

David L. Wright

THE CONSCIENCE OF THE VILLAGE

from "River Saints — Introduction to a Mormon Chronicle"

His eyes milky, intensely blue,
Fasten totally upon the life that was living
From 1884 to nineteen hundred and twelve;
Not seeing the life that has been his dying since,
Though he has braked the crawl toward surcease
More courageously successful than we (even I, the Valley's Poet)
In our existing.
Now, in the final year of his dying, unfamiliar people,
Like Sadie his long-suffering, gentle wife,
Plunge his hat on his head and speak of things
(Eat your bread, Father, then we'll help you to the bathroom)
Having nothing to do with the untranslatable essence
Of those Maori days worshipping with savages who loved him,
And the boyhood before it, fishing the river,
Talking with God,
They — Sadie, his son Nathan, his granddaughters (two) —
Occupants and masters of his home now,
Caution him, watch your step, Father,
Sit down, shut up the girls are studying,
Try not to cry, Father, sleep well, Father,
We know what's best for you,
Hushing his twanging outbreaks of Maori war and wedding chants,
The sharp-syllabled cries likely to disturb or frighten
The granddaughters, who must study and listen to
The Beatles.
(: Well, what are they doing here anyhow? This is my house)
(: Shhhh, Father, you're not well . . . behave yourself . . .
You wouldn't want us to take you to Blackfoot would you?)
At which mention of Idaho's mental institution
He cries,

Crumbling the bread on the oilcloth,
Sipping water (perhaps in remembrance of his blood?)
And wipes his nose with a middle finger large
With arthritis, its joint broken by a kicking hog,
Thirty years ago, in the middle of the dying time;
Now guiding that finger to grasp at crumbs,
(*Surely*, the Poet thinks, in remembrance of the Lord).

Sadie saying: now Father . . .
Gently washes his hands with a washrag
: Your friend is here, you haven't
Seen him since he went away.
But he cries still, his head bobbing to table's edge,
His hand uncaring loose
In the kindly grasp of his long-suffering
Who endured and never blamed him for their children's rags
Throughout the carefree, dying years.
: Father! Don't you remember?
Carl's son . . . he's coming to see you.
He turns his milky eyes up, his lips form, break,
And re-form angles over the cavern of mouth
: Carl's Boy?
? . . . ?
Yes, yes . . .
For the Poet heard and saw the Maori world,
As a village boy listened and seemed
To understand
The war and wedding chants:
Saw empathetically, visions and remembrances,
As they were —
Of young Mormon missionary, Matthew Daniels,
Baptizing natives in fish-filled streams,
Eating ceremonial trout,
Tempted by but not submitting to barebreasted daughters
Of the chief
Because of Judith, his village sweetheart,
In the days of living when vows were not mired
In the moss of lust.
Saw too, himself pleading for more tales,
More songs, more images of rivers and oceans
Aborigines paint-smeared and loin-cloth
Naked —
Saw too the young Matthew equally vermillion and naked,
Dancing chanting with them,
Like one of them —
Saw too his leading the chief
Into the river,
Baptizing him in the name of God, Son, and Holy Ghost,

Not insisting as all missionaries were ordered
That the otherwise pure in heart
Must discontinue smoking pipes —
Seeing Matthew smoking with the chief,
Minutes before and minutes after
The dunking ceremony
(: I tried to do right. I tried!)
(: Now, Father, hush, we're here)
: Carl's son,
And his arm goes out, recognizing.
: Brother Daniels, I've come to take you for a drive . . .
To the river.
The long-suffering jams his hat on his head
: Father, you hear that? He wants to take you
To the river? Won't that be nice?
But he has been searching not her words,
Nor the poet, but
A remembrance;
The milky intensely blue eyes frown,
Then see the memory.
: You asked me,
The memory asserts authority now,
: How could you know, and I told you I don't know . . .
It's different for every man.

His eyes dance now with the days of two decades ago,
When the boy often touched the time of the old man's living;
When those in the village thought him only pleasantly eccentric,
And blamed him affectionately for being improvident
To his now well-employed children
The saints milked his cows,
Cut his hay,
Stacked it,
While his carefreeness mocked
Their industry and sweat,
With Maori songs; and along the river
He trapped in constant dialogue with elusive fish;
The Saints of Zion loving him full well,
Unconsciously asking him the light and the way,
Envyng him, clucking tongues forgivingly
Over the frightfulness of such sloth that dared
Comb abnegation through the beehive of their Mormondom;
Yet innerly knowing he knew secretly
Grandeurs of heaven and earth they
Could only pretend to know
While they righteously worked their days
Honestly
Paid tithes

Honestly
Churched themselves
Honestly
Uttered Sunday platitudes
Honestly
And strove for honest tractors, electricity,
And plumbing, and education;
Acquisitions, all, he never argued with,
But preferred to fish into the cyclic nonsense they are,
Than have.
: It was one day I was hauling straw for your father, down from
Maple field. It was cold that day,
And you were just about knee high to a grasshopper.
Ignoring Sadie's hand, urging him to rise,
To go,
: And you said : I don't know, Brother Daniels,
How does a body go about knowing? And I didn't
Tell you like some others do, to pray and read
The Book of Mormon.
His voice rising, justifying his own form of
Honesty,
His milky intensely blue eyes straining,
Frowning into the Poet's face who
Is remembering that he too was blooded into the village
Life, then.
: Because it's different for every man,
And sometimes when you want to know, you *can't*,
You can't!
That's all there is to it!
He trembles as if
The powerful unseens of orthodox voices
Are claiming otherwise.

: Shhhh, Father . . . now here's your coat . . .
Don't keep him waiting.
: You can't!
Unaware of the coat she has draped over his arm,
Of the Poet's hand guiding him out of the chair,
Of long-suffering holding the door open.
: It's different . . . there's no telling . . .
And the Poet knows there is no telling . . . anything,
For that is why he is back to the old fisherman,
To learn to know, then to tell,
From the spirit of his old and first teacher,
In the glowing dying days;
In hay rack days.
: His arthritis is so bad,
Long-suffering's voice a sadness,

A story and a poem
She of patience and no complaints,
Whom no woman in the village ever envied;
She, waiting, knitting the two three four nights
Of his fishing absences,
His announced planlessness
While the hay burned and the unmilked cows
Broke half the fences in town.
: Arthritis this, arthritis that!
Mumbling, staggering,
Critical in his brief return to the world of his long-suffering's
Pitiful narrow-worldness,
She, never having had a vision on a hillside
Or anywhere else,
Never feeling wildly certain of anything
Except a loaf of bread,
A knitted sock.

: The sun was bright as a gold piece,
He says, his joints testing the pathway uncertainly,
: But it was cold that day . . . I tell you . . .
It was awful cold that day . . . and me with a fever
Like a bonfire.
His broken finger joint fumbling over his lips,
He limps and stops, repeating it was different for every man,
But the way he first knew was the night
He lay in a thicket on a New Zealand hillside,
Sick and feverish when
Lo and behold
God and Joseph Smith appeared in a bath of light
: I *saw* them,
He, nearly screaming,
Eyes and lips weeping.
From the porch: Now, Father . . . don't . . . please don't . . .
He turns, walks a jerked speed,
Lips angry now,
Eyes intensely blue searching the gravel path.
: She don't know
They think I'm two shades in the wind;
But they don't know . . . my own house!
But the poet busily deafens the traffic of sadness,
With noises of memory — the sleigh ride day, the load of straw
Among the many loads from maple field,
The snow crusty in the isinglass fields,
Hard and glistening beneath the runners of the long lane roads;
He and the old fisherman buried for warmth in the straw,
Noses dripping and feet yelling numbness,
In the days of dying

When animals seemed the lucky ones,
Fed and warm when humans sometimes weren't:
And the Poet sees the horses foaming in the traces
Snorting and defecating,
Their hooves crunching the hardpacked snow;
And remembering the old fisherman's telling again
Of God and Joseph Smith laying hands upon his fevered head,
Commending him for his faithfulness
In rejecting the chief's request to cohabit
With two of his unmarried daughters,
Hence to plant the seed of Israel in his royal blood;
Then the two personages, glowing brightly as a gold piece,
Commanded the fever from his body,
Bade him rise from the hillside --
: Go forth
And do a mighty work
Among a needful, heathen people;
And if thou are faithful it shall come to pass . . .

But neither in the living nor in the dying years
Did the personages finish their prophecy upon his head,
Leaving him to ask five decades of fishes for the means of his
Salvation.
: I tried,
Limping, clutching the Poet's arm,
: I tried . . . to do my best.
Small compensation since nineteen hundred and twelve
Talking to a river about what living was like,
Convincing elusive fishes of the agony
Of whistling into the graveyard of the villagers' ears
All that they could not know
Of his great knowing . . .

The Poet drives slowly beneath, then into,
The foothills of Pescadero
Seeing a yellow grove of aspens where,
Before his time, a bishop's son
Slew himself herding his father's sheep;
Not listening to the Gabble of where,
In countless fishing holes, the old fisherman
Sought answers to his fate
From fishes.
From hooks to lines to bait to water battles won and lost,
He gabbles.
Finally to Judith, his long-waiting sweetheart,
For whose gospel sake he spurned the barebosomed Maori maids,
He talks;
Of having married her in nineteen hundred and twelve,

Honeymooning at the quarterly gathering of Zion's flock
In Salt Lake City,
There seeing Brother Murdock his New Zealand
Mission President who said,
: Matthew, are you still fishing . . . good! . . .
Hugging the intense villager who
Converted more Maoris than all missionaries combined.
: So busy with real estate and church, I gave it up . . .
Don't let any get away! . . .
. . . But don't forget to love the Lord!
: He was a good man, President Murdock,
Never a better one ever lived.
Crying now, softly,
The big finger crossing under his nose;
For the day after, Judith took sick,
Dying in Salt Lake of appendicitis
Under the prayers of Murdock imploring the Lord
To spare her,
: I come home and started going with Sadie,
He said. But broke off.
: I don't know why I'm a-talking like this,
His eyes coming back with re-interest
As he sees a certain bend in the river,
Beneath Pascadero,
And his spirit lights with memory of a big one,
Landed in Hoover's time,
The very day? (the Poet ponders)
When he, the village constable, forgot to open the polls,
Was off fishing, and the saints had to hoist
A boy through the schoolhouse window.
: Nathan helped me pull him out . . .
Must of weighed six pounds!

Then the narrative of his beginnings,
Flowing as coherently and true as hayrack conversations
In the days of dying —
His father, a trapper named Billings;
Mother a half-breed Indian;
The child orphaned
(: I dunno if they left me or died or what)
And cared for by his mother's people,
Known of, somehow, by the Poet's grandmother who,
Also knowing of Old Gus and Hilda Daniels'
Long childlessness, took him
From the burdened grandparents,
And transported him in a boxwagon
To Bear Lake Valley, keeping him
Alive on mare's milk during the long and delayed journey

From Fort Hall.

Indulged by his foster parents into an idyllic
River-fishing childhood, permitting him to determine
When or whether to go to school,
And leaving him with reasonable property and money
(As village legacies go) which he used
To perform his three year mission,
Then mismanaged and squandered through neglect
From nineteen hundred and twelve unto this day,
Preferring now, as eight decades ago, to fish
The river every day that the obstructive theys
Will let him,
Crying when they will not.
And through all the days of his dying
Always refusing the complications of family-rearing,
Plying the river for completion of the personages' promises;
But not knowing, the Poet thinks, that he was
Becoming a twentieth-century impossibility,
A wonder of the world that couldn't be,
But was;
Daily returning to the river to secure simplicity;
And though too kind to refuse office and task —
Constable, sexton, gravedigger, butcher —
Too near the magic of idyl to often perform them,
Paying the Saints the inconvenience of his un milked cows
With messes of fish, and to the bishop too
His tithing — one fish in ten to the Lord.

In the car bumping through pioneer logging trails
Weeded over now, he speaks of recent reform,
Enforced by arthritis and winters too long.
: Been going to church,
He says, like a child learning to swim again.
: Going back now I'm old. But they think I'm
Two shades in the wind and . . .
Choking, bringing the broken joint to his nose,
. . . : They made me sit down . . . I was telling them
How I came to know . . . fever like a bonfire . . .
Wasn't half through and the bishop told Sadie to make me
Quit.
Because (the Poet thinks) he is the conscience of the village —
The Saints could not bear the chilling pierce of the Maori songs
Cracking the walls of the churchhouse and reminding those
Who have become old with him, that this is his dying year;
Or perhaps, because he announced the chant
As picturing dying suns, they felt
Premonitions of their own Yorick time.
I, the Valley's Poet, stop the machine

That I have accepted as consonant with my century,
And walk in the yellow aspen grove
Where the boy slew himself before my time,
Seeing in the eye of my soul
The Pescadero hills,
The stubble fields, reaped,
And the river, faint and long, below;
Tormenting myself not of dying
But of living in a rocket century.
Knowing the arthritically old man
Trembling in the car
In the final sign of sanity
In this the final year of his dying;
Knowing the *how can anyone know?*
Of our hayrack day gliding over isinglass snow
In maple field is no answer other than
The one he gave, and persisted in.
And now I long for his
Gift of leaving
A way and a time so rich;
To do as he has done;
To be as he has become.
Leaving a river for others to find
For more than they know will be.
Yet who can give such offerings as he,
At the water's edge,
Or offer the gift of self unto its flow?
Who? For eight decades unremitting?
Only he, whose mystery is to be reclaimed in that same innocence
From which, orphaned, he began.
The car starts, moves downhill,
Stung by the lashings of dead willow limbs.
: Be careful, Brother Daniels,
Of the river.
: Tumble in?
Mischievous streaking the milky intensely blue eyes,
: O, I 'spect so . . . someday . . . this winter . . . maybe.
Caring not;
For he tried to do right in the days of his living,
Knowing he saw them one rainy night —
God and Joseph Smith.
: I saw them again the other night . . .
Funny thing, they looked a little
Like Judith,
Chuckling, gazing, now pointing the crooked finger to
A certain bend where
He and Nathan pulled a big one
Into shore.