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Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s

Edward A. Geary

Wallace Stegner, in his essay on the writer in the American West, laments that Westerners have been unable "to get beyond the celebration of the heroic and mythic frontier." He says,

We cannot find, apparently, a present and living society that is truly ours and that contains the material of a deep commitment. . . . Instead, we must live in exile and write of anguishes not our own, or content ourselves with the bland troubles, the remembered violences, the already endured hardships, of a regional success story without an aftermath.¹

But perhaps this tendency is characteristic of regional literature in general, not just of Western regional literature. Faulkner has his heroic myth of the South and his war with time and his ceaseless effort to recover the past. Willa Cather's Nebraska novels are nostalgic; *My Antonia* has as its epigraph "The best days are the first to go." Thomas Hardy's sympathetic characters are all out of tune with their times, seeking a lost community and wholeness, wandering (to borrow Arnold's phrase) "between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born."² Irving Howe has identified this regional quality even in the urban Jewish writers of the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Howe defines regionalism not primarily as a response to place, as it is often defined, but as a response to a cultural moment. A regional literary movement, he says, is an eruption of creative vitality in response to a cultural breakdown of some kind. The regional writer celebrates a more heroic age and laments its passing.³

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¹Wallace Stegner, "Born a Square," in *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 176, 178.

²Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse," lines 85-86.

³Irving Howe, "The American-Jewish Writers: Another Province Heard From," Address delivered to the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association, 27 December 1973.

There was such a regional movement in Mormon country in the 1940s. It was a rather sudden eruption. As late as 1938, Bernard DeVoto predicted failure for anyone who tried "to compose fiction out of Joseph Smith and the Mormon people." He declared that "God, the best story-teller, has made a better story out of Joseph and the Mormon wandering than fiction will ever equal" and called his own Mormon novel "the best book I am never going to write."⁴ At that time the Mormon story did indeed seem strangely resistant to fictional treatment. After the "home literature" movement in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, there had been very little full-length fiction published on Mormon themes for some thirty years. But things were soon to change. In 1939 Vardis Fisher's Harper Prize novel, *Children of God: An American Epic*, appeared. It was followed in the next ten years by at least twenty novels on Mormon subjects by at least a dozen different authors, plus such significant nonfiction works as Fawn M. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (1945), which perhaps should be read as a novel, and Wallace Stegner's *Mormon Country* (1942).⁵ Juanita Brooks' *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950) and Austin and Alta Fife's *Saints of Sage and Saddle* (1956) were published after the 1940s but are products of the same regionalist impulse that produced the earlier works.

Most of the writers who emerged during the 1940s were born in the first two decades of this century, a transitional time in Mormon country, and most grew up in small towns where the transition was perhaps most strongly felt. (It is interesting to see how very few scenes, in all of these novels, are set in Salt Lake

⁴Bernard DeVoto, "Vacation," *Harper's* 177 (October 1938):560.

⁵These are the works uncovered in a survey that I have no reason to think was exhaustive: 1940: Jean Woodman, *Glory Spent* (New York: Carrick & Evans); Paul Bailey, *For This My Glory* (Los Angeles: Lyman House). 1941: Lorene Pearson, *The Harvest Waits* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill); Maurine Whipple, *The Giant Joshua* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin). 1942: Elinor Pryor, *And Never Yield* (New York: Macmillan); Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce). 1944: Paul Bailey, *The Gay Saint* (Hollywood: Murray & Gee). 1945: Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Knopf); Maurine Whipple, *This Is the Place: Utah* (New York: Knopf). 1946: Paul Bailey, *Song Everlasting* (Los Angeles: Westernlore); Virginia Sorensen, *On This Star* (New York: Reynall and Hitchcock); Ora Pate Stewart, *Pages from the Book of Eve* (San Antonio, Texas: Naylor). 1947: Helen Hinckley, *The Mountains Are Mine* (New York: Vanguard); Helen Cortez Stafford, *Sweet Love Remembered* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book); Virginia Sorensen, *The Neighbors* (New York: Reynall and Hitchcock). 1948: Blanche Cannon, *Nothing Ever Happens Sunday Morning* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons); Samuel W. Taylor, *Heaven Knows Why* (New York: A. A. Wyn); Samuel W. Taylor, *The Man with My Face* (New York: A. A. Wyn). 1949: Ardyth Kennelly, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin); Virginia Sorensen, *The Evening and the Morning* (New York: Harcourt).

City.) The pioneer era was over. Virtually all of the arable land had been occupied. The towns had reached maturity; the temples and tabernacles were completed; good substantial houses had taken the place of the simpler dwellings of the first settlers, as one can easily see on a visit to Ephraim or Scipio. Indeed, the rural-agrarian economy had reached the saturation point, with a consolidation of land holdings and rural depopulation already under way. Lorene Pearson, in *The Harvest Waits*, and Virginia Sorensen, in *On This Star*, show this process in operation, as the more successful and ambitious farmers buy up the land of the less successful, leaving them either to remain in town as poor, occasional laborers or to migrate to the cities. Economically, Utah was being pulled into the American mainstream. Culturally, too, for the Manifesto and Statehood had signaled a decisive accommodation with the "outside."

The sense of change was all the stronger because there were still vivid remnants of the past. Every town still had, in the second and third decades of this century, residents who had been at Nauvoo or had crossed the Plains with the handcart companies, hardy pioneers telling their stories at Old Folks' Day parties and Black Hawk Encampments. Every town still had polygamous families or wives abandoned after the Manifesto. Every town still had its immigrant converts whose English or Danish or German traditions enriched the community life. Maurine Whipple, speaking of the period when she was writing *The Giant Joshua*, has said,

Some of the old people were alive then—Uncle Charlie Seegmiller was 95, Aunt Jane Blake was 90 something—and I just went and talked to them. I got so immersed in that era—reading everything and wandering the hills and sitting upon the red hills and visualizing everything—that it was almost as if I had lived through it myself.⁶

Virginia Sorensen has spoken similarly of her "deep consciousness about the so-immediate and yet so-remote past of town after town, valley after valley,"⁷ and of the sense of living "where nothing is long ago."⁸

The regional writers of the 1940s found their sense of "cultural breakdown," I think, in this ending of an era of Mormon

⁶"Maurine Whipple's Story of *The Giant Joshua*," as told to Maryruth Bracy and Linda Lambert, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6 (Winter 1971):57.

⁷Virginia Sorensen, "Is It True?—The Novelist and His Materials," *Western Humanities Review* 7 (1953):284.

⁸Virginia Sorensen, *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood* (New York: Harcourt, 1963), p. 4.

isolation and self-sufficiency, in the stagnation and decline of rural Mormondom. Several of the writers participated in the exodus from Utah in the 1920s and 1930s, as thousands of people left the valleys of their birth for the promise of a richer life in California or the East. For many, leaving the region meant leaving the Church, for they could not clearly separate their Mormon-ness from their Utah-ness or their awareness of the economic stagnation of the region from a sense of the decline of the Church. Some left reluctantly, others eagerly to escape what they saw as the provincial narrowness of their home towns.

But as provincial people have always discovered, it is not easy to escape from one's native province. Nearly all of the Mormon novels of the 1940s have their roots in the author's effort to come to terms with his or her Mormon heritage. These are expatriate novels. They resemble the works of the so-called "lost generation" of the 1920s in their ambivalence towards a tradition which seems to have failed yet which still offers the only available spiritual anchor against a tide of meaninglessness.

The Mormon regional novels of the 1940s fall into two groups according to the era they treat. Some have pioneer settings, including Fisher's *Children of God*, Paul Bailey's *For This My Glory*, and Virginia Sorensen's *A Little Lower Than the Angels*, which deal with Missouri, Nauvoo, and crossing the plains to the Great Basin. Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* and Lorene Pearson's *The Harvest Waits* are pioneer novels dealing with the settlement process within Utah, in Whipple's case Saint George, and in Pearson's a remote southern Utah village called "Joppa" whose actual prototype, if it has one, I have been unable to discover. The other group of novels is set in what we might call the provincial period of Mormon history, when the communities have grown settled and often rigid. Blanche Cannon's *Nothing Ever Happens Sunday Morning* takes place on a single day in 1900 in the town of "Lakeview," which is somewhere south of Ogden. Virginia Sorensen's *On This Star* and *The Evening and the Morning* are both set in the 1920s in Manti, which is called "Templeton" in the earlier novel. Jean Woodman's *Glory Spent* and Richard Scowcroft's *Children of the Covenant* are set in the 1920s or '30s, Scowcroft's novel in Ogden, Woodman's in Provo, which she calls "Melburn." Bailey's *Song Everlasting* begins in the '30s, in "Millard City," moves to Los Angeles and then back to Millard City at the end of World War II. Samuel Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why*

is set in a valley west of Tooele in the years after the War, though its folkways seem to belong to the 1920s instead of the 1940s.

In general, the pioneer novels portray a more heroic life and more admirable characters, but similar themes run through almost all of the novels. The central conflict is nearly always between individualism and authority. Virginia Sorensen has said that the writer tends to be "in the middle" and "incapable of severe orthodoxies," trying "to somehow balance the importance of the individual (his respected and ancient concern) with the importance of the great events that wash people into vast groups and crowds, into anonymous armies."⁹ The founding of the Church and its growth, migrations, and settlement in the West are "great events," the more so because of the Church's authoritarian structure. The settlement of Mormon country was communal rather than individualistic. Villages did not simply grow up around a crossroads store; instead people were "called" on settlement missions and went to the site with their social and ecclesiastical organization already established, in most cases. Communal values took precedence over individual tastes; obedience to authority was more important than individual judgment; and the achieving of communal goals mattered more than personal fulfillment, or rather personal fulfillment was to be attained through the achieving of communal goals. The pioneer novels show their authors' awareness that the distinctive achievements of Mormon country were the product of this highly organized approach. The irrigation systems, especially, are a symbol of community solidarity in *The Giant Joshua* and *The Harvest Waits*. Nevertheless, the sympathetic characters in these novels are the ones who experience a tension between the demands of the community and their desires to think and act for themselves. The protagonist is nearly always a character "in the middle": something of an individualist yet involved with church and community, caught between his or her instinct for freedom and the demands of loyalty and obedience. Sometimes, as in the case of Paul Bailey's David Warren, they are able finally to reconcile the opposing pulls of their lives. More often, like Sorensen's Mercy Baker and Whipple's Clory McIntyre, they die with the tension unresolved.

This conflict recurs so regularly in the novels of the 1940s that it is possible to outline a single "story" with certain basic figures that reappear in different forms. This story first appears, so far as I have been able to discover, in 1936 in George Snell's

⁹Sorensen, "Is It True?" p. 285.

Root, Hog, and Die.¹⁰ It does not seem, however, that Snell's book had a direct influence on the later novels. The central figure, as I have said, is the character "in between," who can neither escape from the community nor feel comfortable within it. Sometimes, as with Sorensen's Mercy Baker, this character is frankly skeptical about the claims of the Church. Sometimes, like her Kate Alexander, the character is a rebel against the authoritarian constraints of the community. Most often, however, the character is divided, wanting in a way to become a wholehearted member of the community yet also longing to escape, to find some mode of life less filled with hardships, more rewarding culturally and aesthetically. In this category we may place with more or less appropriateness Snell's Mary Brent, Whipple's Clory McIntyre, Sorensen's Chel Bowen, Pearson's Sara Bastian, and Cannon's Matilda Benson. As is apparent, this character is most often a woman. The second figure is usually a man. This character, in our recurrent story, is firm in the faith and committed to the community values to the point of narrow-mindedness. Often he begins as a simple and appealing person, like Snell's Jim Brent, who is barefoot in a pigsty when the missionary finds him and changes his life. Sometimes he retains that simplicity, as Jean Woodman's Hans Sorenson does. More often, however, he slowly grows fanatical and ambitious and finally tyrannical to the central figure, who is usually his wife. In this category are Whipple's Abijah McIntyre, Pearson's Angus Bastian, Cannon's Eben Benson. The third figure is the child (for most of these novels involve a second generation and some a third), sensitive and perceptive, who will eventually fulfill his mother's rebellious impulses by leaving the community for a life both creative and individualistic: Ezekiel Brent, Lucy Bastian, Marian Matthews, and (ironically) Jasper Benson.

A fourth recurring figure is the one we might call the liberating Gentile, an outsider of culture and charm who opens up a vision of freedom and fulfillment beyond the narrow provincial boundaries of the valley. In *Nothing Ever Happens Sunday Morning* the liberating Gentile is a free-thinking drifter who comes to town with a bagful of books and wins the heart of the bishop's daughter, enticing her to read such subversive things as the poetry of Whitman. In *Glory Spent* it is an outsider attending BYU who encourages Marian Matthews to develop her talents as an actress so that in the end she goes off to New York in search of a career

¹⁰George Snell, *Root, Hog, and Die* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1936).

instead of marrying her returned missionary. In *Children of the Covenant* the liberating Gentile wins his Mormon bride because, as he puts it, he was "the only other person in Ogden who had read a book."¹¹ In *On This Star* the liberating Gentile is not a Gentile at all but a local boy who has gone out into the great world, gained knowledge, and lost his faith, and who now has come back to Templeton to win the love of his brother's fiancée. In this case, the seducing device is music, combined, again, with the poetry of Whitman.

Through the variations on this central story of zeal and reservation, crude energy and afflicted sensitivity, dedication and liberation, there emerges a fairly consistent view of Mormon history which may be broadly outlined as follows. The Church in its early stages could appeal powerfully to the imagination because it represented a break with the past and the chance of a new start, because of its social vision of a righteous and egalitarian community, and because of the charisma and humanity of its leaders. It attracted good and idealistic people who were tried in the fire of persecution and made strong for the heroic task of building a civilization. However, the seeds of ultimate failure were present from the beginning, in the self-serving and possibly self-deluding tendencies of the leaders, and in the authoritarian system which valued conformity above creativity and zeal above wisdom. With the end of the pioneer period, the heroes disappeared, to be replaced by men of smaller souls and narrower vision. The social vision was compromised. (Interestingly, by this reading of Mormon history both the institution of polygamy and its abandonment can be seen as signs of corruption.) Finally, the church whose first adherents had expected to fill the earth became merely an odd sect in a remote and backward corner of the West.

Obviously, this is a dead-end interpretation of Mormon history. It is also a humanistic interpretation, as is made clear at the end of *The Giant Joshua* when the author has Erastus Snow justify the Church not because its doctrine is true but because it stands for an "Idea":

"You may lose, Clorinda Agatha. I may lose. *Zion* may lose, for the time. But the Idea"—he saw all those myriads, the oppressed and downtrodden, marching hand in hand straight into the dawn of a better world—"the Idea *can't* lose."¹²

¹¹Richard P. Scowcroft, *Children of the Covenant* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945), p. 262.

¹²Maurine Whipple, *The Giant Joshua* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 621.

Some of the novels present this view in rather simplistic terms. In *Nothing Ever Happens Sunday Morning*, we get nothing but the dead end of the story. Bishop Benson, scheming and hypocritical, is almost a parody figure, and there is no glimpse of heroism to be seen anywhere. In Richard Scowcroft's *Children of the Covenant*, the first generation Brother Burton is made of stern pioneer stuff. "Strength was in his square jaw, and condescension in his manner of looking down at anyone to whom he spoke." He was one of the builders of Ogden, and when he died he had the largest monument in the cemetery. His daughter Esther inherits his ambition and drive. She tells her sister, "You want a man who can build a house and then a town and have schools named after him and streets."¹³ Unable to find such a man, Esther settles for a shoe salesman, hoping to prod him to greatness. When she fails at this she settles her hopes on her son Burton Curtis. But Burton is not made of the same stuff as his grandfather. He comes home from his mission, discovers that his girl friend has taken up smoking, and proceeds to go to pieces. Where Scowcroft sees decline, Jean Woodman sees simply an inevitable process of maturation, outgrowing foolish notions. In her reading of Mormon history, there are three generations from faith to freedom. The grandfather, Hans Sorenson, maintains until the end "an absolute, unquestioning faith" in the Church. His daughter, Grethe, and her husband "had never shared the vision of their fathers, whatever that vision had been," but had been willing either to conform or to rebel inwardly and quietly.

Marian represented the third step in the cycle. Except that it had shaped her mode of life socially, the Church had never held any fundamental significance for her. In all probability she had never realized that Hans had ever seen a glorious vision or that her mother had ever doubted or that her father had learned acceptance.¹⁴

In these novels there is little of the nostalgic attachment and ambivalence that I spoke of earlier. However, the best novels in the group are rich with these qualities which are one source of their power. Maurine Whipple resents authoritarianism and polygamy and the demand to sacrifice more than really needs to be sacrificed. She cannot see how the pioneer heritage can be made viable in the present and the future. Yet no single book gives a more powerful sense of that heritage than *The Giant Joshua*. Though the

¹³Scowcroft, *Children of the Covenant*, pp. 6, 14.

¹⁴Jean Woodman, *Glory Spent* (New York: Carrick & Evans, 1940), pp. 340, 341.

author's main sympathies are with Clory McIntyre, her character "in the middle," they extend to the authority figures as well. Her Brigham Young is a brilliantly drawn sketch of the man of the *Journal of Discourses*, combining an overarching vision with a love for detail that finds nothing too trivial to dabble in, even to burning his fingers on a batch of soap. Her Erastus Snow is a character of great humanity and complexity. His inner conflict comes out most clearly in his relation to John D. Lee. He owes his life to Lee and is convinced, moreover, that Lee is being made a scapegoat for others whose responsibility for the Mountain Meadows massacre is at least as great as his. But he is persuaded by Brigham Young that Lee must be sacrificed for the good of the community. He is somewhat like Melville's Captain Vere who, faced with a situation which defies satisfactory solution, chooses, as Yvor Winters puts it, "to act according to established principle, which supports public order, and for the margin of difference between established principle and the facts of the particular situation, to accept it as private tragedy."¹⁵

Lorene Pearson's little-known novel *The Harvest Waits* is another fine expression of this ambivalence. Her Bishop Bastian is a good picture of the zealot who is willing to lose his family and even destroy the very village he has founded rather than compromise the United Order he was called to establish. There is a great variety of characters in this novel, providing a panoramic view of the growth and decline of a Mormon village and a range of individual destinies. Pearson has something important to say about the nature of responsibility as she shows what happens to Hiram Watt, the one man to refuse to enter the Order, when he becomes bishop after Bastian's death.

If Whipple and Pearson are our best interpreters in fiction of the pioneer period, Virginia Sorensen is the author who writes most perceptively about the provincial period. Her first novel, *A Little Lower Than the Angels*, set in Nauvoo, is marred by sentimentality and an unsure grasp of materials. She reaches her full power in the novels set in the Manti she knew as a child. *On This Star* falls into melodrama at the end, but *The Evening and the Morning* is a well-finished study of three generations of women. Sorensen perhaps realizes regionalist's ambivalence more completely than any other Mormon writer has done. Her sympathetic characters are all skep-

¹⁵Yvor Winters, "Herman Melville and the Problems of Moral Navigation," in *In Defense of Reason* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1947), pp. 230-31.

tics and rebels to some degree, but they also acknowledge the inseparable ties that bind them to the community and a nostalgic loyalty which amounts almost to a kind of faith. Kate Alexander, in *The Evening and the Morning*, has rejected the moral, social, and religious norms of provincial Mormonism and has moved to Los Angeles and become a social worker and a feminist. But in the novel she has come back to Sanpete Valley to try to pull together the loose ends of her life, and she feels the pull of the land and the town, the clustered barns and spreading irrigated fields. On the morning of the twenty-fourth of July she thinks, individualist though she is, "If only a great poet could be born here to make the kind of poetry the story of the water deserves!"¹⁶ And she fully understands that the story of the water is a communal story of faith and sacrifice. Similarly, Erik Erikson, in *On this Star*, has rejected the faith in favor of a kind of humanism. "God wouldn't make a heaven for just a few," he says, "for those who happened to stumble on a certain valley or a certain word." Yet he is the interpreter of the faith of those who live in the valley as he composes a musical work embodying their traditional songs. Erik is very much a man "in the middle." Whenever he comes back to the valley he feels "a rightness within himself, a sort of stay against confused loneliness. Nevertheless he would go away in September and would suffer the old splitting all over again."¹⁷ It is the old splitting that the Mormon regional novel reenacts again and again. It is that voice of expatriation which is the most poignant note of Mormonism's lost generation.

¹⁶Virginia Sorensen, *The Evening and The Morning* (New York: Harcourt, 1949), p. 205.

¹⁷Virginia Sorensen, *On This Star* (New York: Reynall and Hitchcock, 1946), pp. 181, 22.