

BOOK REVIEWS

Provoans

EDWARD GEARY

"Under the Cottonwoods" and Other Mormon Stories. By Douglas H. Thayer. Provo, Utah: Frankson Books, 1977. 229 pp., \$4.00.

Little of the Mormon fiction published thus far has dealt significantly with the central issues of Latter-day Saint religious life. On the one hand there is the propagandistic fiction, found chiefly in the church magazines, which ignores or distorts real problems as it parades conventional characters through unconvincing conflicts to predictable conclusions. On the other hand there is the regional fiction, some of it very good but usually concerned more with Mormon folkways than with Mormon faith. Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* is a powerful novel but humanistic at the core. Virginia Sorensen's novels evoke vivid pictures of Mormon life but always from a slightly alienated point of view. There is a kind of centrifugal tendency in most regional writing. It may begin in the peculiarities of Mormon experience, but it reaches out toward wider issues for a wider audience. Ms. Sorensen has described the task of the regional writer as to "manage somehow to expand" his limited materials "into the necessary importance by finding their place and meaning in the world at large. . . ." She went on to say that "As a writer and as a person, I can honestly say that I am not particularly interested in Mormons. Not particularly. It is by a series of accidents of birth that I must fill out the blank of myself with such words as 'white' and 'female' and 'American and 'Mormon.'"

In contrast to this centrifugal tendency, Douglas Thayer's tendency is centripetal. He is particularly interested in Mormons, not just as a regional culture but as a faith. His major characters all are, or have been, committed Latter-day Saints; the problems

they face center on their religious lives; and the stories will speak more powerfully to members of the Church than to others. Powerfully, but not reassuringly; for Thayer's book is a kind of Mormon *Dubliners*, examining the moral and spiritual paralysis of Mormon lives in ways that most of us, I think, will find rather uncomfortable.

The resemblances to Joyce's *Dubliners* are extensive enough to suggest an influence. All of the characters inhabit one provincial town, in this case Provo, Utah. The stories, though separate, gain additional meaning and impact when read as a group, and they are arranged roughly in order of the advancing age of the protagonists. The stories have little action in the usual sense, depending instead for their effect on developing insight. (Some of Thayer's stories, notably "Second South," "The Clinic," and "Under the Cottonwoods," even have Joycean "epiphanies.") Thayer's range of characters and incidents is narrower than Joyce's, and his narrative technique is less complex. We see Thayer's major characters mainly from the inside without the ironic play of moral and intellectual distance typical of Joyce. Unlike Joyce, Thayer clearly intends to show the strengths as well as some of the shortcomings of Mormon life, but the prevailing effect, for me, at any rate, is emptiness and frustration.

The blurb on the dust jacket describes the stories in these terms: "Poised on a decisive moment, a story may follow the fractional turnings of a character choosing his way through a crisis. Or it may follow him into the gap between the limitations of his own understanding and the full enlightenment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The result may be devastation; it is more often renewal." I would reverse the last

statement. The result, in Thayer's fiction, may be renewal; it is more often, if not devastation, desolation.

The positive themes are there, make no mistake. "Elder Thatcher" strongly affirms the reality of testimony and is, moreover, the most realistic treatment of missionary experience that I have ever read. "Greg" is a positive story: a young priest faces the temptation to run away from his moral responsibility for his girl friend's pregnancy and at the end is on his way to confess to his bishop and to begin setting his life in order. "Testimony" is positive, though rather slight. "The Clinic" is my favorite story in the volume, largely because of its hard-won affirmation. But these stories are surrounded by others much bleaker in vision, stories which suggest that many Mormons lead lives of quiet desperation.

Thayer's fictional world is chiefly composed of men and boys with no-nonsense names of one or two syllables—Greg, Allen, Troy, David, Paul, Glen, Reed, Jared—"normal" names for normal people, (very different from Don Marshall's comic Mormon names). These are characters we are invited to see from the inside, as representatives of Mormon norms, not extremes. However, they are not exactly typical Mormons, being more given to introspection than most and almost entirely humorless. (These characteristics may be accounted for in part by the fact that the stories explore crisis situations.) They are perhaps a little neurotic and more than a little puritanical, people for whom life is a spiritual struggle and faith a strenuous discipline.

The protagonists are surrounded by conventional figures. Their fathers are upright and manly and understanding. Their mothers are less understanding but intensely devoted, constantly buying them new clothes and fixing bedtime snacks and holding the highest hopes for their futures. Their wives are younger versions of their mothers, wonderfully virtuous and spiritual, smiling, patient, perfect housekeepers who never get cross (not even when left pregnant, with three tired children in a hot car at a freeway rest stop while Hubby takes a leisurely stroll in search of his lost boyhood). And yet there is something terrible about these perfect wives and mothers who seem to have no inner lives. It is as though the protagon-

ists were trapped in a diorama on Temple Square where they were the only living beings amid a crowd of animated manikins.

There is something peculiar in the sexuality of Thayer's fiction. His married protagonists have children by their wives (one, indeed, has had seven pregnancies in nine years, counting miscarriages), but through all of their reflections they betray scarcely any awareness of their wives' bodies. Similarly, Greg, the young boy who has got his girl friend pregnant, has remarkably little awareness of her physically. For the most part he longs simply to annihilate the act, to will it out of existence and to recover cleanliness, though there are occasional moments when he feels the desire to "be carnal, just let his body take over and always be that way." Even then, however, it is his own body he is conscious of, not hers. That is the way it tends to be with Thayer's characters, the unconsciousness of women's bodies and the intense consciousness of their own. They are remarkably fastidious, with more bathing and washing and lathering than one will find in a book of this length. David Thatcher's true conversion, while he is on his mission, is signalled by a new relation to his body: "He'd been able, finally, on his mission to forget about his body, not even be aware of it, as if it had become air or light, or some special kind of rare metal." Paul, in "Under the Cottonwoods," is trying to recover the physical sensations of pre-adolescence, the sensation of diving into the cool water, the sensation of sun on his bare skin. At puberty, in his passion for exemplary purity, he had "lost all delight in his body. He distrusted it, became uneasy because of what he now felt, and so after fourteen he had no memory of his body being wonderful." His longing for freedom and renewal takes the form of a longing to rediscover his body: "He wanted to find his body, take back the responsibility for his own life so that he could begin to love out of himself." When Troy, in "Opening Day," receives a deer rifle from his father for his sixteenth birthday, he virtually has an affair with it: "That night after I showered I got the .270 out of the case again to hold it against my body." And in the end, despite his intentions to perfect his life, the rifle seduces him to violence.

And so it goes. Except for a hug or two in "Indian Hills," the only real variation from this narcissistic sexuality comes in "The Clinic." Here again the protagonist's spiritual condition is symbolically reflected in his relation to his body. Steve has come home from Viet Nam feeling alienated, unworthy, emotionally dead, and he has also brought home with him a persistent skin infection. "At times his whole body burned faintly. The army doctor had told him that some men lost all control and lay in bed scratching themselves until they had deep infected sores. He had always liked the shower after he had played basketball or tennis. His body had always been light and clean." Neither condition, the fungus infection nor the spiritual malaise, is easily curable. As the old family doctor says, "It's one of those things you're going to have to learn to live with. One way or another we all have something." But the doctor gives him a prescription for some salve which will relieve the itching and at the same time offers a prescription for the spiritual disease: "Start going to church. You're not better or worse than most of us. And get married. You need to hold a wife in your arms for about six weeks to thaw you out." On his way to the drug store to get the salve, Steve sees a girl and grows conscious of her body: "She swung her purse gently across her legs, and her shining dark hair fell down over her bare arm." It isn't much, but it is the beginning of feeling, and feeling for something beyond his own skin. It is one of the things that make "The Clinic," to my taste, the most satisfying story in the collection.

Despite their peculiarities, however, Thayer does succeed in making his characters representative. Their crises are crises we all might have to face. The forces which threaten their lives are a danger to us all. Thayer's most pervasive theme is that Mormon lives are too often planned-out, programmed, consumed by abstractions. This theme is present in every story in the book, but is treated most explicitly in the title story. Paul, the protagonist of "Under the Cottonwoods," is outwardly a shining example of the Mormon success story, but his life has become nothing more than a list of achievements:

He had graduated from Provo High School, filled a mission for the Church, been in the army, gotten married, graduated from BYU and then dental school, finished an orthodontics residency and been in practice one year. He would build a house, a clinic of his own, he and Beth would have three or four more children, and he would probably move up from second counselor to bishop of the Palo Alto Ward, be on the high council, maybe be stake president in ten years. He had done and would do all of those things he was expected to, but his whole life seemed so ordered, predetermined, rushed, tense. At times he felt like a robot, had little sense of controlling his own life, being individual.

As he returns home to Provo for a vacation, Paul begins to realize that his life is barren, stripped of meaning like the old swimming hole that has been dredged by the Army Engineers leaving only a barren channel under the cottonwoods. The life he longs to recover, the "pure careless joy" and "sense of being," he can now approach only symbolically, in the image of the trout caught on his line and then set free to "flash back into the deep water, vanish." Clearly Paul is a fish hooked and landed, but by whom, or by what? Partly by his own drive for success. Partly by the pressure of the women in his life: "He had spent his life trying to achieve the happiness and perfection his mother wanted for him, and now he was doing it for Beth." But partly too, it seems, by a religious climate that has reduced life to programs, obligations, discipline, and awards, as if achieving goals were more important than living and "as if being an example were more important than being a person."

Thayer's most interesting character is probably Jared in the concluding story, "Zarahemla." Like Paul, Jared is outwardly successful in his profession, in his family life, and in the Church. He is a CPA living in Provo instead of an orthodontist in Palo Alto (both dentistry and accounting are favored occupations among Mormons, seeming somehow "safe" as well as respectable). Like Paul, he makes a pilgrimage to his boyhood home and attempts to reconcile the quality of his present life with the remembered dreams and aspirations of youth.

Even more strongly than "Under the Cottonwoods," "Zarahemla" deals with the Utah-Mormon nostalgia for the rural past. In conversation Thayer has said that the story examines the question of whether Mormonism is viable in the last half of the twentieth century, as an urban and a worldwide faith, or whether it is essentially rural and regional. Thayer did not say what answer, if any, the story gives to the question. Presumably, however, since the story ends with Jared severing the tangible links with his past and looking somewhat hopefully toward the future, the answer is intended to be affirmative. But the affirmation strikes me as half-hearted at best.

Jared's faith has been shaped by the living tradition in which he grew up, embodied in the figure of his great-grandfather, Nathaniel Thatcher, who settled the remote southern Utah town of Zarahemla, built a beautiful stone meeting house there as well as four stone houses for his four wives. He served as colonist, missionary, bishop, patriarch and as exemplary man of faith in the stories Jared's grandmother told him as he was growing up:

"My son," she said to him often, "your great-grandfather was one of the noblest men ever to draw a breath of air on this earth. He was God's servant, and if ever a man deserved the celestial kingdom, he did."

Now the village has gone to seed, and the house Jared inherited is the last of the four stone houses remaining in the family. He had hoped to maintain a physical tie with his traditions by keeping the old house in Zarahemla as a summer home, but he must face the fact that his life is now caught up in middle-class Wasatch Front Mormonism and that his wife and children have no feeling for the past beyond a collector's interest in antiques. After one last visit to the town, Jared decides to sell the house to a physician from Los Angeles who wants it for a retirement home. However, he will use the money not, as he had thought of doing, to build a cabin closer to Provo but for his sons' missions and after they are grown for another mission for himself and his wife. To sell the house, therefore, is to put the past behind him and accept the present and future. To sell it and use the money, not

for material comforts but for the work of the Lord is to affirm a faith based on living principles rather than dead traditions.

So, at least, I take Thayer to intend in the story. The problem is that the values supposedly affirmed are not very convincingly established in the story. The immediate situation of the story, with the visit to Zarahemla sandwiched in between a trip to Disneyland and a little league baseball game, calls into question the quality of life that has supplanted the pioneer traditions. So do the descriptions of life in Provo: "Many people in their ward had cabins, some as far away as Bear Lake. If a family didn't have a cabin, it had a camper, trailer, or motor-home, and some had boats. All of the houses in Indian Hills were new, and comfortable, and most of the families young. Their ward was one of the most active in the whole Church." This looks like a satirical commentary on the confusion of spiritual and material values in the Mormon middle class, but apparently no satire is intended.

The same ironic tension appears again and again in the story with the same equivocal treatment, as though Thayer's usually firm control of his materials has broken down here for some reason. The modern Church is persistently characterized by lists of abstractions: "youth leadership, chastity, testimony, and mission preparation"; "education, social services, chapel construction, missionary work, welfare, genealogy, and family life." Intermixed with these are comparable lists of middle-class materialistic values: "In Provo they had their friends, stereo, color TV, closets full of clothes, own rooms, and their league games. They both took swimming, diving, and tennis lessons again this summer"; "In Indian Hills families had life, health-and-accident, maternity, and disability insurance, and retirement programs." In contrast, the nostalgic values are intensely concrete in rendering: stone buildings with the chisel marks still visible; cool shade beside the creek; the smell of sagebrush after a rain; the smell of baking and ironing; the taste of home-bottled fruit: "His grandmother made it almost a sacrament when they ate fruit from the old glass-topped jars that had been her mother's." The new chapel in Provo, "based on the

seven or eight basic plans permitted by the Church architect's office," is "big, efficient, carpeted, air-conditioned—comfortable." The old meeting house in Zarahemla, built by Jared's great-grandfather, has six stained glass windows for which the people of the village had to save for twenty years. The sun coming through the windows fills the chapel with "a hazy golden glow. And it was as if Brigham Young, the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Angel Moroni, the Father, the Son, and the other figures stood suspended in air, each window a vision."

In virtually every way life seems to have grown cheaper, more standardized, less authentic. Jared, growing up without a father, has had to work hard and accept responsibility all his life. His sons, however, "didn't need poverty or a depression to motivate them. The boys in Indian Hills expected to be presidents of corporations, doctors, lawyers, generals, cabinet members, or scientists, so counted on success always. The Church helped to breed that kind of ambition; doctrine, leadership, organization, pro-

grams, and dedication had become the most important things now." When Jared takes his sons to the creek where he used to swim, "they seemed almost afraid. They wore their trunks, didn't run and yell, didn't really enjoy the rope swing." And yet these sons are both the product and the hope of the new Church: "Their generation would be the new bishops, stake presidents, mission presidents, and other leaders the expanding world Church needed. And they would be successful doctors, lawyers, scientists, professors, and businessmen."

Another list of abstractions; another generation of planned-out lives. But at the end of *Under the Cottonwoods* it is far too late for us to be convinced of the value of these things, far too late to be convinced that Jared's dream of a second mission to Mexico holds anything but an illusion of fulfillment.

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The Hill Version of the Prophet's Life

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Joseph Smith, the First Mormon. By Donna Hill. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1977. pp. xix, 527, \$12.50.

Prospective Latter-day Saint readers of Donna Hill's biography of Joseph Smith will want to know two things: Is there anything new, and is it sympathetic to the Prophet? The answer to both questions is definitely yes. Historians of Mormonism have been more active in the past ten years than ever before in the Church's history. Although this is her first venture into history, Donna Hill has read their reports and incorporated the new findings. She acknowledges the aid of her brother Marvin Hill, associate professor of History at Brigham Young University. As one of the most astute and best-informed scholars of early Mormonism, Professor Hill is an excellent guide to the current research, much of which he has done himself. The

historians have made few startling discoveries, but at innumerable points details have been added and perspectives enlarged. *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* affords Latter-day Saints convenient access to the new material.

The book is a friendly reading of the facts new and old. "As a descendant of Mormon pioneers who crossed the plains in faith and hardship," Donna Hill confesses in the Preface, "I cannot deny that my sympathies lie with the Saints." That is not to say that the biography was written to please a Mormon audience. On the doctrinally crucial question of revelation, the book does not take a clear stand. A comparison of Joseph's written revelations with Sidney Rigdon's sermons, she says at one point, "makes it apparent how much Joseph's revelations were indebted to inspiration, how-