

## Room to Be

*By Harlow S. Clark*

Reflection written by poetry editor Harlow S. Clark for *Irreantum's* tribute issue following the passing of Eugene England.

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I OPENED MY e-mail recently to find an elegy from Dixie Partridge, an expression of life and death fiercely overlapping. It was a poem about a friend dying while Partridge was far south at her daughter's wedding. The poem reminded me of Eugene England and the sad but pleasurable task of putting together poetry for his memorial issue. (As I write this I am listening to a broadcast of *A Prairie Home Companion* from St. Olaf College, where Gene once served as Dean of Academic Affairs). In considering Gene's influence on Mormon letters, I reread an editorial I wrote last year about this time, called "Room to Be Lousy," suggesting that little magazines play the same role for writers that small clubs play for stand-up comics, giving them a place to practice their craft, polish their material. One of the poets in that issue remonstrated with me gently at the annual AML gathering. Yes, she knew I was reacting against clichés about excellence. Yes, she knew I was welcoming writers who might be unpolished but have good words anyway and needed a place to speak. Yes, she knew . . . yes, yes, yes, she knew all that. But why didn't I say something to dispel the sense that I see *Irreantum* as a second-rate venue?

It didn't occur to me. The Mormon publishing world is small enough that some writers, like Dixie Partridge, Bruce Jorgensen, Emma Lou Thayne, Marden Clark, Lavina Fielding Anderson, Richard Cracroft, Linda Sillitoe, Dennis Clark, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Doug Thayer, Carol Lynn Pearson, and others including Margaret Young and Elouise Bell and Eugene England, have published everywhere (or nearly): *The Ensign*, *The Friend*, *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, *Sunstone*, *This People*, *Inscape* (interviewed or published), *Exponent II*, *Weber Studies*, *Wasatch Review International* (when it was active), and *Irreantum*. And I've received submissions, solicited work, or published work from people as varied as Sapphire Hodges and Marden Clark—separated by 70 years representing a wide range of experience, styles, quality, attitudes toward the culture and the church behind the culture, representing people as varied as Linda Adams and Cathy Wilson, Gideon Burton and Darlene Young, Mildred Barthel and Paul Sexton, Dennis Clark and Michael Collings, Bessie Clark and Carol Clark Ottesen, Robert Christmas and Lance Larsen, Gina Clark and Sharlee Glenn, Susan Howe and Rodello Hunter.

Let me restate this. In the small world of Mormon publishing any publication is likely to receive submissions from across the culture. Perhaps this literary world is so small that there are no second-rate venues, that our writers publish where they can. Indeed, Mormon publishing is small enough that some writers (like Eugene

England and Margaret Young) have published not only in all the big magazines and little ones, but with three major publishers, Deseret Book, Bookcraft, and Signature. That is remarkable, able to bear remark, because there are people within Mormon culture who see these publishers as incompatible.

Let me restate it a different way. Maybe people publishing everywhere represents the desire for one culture and many songs, not a culture fractured into discordant voices. Maybe that 70 years represents the 70 kine, fat and lean, or the seventy families that came off the ark, one for each of the seventy disciples Jesus would later send out, or the 70 voices (times seventy times seventy) passionate in wanting to write about their Lord and King, king of all that is virtuous, lovely, of good report or praiseworthy. One kingdom, one culture, many songs and voices.

Eugene England had a distinct voice and a passionate song, which he often raised to praise other voices, and other voices returned the praise and prayers and love. “I enjoyed your article about Eugene England,” a friend told me at church September 30. He had read it in that morning’s paper, a few weeks after I’d turned it in. “Back in the days when I used to attend Sunstone I always went to hear him speak.” “I miss him terribly,” I said. Gene was one of those who refused to see the culture divided, and my friend saw that, said how he admired Gene’s “way of upholding the patriarchy of the church” while speaking eloquently about the needs of women and others who were not part of the patriarchy.

With his voice and with his hands, Gene spoke peace to the factions within our culture, denying by the breadth of his publishing the adequacy of our divisions, affirming by the breadth of his words a desire to bring everyone within the compass of the Savior’s arms. When Utah Valley State College planted a memorial London plane sycamore for Gene on October 3, 2001, Sam Rushforth told how he and Gene had taught together twenty-five years earlier under an NEH grant, and Gene was bothered by some of Sam’s ideas about God. “I can help you with that, Sam. Come to my office.” “Give it up,” Rushforth replied. Then, just before his illness Gene said again, “I can help you with some of your notions about God, Sam.” “Oh for hell’s sake, Gene, give it up.” “I’ll never give up on you, Sam.”

Later that evening as the first Eugene England memorial lecturer Laurel Thatcher Ulrich echoed the story, telling how Gene had encouraged her to write personal essays and not only history, how she still hears his voice encouraging her. “Perhaps even yet he hasn’t given up on me.”

Gene gave his encouragement liberally, to his culture as well as its writers, and naively (as does Tom Rogers), not seeking to offend or, necessarily, to challenge, but to share. Or is the word I want guilelessly? Both wonderful words, naive suggesting the self-taught (“study it out in your mind”) art of a Grandma Moses, and guileless suggesting Nathaniel’s purity of heart, that Israelite of old like unto Edward Partridge in whom there was no guile.

Gene commented occasionally on what happens when the naive sensibility—the simple desire to express personal spiritual experience—meets up with the needs of an institution. Seems he had a walnut tree and when he was putting in the foundation for his house he cut the root too much, or too deeply, and the tree got sick. Like pioneers blessing sick oxen or a branch president blessing an ailing Chevrolet he blessed the walnut, then wrote a poem about it and sent it to the *Ensign*, who sent it back, for “doctrinal reasons.”

## Black Walnut

Fine wood that darkens toward the core  
 And complex leaves that come late  
 But bush dark and high to ease the Utah summer,  
 The taste of desert in our bones.  
 Last spring we built a tall old house  
 On the site of an older fallen homestead  
 But crowding near the luminescent shade  
 We cut the roots, dropped huge limbs.  
 By fall the leaves browned branch by branch  
 Hung without dropping in crippled grasps.  
 I watched the dying through the lowering sun  
     and knew  
 That fifty feet of life was mine  
 To bless. My hands upon the trunk,  
 I prayed the Holy Spirit rootward,  
 Called the sap into Christ's fluorescent love,  
 And left the tree to winter rest.  
 Now come the leaves in early May,  
 Springing in sharp green shoots, the high sun  
 Proving them against retreating death, and I  
 Will dress the garden with my life.

—Eugene England

Gene wanted so much to heal, so much to proclaim peace that I've wondered how he would have responded to the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Surely he would have said some words about making peace. Perhaps he would have once more quoted words he loved from President Kimball:

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan's counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior's teaching: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you, "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven." (Matt. 5:44–45)

—Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign* 6 (June 1976): 6

Gene took seriously that assignment of loving, blessing, praying for others. He wanted us to be at one, reminding us that the word atonement lends itself to mispronunciation, the silent e making the o long. At-one-ment it should be. His awareness of that word gives further resonance to a poem I've been thinking about a lot since September 11, Marden Clark's "November 22, 1963—and After."

"It's the same country I step out into this afternoon," begins the poem, and the

second stanza begins, “I had thought to find it all changed.” Opposites that keep our world whole, dramatic change and constancy. Not a new idea, simply a way of expressing that idea that kept drawing my thoughts. But there’s an added resonance with Gene’s concerns in the poem’s closing comment about atonal truth. There’s a delicious pun in the phrase. The poem was originally published in *The Utah Music Educator*, whose readers would have noted the discord in the word atonal, the suggestion of twelve tone music (one tone for each apostle?), the suggestion of discordant truth about the a-tone-ment, that though Christ spread His arms on the cross to draw all unto Him, we can only be drawn into those arms if we take effort, if we walk toward them.

And Eugene England wanted that, wanted us to walk toward our Savior with the best works and work we could present, with the best tones we could sing, discordant or harmonious. I don’t know that Gene would have liked these words—I suspect he would have been embarrassed at a memorial issue of a magazine—but given his generosity toward younger writers, I hope he would be pleased to share some space with them in words about giving younger writers a place to practice, develop, and encourage yet younger writers.

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