

Book Reviews

EUGENE ENGLAND. *Dialogues with Myself*. Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1984. xii; 205 pp. \$7.50.

_____. *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986. viii; 149. \$8.95.

Reviewed by Claudia Bushman, executive director of the Delaware Heritage Commission.

Eugene England is a well-known figure in contemporary Mormon intellectual circles. He has influenced a generation of young people, and his voice has been increasingly heard. These two volumes of collected works show a consistent, if developing, voice, over a twenty-year period, that speaks for devotion, tolerance, openness, and endurance.

Who is he? England began in the wheat fields of Idaho and became, somehow, a professor of literature. He is a sixties liberal who is a convinced Christian, a strong believer in the Mormon message and its saving power who has synthesized those seemingly contradictory styles and writes about the tension of that life. He may have been the first "sensitive" Mormon man, willing to give women more than a fair shake and known to weep from time to time. He is a great confessor who opens his life and heart to others and encourages reciprocation. Though buffeted by the slings and arrows of critics and officials who have not particularly appreciated his style, and despite the fact that his worldview is basically tragic, he maintains a boyish cheerfulness and has not fallen victim to the bitterness that afflicts other liberal Mormons when the Church has not "come around."

His "Letter to a College Student" illustrates to me the position he could have moved to. He could have adopted the same disillusion with the Church's refusal to jump on the social-welfare bandwagon. He could have been disgusted at preaching to, rather than cooking for, hungry people. Instead, he accepts the actual suffering caused by the Church as we attempt our miserable duties, and calls it good. In this essay and in "Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel," he illustrates what I call England's "Mormon Optimism Once Removed," or "Mormon Optimism After-the-Fact." He considers the Church "the best medium, apart from marriage . . . for helping us gain salvation by grappling constructively with the opposition of existence" (*Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel*, 4 [hereafter cited

as *Gospel*]). In fact, he goes on to say that the “Church’s characteristic ‘problems’ are among its strengths” (*Gospel*, 11) and that steadiness brings the best rewards. “Most of my profound spiritual manifestations . . . have come ‘as a natural sequence to the performance of duty’ in the Church” (*Gospel*, 122). The Church itself is the refiner’s fire. England’s tempered affirmation is convincing:

Going to conference made it possible for me to feel more strongly than ever that the great soul-satisfying truths of the gospel and my experiences of love and growth in the Church are much more important than the things that give me trouble. (*Dialogues with Myself*, 112 [hereafter cited as *Dialogues*])

He is not a “Mormon optimist,” a category which affirms simply that all is for the best. These optimists welcome trial as strengthening and death as salvation. If things go well, they are being blessed. If they go badly, the sufferers are being chastened to emerge victorious later on from their “growing experiences.” England, by contrast, sees the evil, the unjust suffering, the contradiction, the inevitability of sin, and while not calling them good, sees redemption, despite pain and suffering, enhanced by this misery. His essay on Hawthorne, subtitled “The Virtue of Sin,” made me think that he might say, “ ’Tis better to have sinned and repented than never to have sinned at all.” Can this notion be true? The lesson of the Garden of Eden, Martin Luther, and Paul—it is a dangerous, but appealing, idea.

The two collections contain essays uneven in length, tone, and purpose. *Dialogues with Myself* seems misnamed, as England is not reflecting inner conflict but presenting his own point of view. Though billed as “personal essays on Mormon experience,” these books are collections of occasional pieces. Many are doctrinal gospel discourses. Some seem dated now. Most were presented as talks at *Sunstone* symposiums or BYU conferences or were written as chapters for books or columns for *Dialogue*. One was published in the *New Era*. Despite an attempt in the introductions to impose a unified shape, the books remain collections.

England is at his best, I think, in the shorter, more personal pieces such as his justly celebrated “Blessing the Chevrolet” in which he unites the world of belief in God and the everyday world of failing autos, and uses the power from one to heal the other. This synthesis is his great strength, and the piece is faith-promoting literature at its best while also being, as in the title, outrageous England. This stance gives credibility to his world, as in the case where he civilizes such bizarre doings as the Hosanna Shout.

His role models are Orson Pratt, Juanita Brooks, and, most of all, Joseph Smith, all of whom suffered for living up to what seemed to them the best of their inner light and for doing their duty. You see

England, the young liberal, taking up this cross in the early works, determined to speak the truth as he saw it despite the unpopularity of the message. The “deep sense of sinfulness” as well as the “divine purpose and mission” (*Dialogues*, 6) he attributes to Joseph Smith are poles of his own life. The endurance of Brigham Young and Spencer W. Kimball inspire him. He grapples with the paradoxes of obedience and inner light and uses several times the mystifying quotation from Joseph Smith, “By proving contraries, truth is made manifest” (*Dialogues*, ix).

England stands at the juncture of two cultures. It is his identity as an intellectual, academic liberal that causes him to write at all, and his mythic, primitive believer’s stance that informs his content. He defines Mormon intellectuals as having the gift that makes them “curious about why as well as how, anxious to serve [the Lord] by being creative as well as obedient” (*Dialogues*, 57). He is at his best when the tension of these two positions is clear. Unlike many people who take strong stands, England is always tolerant of other views. As he says, “True disciples of Christ, true Christians, will ignore persecution and resist the paranoia it naturally brings, will bend their energies to loving and serving others, whatever their differences, and thus will endure and be saved” (*Dialogues*, 190).

This is a Mormon “Song of Myself,” an exploration of a personal world made more universal by definition. England has developed an intricate thought system, but also a community where his old pals turn up. It will be possible to trace a whole subculture, “Mormon people of letters,” from these essays and references to them. I keep wishing for some marginal comments from his wife, Charlotte, who is so frequently cited.

These books are a result of his life, but they do not stand alone as literature apart from that life. They are uneven, the fruit of his striving rather than polished gems. This is a record of his odyssey. The books are valuable, but not good enough to represent his life, which has probably had a greater personal impact than his writings.

There is some repetition here. Readers are heartless. They don’t want to hear anything again. A writer must outdo himself at every appearance, or eyes will glaze over even at the best lines. So I was less than thrilled to get another dose of at-one-ment, not my favorite subject. I even regretted another journey through the wonderful journal of Joseph Millett. England may have collected more than he should. He would also do well to make his essays more personal. His consideration of Shakespeare and Hawthorne will not add one jot or tittle to the stature of those two giants. And a reconsideration of what Shakespeare really meant in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* which leads to the

conviction that he was a closet Mormon is not helpful to the general reader.

By writing, England is taking custody of the future. These frank essays, with the author's willingness to reveal himself, will be discovered again and again and will influence many searches. By contrast, the influence of some current General Authorities, with their reluctance to commit any but the blandest thoughts to paper, will be diminished. England has not always been trusted, but rebuffs have made him less guarded rather than more, and he continues to speak openly. What he writes is significant; future readers will find it invaluable. His steady affirmation is that

the Church community is blessed, not fractured, by those who express themselves sincerely and openly—even their disagreements and their vulnerability—rather than those who keep silent in public but criticize in private or harbor resentment or guilt or gnaw alone on the bones of their failures and hurts. (*Dialogues*, 55)

This alone is a good message.

THOMAS F. ROGERS. *God's Fools: Plays of Mitigated Conscience*. Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983. xiv; 233 pp. \$6.00.

Reviewed by Eugene England, professor of English at Brigham Young University.

Fires of the Mind, by Robert Elliot, is the best single play yet written about Mormon experience. But the best Mormon playwright, on the evidence of cumulative, consistent achievement, is Tom Rogers. The scripts of his four best plays, *Huebener*, *Fire in the Bones*, *Reunion*, and *Journey to Golgotha*, are now available through the generous efforts of Thomas Taylor, the young BYU student preparing to be a professional small press director who prepared the first edition, and Signature Books, which has republished that edition.

Rogers is ambitious. His plays fearlessly address two of the most troubling tragedies in Mormon history: the Mountain Meadows Massacre (and subsequent scapegoating and execution of John D. Lee) and the excommunication and execution of the young anti-Nazi Helmuth Huebener. Rogers also takes on two of the most devastating contemporary dilemmas: the breakdown of communication and forgiveness in a "religious" Latter-day Saint family, and the torture and corruption of citizens by their own governments. In addition, all four of these