

in Rigdon's prophetic powers. Rigdon preached in 1844 that he held the keys of conquest and that he would triumphantly lead the Saints to battle against the United States and England, preparatory to the battle of God and Magog. Such wild apocalyptic utterances, characteristic of Rigdon, seemed extravagant to most Mormons. They seem to have sensed what Rigdon's son, John W., said in 1859. When some of the elders persuaded Rigdon to leave Friendship and preach at Centerville, it raised the anger of his son: "My father is in no condition to preach to any people he is a Maniac on religion & you did very wrong to influence him to leave his home." John W. may have been guilty of the Rigdon tendency to exaggerate, but a more thorough and thoughtful study is needed before we can be certain.

## Sisyphus in the West

MAUREEN URSENBACH

*Goldenrod*. By Herbert Harker. New York: Random House, 1972. 186 pp. \$5.95.

In a recent *New Era* article (August 1972) Arthur Henry King made an incisive comment about Mormon literature: Mormon artists, he said, "need not write especially for Mormons, and they need not write especially on Mormon subjects" for the treatment to be inescapably Mormon. I cannot be sure that a Gentile would recognize the Mormonism in Herbert Harker's novel *Goldenrod*, but certainly here is a work which finds resonance in at least one Mormon soul, and a new talent which gives some substance to Dale Morgan's hope, expressed in *Dialogue's* issue on literature (Autumn 1969) that "there is going to be, as there is now, a Mormon literature, and on the whole, I think the best is yet to come."

*Goldenrod* makes literary sense on several levels. It's plot line is western, and Harker can suit his prose to the fast action of the rodeo circuit which is the milieu of his protagonist Jesse Gifford. A down-and-outer since a trouncing under the hooves of the bronc that had thrown him, Jesse, his back taped to protect the still fragile pelvis, tries for a comeback in the granddaddy rodeo, the Calgary Stampede, astride the saddle-bronc Polka Dot:

The chute opened. Polka Dot . . . stood for a moment, uncertainly. Then, with the same zest he had shown earlier, he spun on his heels and leaped into the arena. Jesse felt blue sky under him, but when the horse came down hard on all four feet, he chucked back into the saddle like a rifle bolt going home. He felt as if his encasement of adhesive tape had crumbled, his pelvis smashed with the shock. . . .

The story moves rapidly, with tight, concise prose. Flashbacks enlarge the plot so easily that the reader is hardly aware that it was a literary device and not an actuality which filled in the details.

*Goldenrod* does more than tell a western tale. There is a lyricism in Harker's setting of the western scene which not only puts the characters in a fitting locale, but creates that landscape and characterizes those people in a few deft strokes. The book begins:

Jesse and his boys had traveled for three days. Now it was evening again, and as he looked back across the distance they had come, Jesse saw their long-legged shadows ripple over the uneven prairie behind them. He was weary beyond feeling. The numbness of his body was intensified by the ache that hung inside him, swinging with the motion of the saddle. Sometimes that ache seemed suspended from his heart and sometimes from his broken pelvis.

And already there is established a tone which undercuts the romance of the west which we have learned to impose on our writing of cowboy lore; with the broken pelvis we sense the breakdown of the cowboy hero. Jesse Gifford can ride, better than most circuit cowboys, but he is far from the John Wayne-Roy Rogers hero we grew up with. He misses the rabbit he was aiming to feed his boys for supper because he forgot to load his gun; he refuses to fight the champion who has stolen his girl because "his anger all drained out through the soles of his feet;" he can't function with a couple of drinks under his belt; and in an angry madness he shoots his faithful horse. The alternating hero and anti-hero, or better expressed, non-hero, makes of Jesse Gifford a man to be believed in. The balance is precarious, but Harker manages to maintain it.

And out of the tension which arises between Jesse Gifford the cowboy and Jesse Gifford the man emerges a novel which has more in common with Camus' *The Stranger* than it does with Jack Schaefer's *Shane*. The pseudo-morality of the western frontier is an imposed direction which, when he thinks about it, Jesse Gifford cannot accept. So he turns at each step, and discovers his independence in acting contrary to the expected. The emerging ethic is not existential: it is most often by accident that Jesse finds himself behaving authentically. But the implications are still there: Jesse is a better man for being a lesser hero.

There are weak moments in the book: the attempted hanging in the stable lacks the balance of dark and light which saves most of the episodes from over-seriousness. And the final chapter gets too caught up in the "ride off together into the sunset" ending to avoid the sentimentality of the formula western. The scene could be one of those rare unforgettable ones: Jesse, broken down and broken legged, clad only in his plaster cast, tangles with his muscled rival Keno; licks him with the help of a shotgun blast fired into the rafters by his twelve-year-old Ethan; then politely suggests that unless Keno leaves now, the road will be snowed in. And then he invites his own wife Shirley to stay, or go with Keno, as she pleases. The elements are all there; only Harker's usually pervading humor is missing.

But if one or two scenes seem less than right, it is mainly because of the craftsmanship with which Harker has wrought the rest of the book. The moment in the third chapter, for example, when tough little George, who doesn't know he ought to be feeling sorry for himself, bereft as he is of home, mother, security, discovers fear in a baby rabbit whose mother has hopped off. The juxtaposing of the two seems too artless to be planned, but too poetic to be accidental.

The scene which, for me, pulls the novel closest to the archetypal, the mythical, and makes it speak with a responsive universality, is the one in the pasture with Czar, the horse. Jesse is trying to escape for a day, and his only chance is to saddle Czar and race on him to the nearest train stop. Already he hears the whistle. But Czar won't be caught, and when Jesse does get close, evades the

bridle. In excruciating desperation Jesse explodes his anger by firing his shotgun full in Czar's face. His rebellion stilled by his horror of his action, he reasserts his humanity by firing a second and infinitely more difficult shot to kill the horse. Swinging wide his arms, he hurls the gun into the deep grasses and falls on his face near the gruesome corpse of Czar. There his boys find him; bit by bit he acknowledges them, his responsibility, and his life. Sisyphus, having failed in his attempt to hurl his rock in the face of the gods, trudges again down the mountainside to retrieve it and with it start the ascent anew.

In summary the scene sounds heavy with philosophical weight; actually it moves quickly and lightly, its implications trailing along in its wake. Its salvation is the author's gift for glossing the whole with a fine sheen of humor, yet at the same time maintaining the sense of impact of the events on his characters. He seems able to show the comic mask not quite hidden behind seeming tragedy in such a way that we see life more real than real.

Such an awareness, accompanied by a compassion grown of understanding, I kept thinking as I read, could create a literary expression of Mormon experience which would be both truthful and significant. Harker's roots are in the Mormon communities of Southern Alberta; his adult world has expanded far beyond small-towns into modern urban Mormonism. He knows Mormon subjects, and he can write. The anticipation that those skills so evident in *Goldenrod* might be applied to the creation of a Mormon novel, with Mormon themes and Mormon characters, was the final excitement in this reading.

## A Prophet's Goodly Grandparents

DEAN JESSEE

*Joseph Smith's New England Heritage: Influences of Grandfathers Solomon Mack and Asael Smith.* By Richard Lloyd Anderson. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1971. 230 pp. \$4.95.

*Joseph Smith's New England Heritage* by Dr. Richard L. Anderson is an important contribution to an understanding of Joseph Smith's immediate ancestry and the domestic environment in which he was raised. Since Joseph attributed dominant traits of his character to the influence of his "grandfathers while they dandled me on their knees;" and inasmuch as "books debunking Joseph Smith typically begin by downgrading his immediate ancestors," a careful study of Joseph's forebearers is long overdue.

This volume contains eight chapters divided into a prologue, an epilogue, and six chapters dealing with the lives of Joseph Smith's grandparents. Extensive notes provide much detail, enrichment, and clarification. Although limited to names, the index permits quick reference to members of the Smith and Mack families. Twenty-one illustrations give valuable assistance in showing family relationships, New England residences, and pictorial views of individuals and places mentioned in the book.

Chapters two to four focus upon Joseph Smith's maternal grandparents, tracing events in the life of Solomon Mack from his early war experiences to