

Tending the Garden with Eugene England

By *Lavina Fielding Anderson*

Reflection prepared for *Irreantum's* tribute issue following the passing of Eugene England written by co-editor Lavina Fielding Anderson about the experience of working with England on the essay collection *Tending the Garden*.

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IT'S A PLEASURE to recall the personal and professional collaboration with Gene England that produced *Tending the Garden* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), the first and so far only collection of essays on Mormon literature outside the AML Annual and the recent issue of *Dialogue* (fall 1999) devoted to that topic.

This volume lay squarely in the center of Gene's professional and literary interest in enhancing and cultivating (1) the serious study of Mormon scripture as literature, (2) the serious study of Mormon *belles lettres*, and (3) the serious approach to the body of world classics by seeing them "Mormonly." (A good example of the latter approach is Gene's own magisterial analysis of *King Lear*.)

Gene's interest in this topic certainly predates his involvement as one of *Dialogue's* founding editors, but it can be said to have taken institutional form in the creation of the Association for Mormon Letters, founded with the specific purpose of fostering literary criticism. Its genesis lay in a meeting which Maureen Ursenbach Beecher called among a group of friends in the fall of 1976 to discuss the quality and availability of Mormon personal narratives. Maureen was then a member of Leonard J. Arrington's group of historians and holder of a Ph.D. in comparative literature. (Leonard not only heartily seconded Maureen's hosting of this meeting but delivered a paper at the first meeting.) Eugene England and I were among the eight or ten people who came. Gene tossed out the question, "How could we go about organizing a group focused on the criticism of Mormon literature?" Then he patiently listened as the lively conversation ranged over the "why" and "what" aspects of the question as well for about an hour.

Obviously it was a discussion that could have gone on for years, but Gene glanced at his watch and said abruptly, "I've got to go. Maureen, why don't you chair a steering committee?" Then he walked out. We dutifully shifted, on the spot, from academics to activity. Maureen chaired that steering committee, formally organized the Association for Mormon Letters, and persuaded us that the name should be "for Mormon Letters," not "of Mormon Letters." She also served as its first president, with Gene and I among her successors.

While this fledgling organization was finding its wings—and imposing the deadline of an annual scholarly conference that dragged many an excellent critical

idea into actual written form—Gene continued to steadily and consistently support the critical study of Mormon literature. He taught a class in Mormon literature regularly at BYU, beginning in 1977, the year after the AML's creation. As AML president, he delivered what was unquestionably the longest presidential address in the history of the organization. He and Charlotte opened their home to readings by creative writers. He reviewed books and short story collections. In short, he put his money where his mouth was when it came to Mormon literature.

Gary Bergera, publisher at Signature Books, first included the idea of a compilation of essays on Mormon literary criticism on a brainstorming list of potential topics for a newly conceived essay series in 1988 and invited me to edit such a work. The board, of which I was and am a member, was polite but unenthusiastic: Were there really enough important and meaningful critical essays available to make such a project meaningful? We could all remember when there was barely an audience for Mormon creative works. Was it not slightly presumptuous to think that literary criticism could command a significant market?

But the seeds had been planted. Gary had a tentative table of contents, and I began adding to it. Then Gene announced that he was tired of photocopying scattered essays to provide a text for his class and independently proposed the idea of a critical anthology to Signature Books in 1990. Gene had a list of his own, and Gary suggested that the two of us get together. From there, it was easy. And how could we back out when Bill Mulder, Mormonism's grand old man of letters, read a paper in the fall of 1991 to a gathering sponsored by the Association for Mormon Letters in the home of Ann Edwards Cannon. In that paper, "Telling It Slant," he called for just such an anthology. He was delighted when I told him that such a project was in the works.

Gene was remarkably easy to work with. We easily agreed on the "must-do" essays in the book, wrangled amiably over the "nice-to-do" essays, each digging in our heels on a personal favorite or two but yielding graciously on others, and dividing the work without much discussion. Gene did most of the author contacts and I did the technical editing to be sure the book used the same style throughout. The Signature staff scanned the essays, giving us a jump-start on the text. Then Gene made the collaboration even easier by going to Europe with Charlotte where he conducted another in a series of BYU semesters abroad. The project was virtually finished by the time he returned.

That's when the hard part happened. We happily turned in the manuscript, only to have Gary tell us in the gentlest possible way that Signature was hoping for a manuscript of under three hundred pages and we had delivered over five hundred pages' worth. Gene and I huddled in dismay over our table of contents. I will never forget that Gene broke the log-jam of the impossible by yanking out his introduction, the most comprehensive bibliography, to date, of contemporary Mormon literature, grouped by genre for convenience, and beginning with the 1930s. To me it was an act of stunning and self-sacrificial generosity, for that essay represented an absolutely enormous amount of work. (Fortunately, "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," found a home in David J. Whittaker's *Mormon Americana*, which actually appeared before our own book. But it made hard decisions easier. [Editor's note: This same essay is reprinted within this issue of *Irreantum*.])

Gene's generosity showed up in another area, and I'm very glad to have this chance to pay tribute to it. I had simply assumed that Gene, as the senior scholar

and the only one with an academic appointment—let alone the only one with a profession relevant to literary criticism—would be listed as the first editor. So I was startled when he even brought up the question, adding that alphabetical order alone suggested that my name come first. I explained my reasons clearly, firmly, and, I thought, persuasively. I also added what I thought was the unanswerable clincher: that since I had been excommunicated for “apostasy” in 1993, it certainly would not do the cause of Mormon letters any good to have my name conspicuously first. I was taken aback, even a little embarrassed and upset, when I finally saw the title page of the printed book. Gene had quietly instructed Gary on the order of the names and arranged that I would not see the front matter until it was too late. When I tackled Gene with my expostulations, he listened calmly and patiently, the smile lines crinkling around his eyes, and then advised with a laugh: “Get over it.”

I never have. Perhaps in closing tribute, I can paraphrase my last sentence in the preface to *Tending the Garden*: The metaphor of creative works flowering in spontaneous splendor while critics sweat away with hoes, sprinklers, and compost breaks down swiftly in reality. My collaborator, Gene, was both a creator and a cultivator—of others’ spirits as well as of their works.

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