

Missionary to the Mind

Dialogues With Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience by Eugene England (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1984), 217 pp.

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JOHN ROCHE PUBLISHED a very thick book of essays a number of years ago. He was, he lamented, an essayist in an age when the essay was not flourishing. Fortunately this did not prevent publication. Gene England has published a much slimmer book of "Personal Essays on Mormon Experience," an equally daunting task. Personal essays can only speak to people when there is some community of feeling, some commonality of background within which the writer can connect with the reader. Such communities are in short supply these days.

I don't know if the essays in this collection which spoke most powerfully to me would touch a person without a Mormon background. But I suspect that the more didactic of them would be accessible even to one who lacks "Mormon" experience. There are sixteen essays in the book, and in the foreword, England groups them into various categories. Some were delivered as formal addresses, and all have been published in some form in nearly every Mormon-oriented periodical now in existence. Over half of them were published in *DIALOGUE*, an appropriate circumstance since Gene was one of this journal's founders.

The essays range from theological explorations to descriptions of personal experiences. Some address traditional moral and ethical concerns, and others discuss particular challenges Mormons face. En-

gland seeks to ground his collection in Joseph Smith's statement that "by proving contraries, truth is made manifest." So, he seeks to test assertions and contradictions which arise out of Mormon experience.

For me, England's essays which dealt most directly with what it *feels* like to be a Mormon were the best. He has done something here which is far too rare. In most Mormon writing, we are told how we *should* feel. Our emotional and even our spiritual experience is prescribed. And we are given to understand that if our feelings do not match the prescription, they are not valid. However, in "Blessing the Chevrolet," "Going to Conference," "The Hosanna Shout in Washington, D.C.," and "Enduring," England simply describes how he and others actually felt in situations. His descriptions ignite memory and recast our experience in new ways, greatly enriching our emotional and spiritual lives in this telling. His example helps us realize that we need follow no one else's prescription to approach the Lord as long as we retain that crucial element: a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

England's essays span nearly two decades. When they are listed in chronological order (excluding the experiential ones) they reveal a constant concern with the problems of the time and demonstrate how the author has dealt with some of the most difficult issues facing Mormons — the denial of priesthood to blacks, the relationship of individuals to authority, and others. England must agree with C. S. Lewis, who reminds us that "progress is made only into a *resisting* material" (1970, 91). We hear, far too often, that discussion of such topics should be avoided for fear of destroying faith. England demonstrates an apprecia-

tion for the strengthening discipline of honest inquiry. Faith is far more vulnerable to atrophy than to challenge.

In listening to the concerns of a full generation of students, I've realized that while issues shift and new causes for concern arise, critics of Mormonism will beat the Church with any stick that comes to hand. It confirms one of G. K. Chesterton's most telling insights: "Men who begin to fight the Church for the sake of freedom and humanity end by flinging away freedom and humanity if only they may fight the Church" (1950, 258). But England gives examples of how one can explore questions *within* the walls of faith. His essays bespeak the blatant boredom of most church manuals.

During the years Gene worked at St. Olaf's College in Northfield, Minnesota, he also served as a branch president. I'm sure this gave him valuable experience in working with a Mormon congregation. But he put me in shock with his description of the tasks he took on as a new bishop: speaking each week, teaching a Sunday School class, counseling with all those young couples! At first I was reminded of the classic description of Teddy Roosevelt: he wanted to be the groom at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral. My own experience as a bishop has (thus far) permitted no such luxury as regular teaching or speaking. I'm aware of the psychic and physical demands his many roles would demand. It would be instructive for someone, perhaps Gene England, to put together a book of personal essays by bishops describing their feelings and experiences as they struggle to cope with this calling.

Gene England has spent most of his life around college students. He has been a catalyst for countless bright, young people, helping them confront and strengthen their own faith. I know of two young men whose first year of college he "mentored" and whose gospel and academic experience he helped deepen and greatly enriched. He has been a missionary to the mind for a whole generation.

Just how crucial such examples can be is illustrated by a passage from an essay written over forty years ago. C. S. Lewis spoke at Oxford University about "Learning in War-Time." "The intellectual life," he noted, "is not the only road to God, nor the safest, but we find it to be a road, and it may be the appointed road for us. Of course it will be so only so long as we keep the impulse pure and disinterested" (1949, 50).

England's positions in many of these essays may not be the conclusions others would reach, but the example he sets is worth everything. He shows us that one can question without arrogance and accept without compromise. This example should be instructive to those who think all questioning is arrogance as well as those who view the acceptance of any orthodox view as compromise.

A good example of this quality is found in a response written in 1973 to Lester Bush's study on the historical background of the "Negro Doctrine," published originally in *DIALOGUE*.

The recent official statements of the Church concerning blacks and the priesthood . . . simply require Church members to accept, as part of their faith in a divinely directed Church, the revealed *policy* that those of black African descent are not now to receive the priesthood. I accept that, essentially at face value. I do not ordain blacks to the priesthood nor self-righteously (or in any other way) fulminate against the Church or its leaders, nor lobby for a revelation to change things. I trust our leaders are doing their job, seeking and awaiting a revelation, and I believe with all my heart that if such a revelation is received they will in no way hesitate to enforce it, no matter how or where unpopular. (p. 128)

Gene England's faith was amply justified, as we now can see.

I would not hesitate to recommend this book to any reader who seeks that rare combination — style and substance. If other writers are encouraged to publish similar collections, all the better. But with these essays England has set so high a