

The Literary Legacy of Eugene England

By Gideon O. Burton

Editorial written by associate editor Gideon Burton for *Irreantum's* tribute issue following the passing of Eugene England.

Originally published: *Irreantum* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 4–7.

THE ASSOCIATION FOR Mormon Letters pays tribute to one of its founders in this special tribute issue of *Irreantum*. Our regular news, reviews, and features about the Mormon literary world will resume next issue. For now, we pause to begin repaying a debt owed to G. Eugene England Jr. by so many writers, readers, literary critics, students, and lovers of Mormon literature. It is as much a pleasure to celebrate what he has done for us as it is a sadness to endure his early departure.

As brain cancer first attacked Eugene England in February 2001 and finally took him in August, this became a time of sober reckoning. Those who knew him, either in person or through his many writings and public appearances, began to tabulate the depth and breadth of his extraordinary life.

Eugene England's voice has been a perceptive and persistent one in many Mormon circles, and his influence is certainly not circumscribed solely by his literary contributions. But literature continually mediated his view of Mormonism just as Mormonism forever impressed itself on all he ever said and did. Indeed, Gene England brought literature and Latter-day Saints into closer proximity, offering page after page of evidence that the two could thrive in a richly reciprocal relationship.

That relationship, with its inherent tensions and possibilities, is explored in his essay reprinted here, "Great Books or True Religion? Defining the Mormon Scholar." He charts a path for those wishing to be true both to themselves and to Latter-day Saint culture, to their literary or intellectual gifts and to their God.

Not everyone has had such faith in religion and literature; few have been so hopeful, so doggedly optimistic, so celebratory of the literary word and the atoning Word. "In the beginning was The Word," quotes Mary Bradford in her letter herein, "and you were devoted to The Word in all of its manifestations." It is not exaggeration to compare Eugene England's tandem faith in God and writing with that of Leo Tolstoy or Flannery O'Connor or C. S. Lewis—or John Milton. Gene England was equally at home with great literature and with the great vibrancy of Latter-day Saint Christianity, and he invited everyone into a parlor (often literally enough in his Provo home) where good words and good religion could mix in a free and fertile way.

Yet he was no armchair dilettante. Gene was driven by his dissatisfactions as

much as by his optimism. He read and knew intimately the revelations, sermons, and biographies of Joseph and Brigham (having written a biography of the latter), and his view of Mormon culture was steeped in the prophetic vision of our religion's founders and their aspirations for the Saints' improvement both spiritually and culturally. Like those great men whom he quoted and revered, he expected much of Mormons, and the plainness of his speech went hand in hand with the depth of his love for others and his manifest faith in the restored gospel.

Time and again he quoted Orson Whitney's prophecy that we will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own, or he repeated Spencer W. Kimball's gospel vision for the arts. Mormon literature had been given its patriarchal blessing from apostles and prophets; Eugene England set about to effect its realization.

He did this most measurably and remarkably by teaching LDS literature at BYU for over twenty years, and for a few years at Utah Valley State College. Gene was also constantly reviewing new LDS literary publications and addressing Mormon literary topics in *This People*, *BYU Studies*, *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, and elsewhere. He constantly spoke on LDS literary topics at conferences of the Association for Mormon Letters and many other symposia, leaving behind him an enviable trail of substantive literary and cultural analysis that has shaped and will continue to shape generations of readers.

Eugene England created his literary legacy by playing a principal role in founding or supporting journals and associations that continue to perpetuate LDS literature and the mode of critical engagement he modeled: *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, The Association for Mormon Letters, *Irreantum*, etc. His role in founding the Association for Mormon Letters and actively leading it is described by Lavina Fielding Anderson in her tribute herein. She also describes Gene's influential role as an editor. During his career he arranged the publication of three anthologies of Mormon literature that have helped put LDS literature on the map: *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories* (1992); *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* (1989, coedited with Dennis Clark); and *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature* (1996, coedited with Lavina Fielding Anderson).

Gene knew instinctively to be true what Wayne Booth once said at a BYU symposium on the arts: Mormonism will never attain a great artistic culture until we have achieved a great critical culture.¹ Consequently, Eugene England worked his whole life toward creating a critical Mormon culture, one that could appreciate both revelation and reasoning, scripture and artistic literature.

This most often cast him in the role of mediator, pulling people back from extremes and balancing one view against another. The title of a recent article exemplifies his middle position: "Danger on the Right! Danger on the Left! The Ethics of Recent Mormon Fiction."² There, as he so often did, he invoked Joseph Smith's statement that by proving contraries, truth is made manifest. "By 'prove,'" he explains,

[Joseph Smith] did not mean to provide a final proof of one or the other contrary, but to test, to try out, to examine both alternatives, or all, in the light of each other; he meant that truth is not found in extremes, in choosing one polar opposite over another, but in seeing

what emerges from careful, tolerant study of the dialectic between the two. (14)

Such examining of opposites requires both charity and vision: the willingness to entertain opposing views and the faith that reconciliations are possible. Eugene England exemplified such charity, often assuming best intentions on the part of authors or critics, as though they also believed their views were part of some larger dialectic of evolving truth. Richard Cracroft, in his tribute herein, gives an appreciation for this habit of Gene's character to believe the best in people, which is so welcome a contrast to the protective rhetoric of some conservatives that seems to require assuming an author's worst intentions. Eugene England had as much faith in Mormons at large as he did in the largeness of Mormonism. He indiscriminately saw good in people and infected them with a faith in themselves and in the potential for their writing to do themselves and others good.

Eugene England equally had a sense of vision tied to his LDS beliefs in our evolving knowledge of truth and the providential unfolding of latter-day events. This is most notable in his conceptualization of Mormon literary history as a dialectic of periods in which contrary currents (the "Home Literature" and "Lost Generation" periods) lead to synthesis and reconciliation (the "Faithful Realism" period of today).

The dynamic of these evolving periods is laid out in his most comprehensive essay about LDS literature, "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," which we reproduce herein. Not only does Eugene England set the terms for the literary discussion of Mormonism for the indefinite future, but he also surveys key issues of its critical reception and spells out the theological resources of Mormonism that have not yet been fully taken advantage of by literary critics or creative writers. He lays before us a vision of our literary future in terms of a potent and evolving past.

Less obvious than his many publications and public appearances, but equally remarkable, has been Eugene England's influence as a teacher, mentor, and literary advocate. He inspired students, encouraged aspiring authors, and critiqued the work of active writers in a never-ending effort to help bring about the vision for LDS letters that he had come to believe in so passionately.

Many of Mormonism's finest writers have gladly acknowledged Gene's direct and indirect support. His coaching played a significant role for Margaret Young, as she records herein, helping this novelist and playwright have the courage to stand up for her beliefs and to write from the heart about African-American Latter-day Saints. Dian Saderup Monson, another of Mormonism's fine writers, recounts how Gene England launched her identity and career as a writer. Valerie Holladay, who for years has edited at Covenant, tells how a single suggestion that Gene made turned around a piece she was working on. Christopher Bigelow, *Irreantum's* managing editor, attributes much of his own drive and this very periodical to the inspiration he gained from Eugene England. Even the formidably famous Orson Scott Card, with whom Eugene England sometimes sparred in public forums,³ defers graciously to Eugene England's model approach (see his quotes in "A Model Faithful Voice," herein).

The support Eugene England provided to authors was not simply personal en-

couragement or solid criticism of their work, but an inclusive rhetoric that made writers feel part of something larger and important. As Mary Bradford, Levi Peterson, and others have attested, Gene simply wrote them into a tradition that they now find themselves happily part of. Anyone with ties to Mormonism who wrote in a personal or literary way would find himself or herself gently woven into Gene's narrative of an evolving and improving LDS literary tradition.

Gene always believed in the rising generation, and was indefatigable in promoting student work. Krista Halverson, currently an MFA student at the University of Washington, tells here how much she owes to Gene for his encouragement, as does personal essayist and student Kristen Allred. I personally discovered his faith in the rising generation as I sat as a student in his BYU office one day in 1987. After I mused about the ideal kinds of writing and writers I thought our LDS community needed, Gene commented—both casually and sincerely—that maybe I could fill that need. As he did for so many, Gene made me feel that I had something to say, and his own writings gave me a model for how to say it.

The magnitude of these two gifts is just beginning to dawn upon me: courage to speak at all, and the pattern for speaking well. In a world cluttered with data and darkness, Gene was incisive and bright, honest and fair, frank and forgiving.

In his many personal essays he taught us how to “speak the truth in love”; how to mediate our Mormon identities and anxieties through literary expression; how to survive—through frank and faithful expression—the paradoxes of life; how to write with both the eyes and the heart wide open. This is Eugene England's literary legacy.

The personal essay was Eugene England's genre of choice. This was not only because of its affinity to Mormon testimony (as Mary Bradford has pointed out), but also because Gene forever positioned himself as a mediator. And as we learn from gaining faith in Jesus Christ, mediation must be intensely personal in order to be meaningful. And there it is. In Gene England's writings he was ever part of the pain, the process, and the people he discussed (as exemplified in the tributes by his daughter Jane England and by Kristen Allred). Whatever our subgroup in society or the church, he was one of us.

In a final interview in April 2001 with Louisa Dalton, Gene singled out (once again) how his essays attempt to “prove contraries,” to explore what seems like a contradiction and hope that the process itself will reveal truth greater than either part of the contradiction. The popularity of his personal essays vindicates his method: he showed how the genre could be an instrument of both reasoning and feeling, a means for both reconciliation and devotion, a vehicle for paradox and for peace. As Susan Buhler Taber expressed it in a letter,

It is the particular gift of Eugene England through his confrontations with experience and literature, both scriptural and secular, to provoke us to examine our own beliefs, experiences, and their meanings in our lives—to find our own questions and endure our own answers.

The personal writings of Eugene England have made us fellow travelers with him as we have set about finding questions and enduring answers with a trustworthy guide.

We are grateful to Charlotte England for allowing us to represent the personal

side of her husband in a final poem written for her (“Your Comfort Close By”) and in two personal essays that have connected strongly with readers over the years, “Easter Weekend” and “Enduring.” Both are included as exemplary models of the personal essay genre.

“Easter Weekend” conveys how broadly and deeply Gene found and celebrated Christian faith in his travels and his reflections. “Enduring” was chosen partly because in it Gene has given us the very means to deal with the grief over his own passing—and with other faith-testing realities we are made to experience, like national terrorism.

I mused to my wife recently that perhaps Gene was called away from us just in time for him to help minister to the thousands of souls killed in New York and Washington three weeks later. (Harlow Clark’s poetry editorial includes what he thinks Gene might have said to us here about those events). Such an idea is small comfort, I know, to his family and friends. But we can take comfort in a life well lived, and in gifts fully given to us. I hope we will all be willing to continue receiving the gifts, literary and otherwise, that Eugene England has offered to us as brother and friend.

NOTES

1. Wayne Booth, “Letter to Smoother,” in *Letters to Smoother, etc.: Proceedings of the Fifth Annual BYU Symposium on the Humanities*, ed. Joy C. Ross and Steven C. Walker (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, [1980]), 32. See also Gideon Burton, “Keeping Company with Wayne Booth: Ethical Responsibility and the Conduct of Mormon Criticism,” in *The Association for Mormon Letters Annual* (Salt Lake City: Association for Mormon Letters, 1996), 27–35.
2. Eugene England, “Danger on the Right! Danger on the Left! The Ethics of Recent Mormon Fiction,” *Dialogue* 32 (fall 1999): 13–30.
3. England calls into question the dubious theology he perceived in some of Card’s fantasy writing, while still appreciating Card’s overall contribution. “Pastwatch: The Redemption of Orson Scott Card,” in *Deep Thoughts: Proceedings of Life, the Universe, & Everything XV*, February 27–March 1, 1997, ed. Steve Setzer and Marny K. Parkin (Provo, Utah: LTU&E, 2001), 19–41.

© 2010 Eugene England Foundation. All rights reserved.

How to cite this essay: Gideon O. Burton, “The Literary Legacy of Eugene England,” *Irreantum* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 4–7.

The Eugene England Foundation expects website users to follow carefully Fair Use of Copyrighted Materials guidelines. Please contact www.eugeneengland.org website administrators for questions or support, to submit or view thoughtful and responsible comments, and to donate to the nonprofit Eugene England Foundation.