

Proceedings

of

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The Association for  
Mormon Letters

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MAUREEN URSENBACH BEECHER

Guest Editor

# Introduction

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BOB REES CALLED IT a "summit meeting of the Mormon literati," the group which gathered April 20, 1976, in the conference room of the Church's Historical Department. Actually it was just a group of people with interest in the question of the literary merit, if any, of the diaries and journals, letters and autobiographies of the Latter-day Saints.

The meeting was to have lasted two hours. It was hoped that at the end of this time each participant, imbued with a sense of the importance of the material, would leave determined to study pieces of Mormon personal literature from his or her own particular point of view. But one hour into the afternoon it became apparent that there was too much to be done in the study of Mormon letters generally. Discussion of diary-as-literature broke down; instead, an organization was generated, an organization whose purpose would be to foster scholarly and creative work in Mormon letters and to promote fellowship among scholars and writers of Mormon literature. They named it the Association for Mormon Letters.

The Association for Mormon Letters was not the first serious attempt to call scholarly attention to imaginative writings of and about Mormons. Voices had long cried out from the pages of regional journals being read by a few of the devoted. In its first issue, *Dialogue* carried a piece dealing with the *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, which acknowledged that there exists "a reasonably distinguished tradition of Mormon literature." The author pled with scholars to find those "works of real power"; to "find them, study them, and criticize them honestly, in the hope that readers . . . will begin paying a little more attention."

*Dialogue* accepted this challenge by publishing not only occasional pieces of literary criticism, but also two literary issues, a roundtable, and, most significantly, a rich collection of imaginative works.

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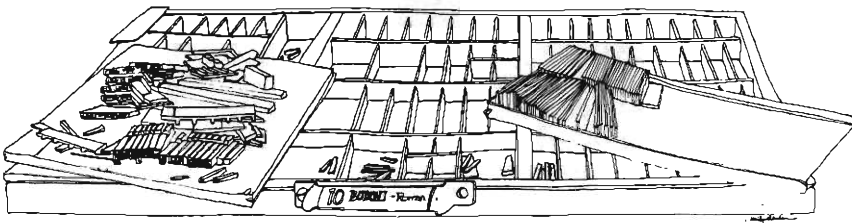
MAUREEN URSENBACH BEECHER is senior research historian at the LDS Church Historical Department, past president of the Association for Mormon Letters and guest editor of this special section.

It is appropriate, then, that when the second annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, October 8, 1977, produced a day-full of papers on the study of Mormon literature, *Dialogue* agreed to collaborate with the Association by sharing those papers with a wider audience than the seventy or so members who were near enough to attend the meeting.

To those who attended the sessions in the University of Utah's Marriott Library auditorium, the day was an unfolding. The first paper, Ed Geary's study of Mormon writers of the 1940s set us in our Mormon context with reminders of the didactic literary efforts of our antecedents, the "home literature" movement among late nineteenth century Latter-day Saints. He led us through the varied responses of the twentieth century writers—Fisher, Sorensen, Whipple, all comfortably familiar names—with their uncomfortable reminder that all is not always well in Zion. His paper ended with an appropriate warning that our present imaginative outpouring, and the critical response which follows, is just as likely to be as dated soon as was that of the 1880s and the 1940s.

On that jarring reminder of our fallibility, we listened to the literary comment on our earlier selves by a Nobel Prize winner. In his paper on Haldor Laxness, Icelandic author of *Paradise Reclaimed*, George Tate combed the entire corpus of Laxness' writings to fill in his picture of the Mormons: "ourselves as others see us." The audience was reminded that there are dimensions of Mormon faith and practice which we insiders might ignore—the similarities between the Mormons in their handcart crossings and the Chinese in their revolution, for instance—which reflect us as we might otherwise not be seen.

Seasoned by the preceding papers in accepting views of the Mormon experience apart from usual patterns, we heard the final paper of the morning—an intellectual, spiritual and literary biography of a Latter-day Saint writer too soon dead. David Wright was presented with compassion and understanding by Bruce Jorgensen who perceived in Wright a gifted young man of eloquent if sparse output.



After the morning's three papers, it was not unreasonable that Franklin Fisher would summarize by commenting that there was indeed a Mormon fiction, but that "only non-Mormons and black sheep have so far written it." We nodded agreement.

The luncheon speaker, however, gave the lie to a too-easy assent. Herbert Harker, very much in the faith, spoke in a personal as well as a general sense of the literary unearthing of the Mormon unconscious that is the stuff of Latter-day literature. His second novel, *Turn Again Home*, then just recently published, had led him, he reported, through a reverse hegira back to Mormon Utah in search of his traces in the past, towards a discovery of

that which is unique and that which is shared.

The frontier experience, shared by Mormons with all such pioneering people, expanded to archetypal significance in the afternoon session as Elaine Burnham, assisted by the recorded voice of her grandfather, retold the tales her great-great grandfather told to his grandson. The oral presentation—a happening which duplication in print could not but demean—was a lively equivalent of the written genre with which the Association had originally concerned itself, the life experiences of the Latter-day Saints.

That most unique Latter-day Saint literature, the personal journal or autobiography of the common Mormon, was treated in the afternoon. Steven Sondrup reviewed some literary dimensions of three published autobiographies in a beginning look. Not at the symposium itself, but under Association for Mormon Letters auspices at a subsequent meeting of the Rocky Mountain Modern Languages Association, Neal Lambert continued the investigation by looking at published and unpublished personal writings of Latter-day Saints to sift out “conscious virtuosity” from “self-conscious artifice,” “unconscious brilliance” from “dull-minded monotony.” The long quotations in his paper, used there to illustrate the author’s literary observations, doubly justified their space: in them we saw both the uniqueness and the universality of the Mormon past; in them we saw our Mormon makings.

And in Mary Bradford’s look at the personal essay among contemporary Latter-day Saints, there we were: Gene England, Becky Cornwall, Ed Geary, Clif Jolley—we listened to our reflections reflected back and found ourselves.

Candadai Seshachari said it for all of us at the end. Through his beautifully tutored East Indian accent, we heard echoes of universality—that the honest literature of a people—any people—is the mirror of mankind.

The underlying question is put to rest. There is a Mormon literature. The term may still be in the process of defining itself, Humpty Dumpty-like, as meaning “what [the critics] choose it to mean,” but October’s symposium, and its repetition in this issue of *Dialogue*, suggest the breadth and depth of the study. The investigation, well begun, continues.

*The Association for Mormon Letters, now in its third year, sends its newsletter to members more than half of whom live beyond the Wasatch Front. Wherever possible, small groups gather under AML auspices to hear readings from local poets or comments from nearby scholars. Beginning this year the Association offers two substantial prizes, one for a critical work and one for an imaginative work. And the symposium, now an annual event, is next scheduled for October 7, 1978, again in Salt Lake City. Papers have already been selected, but there will soon be a call for next year’s contributions. Readers may become members by addressing The Association for Mormon Letters, 1346 South 1800 East, Salt Lake City, Utah 84108. Membership costs \$4.00 annually.*