

### *VIRGINIA SORENSEN: AN INTRODUCTION*

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MORMON READERS are rediscovering Virginia Sorensen. In her person and in her work, she combines many of the traits so often associated with Mormonism: a handcart pioneer heritage, a Danish, old world charm, a seeking spirit, an observant eye. She adds to these a childlike delight in living, a sense of humor, insightful attention to detail and the storyteller's ability to mesmerize.

Born in Provo, Utah in 1912, she was the third of the six children born to Claude and Alice Eggertsen, both of pioneer stock. Eggertsen's work as railroad agent led them from Provo to Manti and then to American Fork, three small towns that imprinted themselves upon her work. Following high school in American Fork, she returned to Provo to enter Brigham Young University as a journalism student. After a year there and another year in the University of Missouri's journalism school, she met and married Frederick Sorensen, also of Utah-Danish heritage. Sorensen was working toward his Ph.D. in English and philosophy at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. She graduated from BYU the same day her daughter Elizabeth (Beth) was born in June 1934. Her second child, Frederick, Jr. (Fred), was born two years later, and for the next twenty years or so, she led the life of a faculty wife, in Terre Haute, Indiana, in Denver, Colorado, in Auburn, Alabama and in Edinboro, Pennsylvania. Her marriage to Sorensen lasted twenty-five years. In 1967 she married Alec Waugh, the British novelist and travel writer (brother to Evelyn) whom she had met at MacDowell Colony, the New Hampshire retreat for artists and writers. Though they travelled regularly to Britain and the States, Morocco was their home until Fall of 1980 when changes in the Moroccan government and Waugh's retirement brought them back to America to settle in Florida near Virginia's daughter.

Her years as a faculty wife were unusually productive. In 1942, while she was living in Terre Haute, close enough to Nauvoo to do some first hand research, she produced her first novel, *A Little Lower Than the Angels*, a realis-

tic and yet poetic portrayal of a woman forced to share her husband in polygamy. It was considered somewhat sensational at the time because of a love scene between Joseph Smith and Eliza Snow and some "unlovely details" like bedwetting. Most modern readers agree that it has stood the test of time, however, and that it and others "could easily appear on a church reading list for young people."<sup>1</sup>

Her second novel, *On This Star*, set in Manti, met with mingled fascination and dismay. Criticized by some as "just a love story," it described the temple wedding ceremony in some detail. The novel's real protagonist is the town of Manti and its temple which lights up the sky and shines on the young lovers.

*On This Star* was really just practice for what critics agree is her finest work: *The Evening and the Morning*. To quote Laurel Thatcher Ulrich: "Its plot centers around an ordinary week near the Twenty-fourth of July in Manti in the 1920s. Kate, a wayward Mormon who has long lived in California, returns home to visit her daughter and grandchildren and to see about getting a small pension due her. . . . The narrative is an interplay of past and present. Kate's memories of her young married life are woven into an account of the events of six days. The shifting perspective in this book gives Sorensen's theme the complexity it needs."<sup>2</sup> Edward Geary believes that "the artistry of *The Evening and Morning* . . . compares with better known works in the mainstream of American literature."<sup>3</sup>

*The Neighbors*, written during a stay in Colorado, deals only indirectly with the Mormons (the leading character is married to one), but it explores the same themes of rebellion and reconciliation that appear in her other novels. Her next novel, *The Proper Gods*, was written with the help of a Guggenheim fellowship to Mexico. She had originally intended to use the award to "chase down Sam Brannan," as she puts it, but became so enamored of the Yaqui Indians that she gave up on Sam. While masses of material about the early Mormon explorer mouldered away in a trunk, she fashioned a story of love and tradition as closely woven as one of the rag rugs she loves to make on her Moroccan loom. Though the setting was a complete departure for her, it dealt with a familiar theme: How can people both love each other and remain true to their beliefs?

Another Guggenheim a few years later, as well as several trips to MacDowell Colony, helped her write her children's novels and her remaining adult books. *Curious Missie* grew out of Auburn, Alabama, where she helped convince the legislature that bookmobiles would make readers out of children. *Plain Girl*, the touching story of an Amish child and winner of the Child Study Award, and *Miracles on Maple Hill*, winner of the Newbery Medal, were both written in Pennsylvania.

Her successes as a children's writer did not keep her from returning to early Mormon themes for *Many Heavens* (inspired by Ellis Shipp), and *Kingdom Come*, a missionary story set in Denmark—also supported by the Guggenheim. In going to Denmark, she felt she was answering a "call" from her ancestors, and the resulting research, besides providing another chil-

dren's book—*Lotte's Locket*—is still feeding the work in progress. During this same period, her collection of short stories, really a memoir based on her childhood, *Where Nothing is Long Ago*, vividly returns to the small town life that informed her earlier work.

Virginia Sorensen's life story falls naturally into two sections, like a beloved book opening to a favorite page. The first and most productive period thus far encompasses her childhood, her education and her first marriage, the second her years alone followed by her second marriage to Alec Waugh. This relatively "dry spell," she attributes to her happiness with Alec and her unhappiness over the loss of her parents and especially the loss of her two sisters who died within a year of one another. Her own bout with an aneurysm and her move (with Alec) back to the United States have slowed her down.

When she and Alec were first married, they acted as visiting professors at the University of Oklahoma and lived for a time in Alexandria, Virginia, home of one of her maternal forebears. Out of these settings she fashioned a non-Mormon novel, *The Man With the Key*, and another children's book, *Around the Corner*. For some reason her long stay in Morocco—eleven years—has produced only one book, a children's novel *Friends of the Long Road*. At present she is working on a Mormon novel which will follow the descendants of *Kingdom Come's* Madsen family from Denmark to modern Mormon country. She is also writing another children's book, a "handcart story."

Most of Virginia's early books are out of print, but the advent of the Mormon Letters Association and the work of students and readers have led to a small Virginia Sorensen renaissance. Her books have always been better known outside of Utah, especially her children's books. In 1956, when I decided to call my thesis, *Virginia Sorensen: An Introduction*, I had no idea I would still be introducing her in 1980. But by this time, I am able to point to a small body of respectable articles and monographs which discuss her work.

Many readers are asking the question, but is she a Mormon writer? Bruce Jorgensen deals perceptively with this subject on page 43. For those who are curious about her private life, she is quick to admit her father was a "jack Mormon," her mother not a Mormon at all. But they raised her in the Church, a church she gradually left during her first marriage. After her second marriage, she joined the Anglican Church. In the interview that follows, she reaffirms her devotion to her Mormon past and her debt to her strong roots. As she grows older, she seems always to represent certain Mormon values. But she does more than *represent*, she *portrays* that most vital thing in literature, the human soul, its strengths and struggles. Though her genuine feeling for the epic background of her people provides much material, she is always reminding us, as does Edward Geary, that the "novel's great tradition is in its treatment of private life."<sup>4</sup> He congratulates Virginia and other Mormon novelists for recognizing this and turning away from "big public events." By narrowing her canvas she paradoxically focuses on a wider truth—that of the individual human heart.

The striving, the becoming, the aspiring in her work represent, in the words of Ulrich, "a celebration of spirit over form, of the future over the past, of freedom over orthodoxy."<sup>5</sup>

In choosing Virginia for a thesis subject, I did so on the recommendation of my major professor at the University of Utah, William Mulder, whose historical studies of the Mormon Scandinavian migrations inspired Virginia to answer her call to Denmark. He believed that choosing a living writer would allow me to make an original contribution to Mormon studies. I am not sure his hope was fulfilled, but certainly Virginia has made a lasting contribution to my life. As a living literary figure she is instructive; as a lifelong friend, she is a model of decency and courage. She helps to fulfill my need for a role model, which, as Lavina Fielding Anderson puts it, is a search that is "ultimately a righteous one and also a very natural one, possibly an inevitable one."<sup>6</sup> Even though Virginia's life is very different from mine, a role model need not travel the exact same path in order to inspire. Unashamed to live the life of the mind while celebrating the possibilities of the body, she accepts with grace the inroads of time. After discovering the aneurysm midway between her brain and her eye, she set about learning to blot out the twin image in the left eye and the discouragement that accompanied it. Now, nourished by her husband's proddings and her own desires, she has begun to write again. Interviewed in Arlington, Virginia in the spring of 1980, she looks back to her childhood and ahead to her "modern Mormon novel." A short reminiscence about her early life, to be included in that novel, follows the interview along with Bruce Jorgensen's article. Jorgensen delivered this paper at the Mormon Letters Association meeting in the Fall of 1979 at Brigham Young University.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Fictional Sisters," *Mormon Sisters*, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Edward Geary, "The Poetics of Provincialism: Mormon Regional Fiction," *Dialogue*, 4, 3:56.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>6</sup>Lavina Fielding Anderson, "Mary Fielding Smith: Her Ox Goes Marching On," *Blueprints for Living: Perspectives for Latter-day Saint Women*, Vol. II, p. 3.