of my mother’s scattered family. My favorite Great-aunt was pure Dane, Anegrethe Nielsen Eggertsen....My great-uncle Simon....had his father’s journal and translated it lovingly into English, so making it accessible to me.... He and his wife went to the old country when I was a young girl, and at the family party welcoming them back, I heard about the relatives still over there and about the places where [my great-grandparents] had been born. Widowed early, Aunt Anegrethe also went to Scandinavia with her daughter....and her Norwegian husband...., bringing back to me stories of her early life and a vivid picture of the old farm at Veddam, in Jutland. I knew that there was still ‘family’ over there who would welcome me when I managed to go myself.²

As a married woman trailing an academic husband, Sorensen began to write historical Mormon fiction and children’s literature, including her Newberry-Prize-winning *Miracles on Maple Hill*. Her first and most famous novel, *A Little Lower than Angels* in 1942, dealt with the pre-Utah Mormon church and the introduction of polygamy in Nauvoo, Illinois. It was carefully researched from her location in the Midwest while her husband was teaching in Indiana. She called her research for any of her works “cultural anthropology.” In the course of researching another work of Mormon historical fiction, she discovered the scholarship of William Mulder, whose dissertation on the Scandinavian Mormon migration was the basis of his subsequent classic work, *Homeward to Zion*. Sorensen wrote him a letter describing her

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reaction to reading his findings: “I have believed—for what reason, I wonder, since I never really lived in the houses where the true tradition was but could only visit a while, and listen, and pause always by the gate where I could hear and see it?—that I was the one to tell this story you speak of. Almost have I heard The Call.”³

As a result of this “call,” Sorensen was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1954 to travel to Denmark to do the historical research in preparation for writing a trilogy, in the style of Rølvaag or Moberg, about the Danish Mormon immigration. Writing of her time in Denmark, she identifies strongly with Danish culture:

No wonder that when I went to Denmark I felt that I had been there before. The food was prepared as I had seen it from the beginning of my time in the world. The faces of Danish farmers and shopkeepers were like the faces I had known all my life, ruddy and square. The tow-headed beauty of the children I had always known at home. The loving-teasing of my father and uncles was so familiar that I knew what the family in Veddum was laughing about, around the table, before I knew ten words of their language. I knew how bread was made in Line’s kitchen before I watched her make it, and beer soup, and cottage cheese, and the best coffee in the world.... I knew how to combine red raspberries and red currents (both fresh from the bushes) for a pudding called Rødgrød med Fløde.⁴

Denmark in her description is both intensely familiar and exotic. The research eventually made it into the first planned novel, *Kingdom Come*, which follows the lives of several Danes living in Jutland in the 1850s and their contact with Mormonism, their acceptance or rejection of the religion, and then the converts plans to emigrate to Zion. The complex plot and characters attempt to show the wide reach of Mormonism in Denmark while taking account of class, gender, age, contemporary religious life, etc. The novel was well-received by critics and universally praised for its “authenticity.” Paraphrasing Henry James, one critic said she had “made the past a ‘visitable place.’”⁵

Despite Sorensen’s success outside of Utah during her lifetime, many of her Mormon works have fallen out of print and also out of

scholarly attention. Some of this can be attributed to the sharp decrease in her production in the last twenty-five years of her life. After divorcing her first husband, she met and then married Alec Waugh (novelist, travel writer, and brother of Evelyn Waugh) and lived in Morocco with him among other expat intelligentsia before returning to the US in the early 1980s. She sketched, but never finished the planned Danish Mormon migration trilogy, saying she was too happy to write. She also converted to Anglicanism in order to marry Waugh. So for Mormon literary critics, as the products of a lapsed Mormon, her books are generally categorized as a part of the “lost generation” of Mormon literature, that is, works written by those who have left the faith and are generally considered critical of it. Within this categorization though, she and her works have been the subject of scholarly analysis, especially for feminist scholars. She is particularly noted for her Utah novels, where her characters find themselves in between the two conflicting worlds of Mormon Utah and the encroaching non-Mormon America. But despite her strong identification as Danish and her extensive use of Danish American characters and themes, her works have not been studied as a part of the Scandinavian American experience. In my view, Sorensen constructs an identity at the intersection of Danish and Mormon in her attempt to answer her ancestors’ call to preserve their experience. These characters illuminate Sorensen’s exploration of the legacy of Mormon history coinciding with her attempt to memorialize an ethnic, immigrant identity in an American religion in the Rocky Mountains. As she sets her novels around the turn of the century, her characters face the same challenge both as Danes and as Mormons: assimilation.

During the fifty years from 1880 to 1930, the Mormon church abandoned many of its idiosyncratic practices, including polygamy, block voting, and communalism, while it integrated more fully into “American” hegemonic economic, political, and social norms. This process of “Americanization” or “assimilation” was not frictionless; Mormonism itself needed to reinterpret its doctrine and history to account for the change from a separatist society to one accommodating the dominant cultural conventions.

During this period, maintaining an ethnic identity in America’s “melting pot” was also a precarious endeavor. Scandinavian Mormon

immigrants, like their Midwestern counterparts, were confronted by the struggle between assimilation and preservation. In Utah, this was magnified by the pan-Scandinavian movement among Mormon immigrants. Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians in Utah celebrated holidays together, shared religious meetings, and belonged to the same ethnic organizations, for example, all under Danish custodianship. This alliance became more strained by the end of this period, particularly challenged by the influx of Swedish immigrants who preferred, often for linguistic reasons, to have their own organizations, meetings, newspapers, etc.

At the heart of these issues is the negotiation of Scandinavian, American, and Mormon identities. The Danish American Mormons in Sorensen’s Utah novels embody the tensions central to the Mormon project: a global religion meant to work on the local level. In these Danish characters, the provincial and the cosmopolitan collide. As such, Sorensen’s portrayals of Danish American culture have less to do with filial piety and more to do with second-generation postmemory, where “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” are prioritized over apologetics.⁶

Her male protagonist Niels Nielsen in the novel *Many Heavens* is an excellent example of this. Born in Denmark, Niels immigrated as a young child with his parents after their conversion to Mormonism and settled in the Scandinavian town of Mendon in Cache Valley. As a young man he served a mission for the church in France. While there he became interested in medicine, and at the end of his mission, he enrolled in medical school in Vienna. By the time he returns to the States, he has spent ten years in Europe. His return from abroad impresses the country village, and the female narrator, Zina, describes him as having “elegant manners.” He comes home to marry his sweetheart, Mette, daughter of Danish immigrants. Niels later explains to Zina what attracted him to Mette:

She could ride a horse and fish a stream and climb a mountain almost as well as a man, but yet looked and acted wonderfully like a woman. She danced like a woman too, though with stronger hands than most on the swings, and cooked like a *Danish* woman. Niels always said that what really convinced him he should marry Mette was tasting

her Danish cooking. It was like his own mother's. Mette's mother, Margrethe Haaken, came from the same part of Denmark as Niels's own folk, so that was why.⁷

Mette represents here the perfect intersection of the Mormon mountain lifestyle with a shared Danish background.

After Niels and Mette are married, they are in a train accident which cripples Mette. They spend time back east with specialists while Niels does post-graduate training, but Mette never recovers the use of her legs. They return to Mendon, where Niels starts a practice and Zina comes to work for them, taking care of Mette and aiding Niels with his patients. Zina is impressed by the cosmopolitan nature of their household: Niels and Mette are both widely read, own books in several languages, and receive periodicals from New England and Europe. Niels is the first "trained" doctor in Mendon and so also brings with him outside knowledge, which benefits the community but also leaves it vulnerable to penetration by the wider world.

Niels uses his connections to the broader medical community to secure Zina a place at the midwifery and nursing school in Salt Lake City. There she discovers his network of connections to medical practitioners, both the local dispensers of folk medicine and the professionalized specialists from the eastern states. In this way Niels straddles the increasing divide between these two groups. Zina also finds out in Salt Lake City about Niels's appreciation of the high culture available in the state's capital. Yet, as Niels and Zina begin to fall in love, it is also in more folkloric ways that they express their love. Niels carves a little figure he calls "the white witch" for Zina. She, a second-generation Dane herself, always has coffee ready for him. He later tells her "you're a real Scandinavian" when he finds out she always has the kettle on. Niels feels as at home among the wider world as well as in Utah's mountain valleys.

The male character Peter Jansen in Sorensen's novel *The Evening and the Morning* also represents intersection of the local and the global. Peter's father converted to Mormonism in Denmark when Peter was a small child. His father immigrated to Utah with the understanding that his wife and children would follow the next year. But not a Mormon herself, his wife decided not to go. It wasn't until after she died that Peter found out as a young man where his father was. Peter had

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been apprenticed to a violin maker and so took the chance to join his father in America, where he saw an opportunity to start his own violin factory. He brought with him to Utah specialized tools and equipment bought on credit in Copenhagen. When his father takes him to his dry farm in Sanpete County, Peter is severely disappointed in the poor conditions there, with no functioning currency and barely subsistence farming. He works on the farm with his father, as a carpenter, and, on the side, taking commissions for violins for the wealthier citizens of Salt Lake City. He is eventually able to pay off the loan for the equipment, but he isn't able to make a living solely making violins and so he ends up working for the railroad with instrument making, repair, and performance as a secondary income. He marries a fellow Danish convert, Helga, but it is his exotic blend of cosmopolitan culture and foreignness that attracts the protagonist Kate Alexander to him, and they begin their extramarital affair that sets the rest of the book's events in motion.

In her semi-autobiographical work *Where Nothing is Long Ago*, Sorensen describes the material culture of the Danes in Utah in the most detail. Here Sorensen explores the tension between Mormon and Danish identities when it comes to marriage and food practices:

“Polygamy and the Word of Wisdom—we Danes didn't take to either one,” she said.... The Word of Wisdom forbade coffee, along with tea and beer and a few other amenities. But to Danish converts coffee was sacred in its own way, and unto the third generation this special sense of its value has not yet entirely disappeared.... Over their cups, Utah Danes had a gentle rejoinder to those unfortunate orthodox who sniffed unappreciative noses: “Brother Joseph never meant that Word of Wisdom for the Danes.”⁸

The opening title piece in the volume takes a darker view of the Danish community in Sanpete County. It begins with the opening lament that “soon there won't be a real Danish accent left in that whole valley. Mormon converts from Denmark came to Utah by the thousands during the second half of the nineteenth century. Now there were only a few survivors.”⁹ In remembering her childhood there, Sorensen de-

scribes the town's bishop, the spiritual, temporal, and pastoral leader for their congregation:

I loved to hear Bishop Petersen tell about Denmark, from which he had come as a young man. I asked him all sorts of questions to keep him talking, for his odd accent and his laughter pleased me.... Bishop Petersen said that to leave the lovely land of Denmark one had to be very certain it was to God's Kingdom he was coming. He himself had been sure of it when he heard about the mountain water, so pure, so shining, so cold, so free.... He thought that, as one descended from Danes myself, I ought to know that the crisp peas I was picking and eating were *ualmindelig god* (unusually good). [...] I loved him dearly, as my parents did, and to most of us to be Danish—as to be Mormon—meant to be virtuous, kind, and of good report.¹⁰

And yet, one of their own, the Danish Mormon Brother Tolsen, killed a man in a fight over water rights in their high mountain desert. Sorensen describes the morbid curiosity she had as a child about the dead man's funeral and Brother Tolsen's subsequent trial and acquittal, and how the Danish Mormon community had rallied around him since "stealing water was stealing life" and his combatant was a "Jack Mormon," as inactive Mormons are sometimes called.

Sorensen described herself and her characters as being "in the middle—incapable of severe orthodoxies."¹¹ Even though her critics have labeled her writing as provincial, the Danish American characters show themselves to be comfortable with hybridity in a time when both Mormon and ethnic identities were under pressure to assimilate into broader Protestant Anglo-American culture. Sorensen used the memories of Mormon and immigrant history to create new narratives that challenge the dominant discourse of both. That Sorensen always felt Danish and identified strongly as a Mormon allowed her to memorialize those cultures in her own way. As she wrote, "I have always felt that a novel is seldom an explanation, rather an exploration."¹²

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Endnotes

¹ Quoted in Susan Elizabeth Howe, “The Danish Genesis of Virginia Sorensen’s *Lotte’s Locket*,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 114.

² *Ibid.*

³ Quoted in William Mulder “History, Memory, and Imagination in Virginia Eggertsen Sorensen’s *Kingdom Come*,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 91.

⁴ Howe, 115.

⁵ Edward A. Geary, “A ‘Visitable Past’: Virginia Sorensen’s Sanpete,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 220.

⁶ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

⁷ Virginia Sorensen, *Many Heavens: A New Mormon Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1954), 30.

⁸ Virginia Sorensen, *Where Nothing is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), 162.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

¹¹ Virginia Sorensen, “Is It True?—The Novelist and His Materials,” *Western Humanities Review* 7, no. 4 (Spring 1953): 285.

¹² *Ibid.*, 291.

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