

DISCOVERING A MORMON WRITER: DAVID L. WRIGHT 1929-1967

James Miller

James Miller, a prize-winning poet himself, has introduced DIALOGUE's editors to the unpublished and generally unknown work of his close friend, David Wright, who died in 1967 at the age of thirty-eight. Much impressed with what we have seen and anxious to end the unfortunate neglect of this fine Mormon writer, we print here the first section of his "River Saints," with a biographical introduction and elegy by Mr. Miller. We plan to publish other work by Wright in the future and would welcome reader responses to this first selection.

In his writing lifetime, David L. Wright, a brilliant young author from southern Idaho, did come to know some measure of fame after the publication of his short story "A Summer in the Country," brought out by *Mutiny* magazine in the fall of 1960. And there followed other appearances of his stories about his real and mythic home country the same year in *Arizona Quarterly*, *The Humanist*, and *Inland* magazine. In 1961, when Wright was thirty-two, "A Summer in the Country" was reprinted in *Best Articles & Stories* magazine. Later that year it was named to "The Roll of Honor" in *Best American Short Stories 1961* (Foley and Burnett).

When John Hall Wheelock first read "A Summer in the Country" (Wheelock was a distinguished writer, poet, and editor who worked at one time for the publishers of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald and had greatly helped Thomas Wolfe with his editing of *Of Time And The River*), he had this to say about David Wright:

As a former editor with the house of Charles Scribner's Sons, and its senior editor for ten years . . . I have formed the habit, while

reading periodicals, of looking for fresh talent. I have not often been rewarded by finding it. It was while reading a story by David L. Wright, called "A Summer in the Country," in an issue of the magazine *Mutiny*, published about two years ago, that I realized I was in the presence of a new talent, a writer whose work, previously unknown to me, seemed to hold the promise of an important writing career. So strongly did I feel this, that I wrote at once to the editor of *Mutiny* to express my enthusiasm. My conviction is that David L. Wright is a man of outstanding literary talent.

Wright was born in 1929 in Bennington, Idaho, a town of perhaps two hundred, composed mostly of hard-working Latter-day Saint farmers. He was raised in a family of five children, the fourth-born of Mormon parents whose ancestors were among the earliest settlers of Bear Lake County. He went to grammar school in Bennington and attended high school in Montpelier, five miles south, not far from Bear Lake. In the fall of 1946 he began his college education at Utah State, coming to the Logan school on a football and track scholarship. It was in college that Wright began to find himself, especially in his sophomore year, feeling without doubt that his destiny lay in literature, in teaching and writing. He had already begun to fill the first of many 500-page journals, writing daily in them and at length, recording what the town of Bennington, its history and its people, meant to him, his entries sometimes profound in their poetic richness. He wrote steadily with great love and nostalgia for the Bennington valley, its mountains, its fishermen, the Bear River flowing west of the town and the great night-haunt of the locomotive trains whistling through the homes of his "river saints." And also he wrote in painful, unable grief over his brother Rich, who had died at fifteen when Dave was seven. The dead brother later was to become the living, full heartpound of "A Summer in the Country," and the tragic protagonist of Dave's very successful first play, *Still The Mountain Wind*.

Wright had a welterweight's quick fist, backing away from nothing that challenged his intellect or the swift athlete alert and fleet within him. Yet he was a gentle and loving young man capable of going to great coaxing, comic pains to let a single housefly or mosquito out of his boardinghouse window.

He wrote hard and he read hard in college, and there were two English professors of great encouragement to him — A. N. Sorensen and Ira Hayward. And Dave didn't disappoint them, academically or creatively. The emeritus A. N., who was still teaching, cried out one day ecstatic, after reading a piece of Dave's, of the "burnings of genius," he was so overwhelmed. But Dave was not being published — outside of the local newspaper with sports articles, the college newspaper, and the school literary magazine called *The Scribble*. And frequently, especially after college when he was sending out his stories and poems for publication and being rejected, the coalpiece eyes would brood mistrustingly, and he would return again, solitary and dejected, to his journals — his face silent, his head lowered and his hands in the waves of the thinning rust hair, and write there, gloomily, of his failures.

But the dominating emotional structure of Wright was one of insomniac creator energy. In college he was coach Dick Romney's sports publicist, and he halfbacked and hurdled and was an excellent high-jumper. He decided to become an English teacher before graduating, and so went on to teach at high schools in Rexburg and Downey, Idaho. And he married, wrote, and raised children. Yet hardest upon him was his desire to create, to see himself in print — in the publications that truly mattered. His submissions though were always returned, and his despair mounted while he worked and reworked his stories and poems, constantly, in the early 1950's. And he would wade and plunge into all of life he could possibly touch, with his reading, teaching, and young family, and joy in it, and argue with it, and lament at it when he wrote of the machining transportation of a once simpler Bennington, and Bear Lake County, filling his journals with protesting chants and questioning life and questioning with passionate search and hunting for skillful artistic hope — always, incessantly, on the move for the creative experience. And his students idolized him — their "unconventional teacher," whose contracts were never renewed, because he knew, too handily, how to deal with and oppose power that was too satisfied with itself and unwanting of change or unresponsive to a "screwball Shakespeare-talker." So, to feel vital again, refreshed, Dave would go to visit with his great fisherman friend of "The Conscience of the Village" printed here, play with the Bennington youngsters, enjoy his parents whom he held in affectionate respect, and walk in the mountains east of Joe's Gap, "the gorge" of his fiction and plays.

His last year of teaching was back to his beloved old grade school in Bennington, a stone's throw from his birth house where his parents lived — small, fascinating Bennington whose children packed about Dave and piled upon him, his personality freeing and attractive. For he was the children's conscience and entertainer, their nature-listener, mountain-walker, song-fletcher, and athlete king. But after that year in Bennington the Air Force called him to active duty as a second lieutenant and he had to leave.

Yet it was in the Air Force that he began to know, at least, a little of the writer's hope — he began to win Air Force short story contests. He had been bottomlessly discouraged, in college and while teaching, over the quality of his writing, but now he was warily confident by that bare saving amount that gives hope. And he was receiving check prizes — money, about which he had seldom thought. He worked in terms of how well his writing captured a past remembrance. And finally he did it magnificently while stationed in Florida, during one week, after all the trying trial years — the recreation of his brother Rich. While lying on a couch, he dictated *Still The Mountain Wind* to a woman transcribing his words who had to stop occasionally to weep.

Still The Mountain Wind was premiered at the Lyric Showman Theatre in Logan, Utah, by The Utah State Theatre in February 1956, and met by filled-house, gratifying, moving success. It was later performed by The Poets' Theatre, Cambridge, Massachusetts, near Harvard Square in late 1960, and at the universities of Minnesota, Massachusetts, Idaho, Eastern Oregon Col-

lege, and in southern Utah towns. The story form of the play became the celebrated "A Summer in the Country."

Wright now began to feel greater confidence and that belief in himself that he had needed — desperately — earlier. Only by the strongest encouragement and urging of a few friends, years before, was he saved from thorough desolation and hopelessness. For time and again we would tell him — "Dave, you're that writer — you are! — truly creative honest Mormonborn writer. And they are rare. When Vardis Fisher read your stories he said as much — that you were writing better at twenty-four than he was at that age. And hell, he won Harper's big prize — \$10,000 — for *The Children of God*!"

So Bennington now would not pass away, would not be machined-clean, peopled-off, highwayed and fenced to death, and gentiled under, and Monsanto'd-out from the face of the earth of Joe's Gap, the gorge in the mountains of *Still The Mountain Wind* and "A Summer in the Country." Dave had stopped such a dying and passing — catastrophic to his mind; he had stopped it lastingly in the captivity of his drama and story. His people, his place, would not be cultured dead or civilized bare with freeway worlds and International Harvester tracks.

He saved his mythic reality too in *River Saints*, and in a thousand other fiction truths. Loving these, his villagers, he became the truth of them, *their* consuming, preserving, voicing artistic spirit — grown and writing, staged and published. Their poet of innocence and tragedy.

Created by the responding originality of his own life-fires to the fire of life, he was unsaintly divided through his most honest awareness of the people he loved, that he had appointed himself to immortalize. And it took him twenty years to immortalize incongruities. Writing, struggling, journaling to capture what he could of a truth, to leave to truth, in his stories, poems, plays — unorthodox, funny, attractive, wry, revolutionary-fresh. Air Force-moving from the Dakotas to Florida to Iceland to Alabama to Vietnam, and being published, at last, praised, Wright felt that he had arrived somewhat, at least at the beginnings of arrival.

One of the editors responsible for first bringing Wright before the public was Jane Esty of *Mutiny* magazine, who wrote:

Because of Wright's peculiarly intense interest in the background and the origins of the American experience, he can make an important, original contribution to our cultural heritage. His particular insight into the folk-myth of our rural past, with special reference to the agricultural West, gives strength to our national purpose and pride in our emergent consciousness of America's role in this perilous time. His insight represents a powerful vision into the American dream.

Co-editor Paul Lett of *Mutiny* added this appraisal of Wright's creative mastery:

Only now, almost two years after its publication, has "A Summer in the Country" begun to have its real impact on creative writing in this country. I feel safe in predicting that in some twenty years time this story will be in the lexicon of American Letters and that it will

be used as a standard in textbooks on writing throughout the world . . . it drew letters of praise from John Fischer, the distinguished editor of *Harper's* magazine, John Hall Wheelock, former senior editor of Charles Scribner's Sons, and the editor-in-chief of *Kenyon Review*, Robie Macauley, to name only a few.

Unregimental as Wright was, but remembering low wages for Idaho high school teaching and unrenewed contracts and the tension of opposition to dead educators living in towns asleep across the bright chances of youth, he decided to remain in the Air Force as a career officer. And despite military stiffness, he found himself able to preserve his identity and startlingly individualize life about him among Air Force officers and their families, even to the point of being ordered to write formal addresses for generals. With this oncome of energy, amusing tact, underlying forcefulness, he found quickly that it "took him places," places where he wanted to go, which culminated ultimately in a "request granted" to attend the University of Iowa for one year for a master's degree in Fine Arts in creative writing, previously unheard of in the Air Force. It was during this time that he produced novels, and began to be called "little Tom Wolfe," because he would show up in class with novels fat like Wolfe's, written through nights, through weekends, holidays — days, hours squeezed in, burning out, as he once confided, in the march towards advanced degrees. He graduated with honors under Paul Engle and Vance Bourjaily.

Out of this Iowa experience came a Wright story (unpublished but accepted — Dave withdrew it so as not to hurt his family and Bennington) entitled "Of Pleasures and Palaces" — a powerful, harrowing piece centered about Bennington, and a play, which he called *The Rough Edge Of Experience*, greatly moving and equally masterful in the dramatic form, though it has never been staged.

Veritable masses of writing out of the twenty creative years of Wright's life are stored now with his brother in Montpelier, Idaho. They have been there for over three years. Some pieces are in the possession of his oldest daughter in Logan, Utah. His publishable works ought not to remain cellared, yellowing in burials of huge packings, there to wrinkle down, brittley mummify, crack and rust dead. For Wright was an important western American author. He had a mind of great originality, and I believe that he did not fail to create the epic of his River Saints, woven throughout his novels, stories, plays, and poetry, the greater part of which lies, today, dark, in direct reversal to the blaze Wright's grasp and powers of vision beautifully and painfully wrought with his creator's mind. Some forty or fifty 500-page journals are a mine in themselves, and several hundred letters which unfold the development of his great struggle on earth to become an artist.

Two of Wright's unpublished novels — one of southern Idaho and the other of Iceland — contain some of his most excellent fiction, the best of his infectious originality, his humorous as well as strong and moving characters, and action and descriptive passages. The Idaho novel deals with contemporary Mormon society and contains a very fine love story; the book about Ice-