

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

Mary Lythgoe Bradford

House of Many Rooms. By Rodello Hunter. Illus. by Roy Olsen. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965. 240 pp. \$4.95. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, who did her thesis at the University of Utah on Virginia Sorensen, now lives in Washington, D.C.; she has reviewed for the *Western Humanities Review*.

"Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent," except that in this story all are innocent — innocent, and lovable, and representative of a tradition that is dying. Like Virginia Sorensen's *Where Nothing is Long Ago*, *A House of Many Rooms* is a "dream dreamed out of memory," and it will cause a deal of speculation among those who know Heber City, Utah. One may ask if such a memoir has value for those not personally acquainted with Rodello Hunter's "turn-of-the-century Mormon family." I think it has.

This book might have been published by a Utah book company purely for family pride and genealogy group sheet purposes, like certain familiar paper and paste atrocities. But it was accepted by one of America's major publishers. As Mrs. Hunter says, "It is a story that happened over and over to many people." It is representative genre.

In every library of any size is a shelf Dewey did not quite know how to catalogue, books squeezed in somewhere between humor and biography — memoirs by famous and infamous people. On this rather miscellaneous shelf may be found the "Family Memoir," in which the author disguises himself and tells of lives that influenced his. And wedged in here is a growing body of "Mormon Family Memoirs," consisting of books like Samuel Taylor's *Family Kingdom*, John Fitzgerald's *Papa Married a Mormon*, and Virginia Sorensen's *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*. This group has much in common with other warm-hearted dramas like Clarence Day's *Life with Father*, but it has doctrinal and historical references peculiar to Mormons.

Writers who handle the Mormon story seem to stay with the past and to deal with Mormons only historically. They lean heavily upon polygamy, pioneers, Joseph Smith, and Brigham Young. When I first saw *House of Many Rooms*, I thought wearily, "Here is another of those Mormon stories. Why can't we have something that shows Mormons as they are today?" But I was unable to resist Mrs. Hunter's family and found myself lingering over passages that seemed lifted from my own childhood. Mrs. Hunter's book, like Virginia Sorensen's, speaks of an era vivid in the background of

middle-aged people from rural areas and revives memories that will be strange to their children. Polygamy, pioneering, and folklore of the Three Nephites are disappearing from our world, and Mrs. Hunter records their last stirrings. Hers is a patriarchal society where women are retiring yet strong, with no desires outside their family duties; where Father firmly presides but is kind; where families are large and there is always room for one more, whether "borrowed" or "birthed"; where work is valued for its own sake and "poverty" is not in the lexicon.

Mrs. Hunter uses fictional tools to shape her material, telling the story through "Prilla, the second-born." (I assume that Mrs. Hunter's real counterpart is the adopted Rachel Ann, who comes last to the house.) Her rambling, anecdotal, homespun style permits her to transform events to fit her aim — which is to give her characters a purpose beyond their own lives. And the characters do seem to live, not because they are unlike everyone else, but for precisely the opposite reason. The children blur into each other because all seem familiar.

Generally the family memoir teeters precariously on the precipice of sentimentality; it is to Mrs. Hunter's credit that she does not often slip. Though her rambling occasionally is confusing, the very lack of a clear chronology gives her story impact. This hodgepodge of humorous detail, circling around an event before finally savoring it, combines with the serious and even the tragic to give the memoir its distinctive character. The reader, having laughed lightly at the family's antics, is surprised to find a lump in his throat when someone dies. Mrs. Hunter handles well this sudden juxtaposition.

She also scores in the characterization of the father, David William Woodrow — "Papa, who built the house." He is not exactly a Biblical patriarch. He cuddles his children, and when after a race he falls flat before all of them he laughs and brushes himself off. But he rules his large brood with a no-questions-asked attitude that is fading from our child-oriented society. In one scene he is mending a halter and asks little Emily Ellen to hand him a rope. He gently repeats his request two or three times, but when she stamps her foot and swears, he firmly smacks her. Then, having reproved with sharpness, he shows forth an increase of love:

He held out his arms and she ran into them, sobbing, and he loved her and fondled her and told her Papa's little girls didn't say "No" and they didn't say "Damn" and Papa loved them very much.

His wife, dainty Catherine, supports him faithfully, except when she gets her spunk up, and then everyone is proud of her for it.

Her hands are laid on spindle and distaff and often reach out to the needy. She is the proverbial Virtuous Woman. And she is not afraid to administer punishment of her own. Mother and Father are gentle with one another, and there is no question as to division of labor, except while Father is on his Mission. Then Mother takes in sewing, and the older girls work at the town theatre. The children, totalling fifteen in all, some borrowed, are lively and humorous; they marry or die in ways that start echoes in the memory.

Though the events are interesting in themselves, the main attraction for me is the descriptions that brought forth a "Me too" in the margins. I remember with Prilla "the hot bricks Mama always put in our beds on winter nights." I know that "we welcomed bread and milk for supper and we never once thought that was all there was." I, with Prilla, thought the "state pen" was a big sheep corral and that the world turned on its "axle, not axis, — I'll bet you." I too read about Da Vinci and tried to build my own flying machine. I know how it feels to itch through a day of "hauling hay," riding home on my back to "watch the clouds and hear the clop of the horses' hooves." I helped to bury certain friends in the "Pet Yard." I remember Barney Google, Skeezix, and the smell of newsprint; and I too grew up where "no matter from which direction, you approached by way of hills and streams and fields." And "always they were protective."

Mrs. Hunter never digresses to explain her Mormon beliefs, but fits them gracefully into the story, referring to Mutual and missionary work as easily as breathing, with a slightly longer explanation of the Three Nephites. This easy inclusion seems to say that the rest of the world understands now.

In describing her "mountain-rimmed town," Prilla has her father read to her about the last days: "And in the Last Days the people shall flee to the valleys of the mountains," adding her assurance that "the Last Days held no terror for us, for we were always sheltered in the valleys of the mountains and could fear no evil."

Many Mormons have left their shelters, scattering to all parts of the world to preach, to work, or to adventure. They build their Zions elsewhere. The little town which sheltered the "house of many rooms" is dying out. But it leaves a promise. A familiar scripture comes to mind: "In my Father's House are many mansions." The house put its arms around all who entered and it welcomed their differences. Hopefully this tradition will not die out among those who remember.