

At Ease with His Past; At Home with His Art

Goodbye to Poplarhaven: Recollections of a Utah Boyhood, by Edward A. Geary (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), 163 pp., \$8.95.

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I DISCOVERED ED GEARY'S ESSAYS by chance—a friend happened to mention them to me: "You've got to read them; they're about growing up in Utah, and they're excellent." Curious, but not so curious that I wanted to shell out \$8.95, I borrowed a copy of *DIALOGUE*, which contained one of Geary's latest essays, "The Ward Teacher." I got around to reading it a few nights later in a parking lot by the purple glow of a street lamp.

From the first paragraph I was involved in the essay. I was the newly ordained teacher walking along with Brother Rasmussen to make visits. I could see myself sitting in the kitchen with the Meeker brothers, who never married and probably never would, or wiping my feet on Sister Woodruff's doormat and catwalking into her impeccable living room, or shaking hands with Billy Evans and his blind wife, then listening enthralled to his stories about being protected from the unsleeping ghosts of Gadianton robbers:

They was moving along in the trees at the side of the road. . . . When I stopped, they stopped, and it was as still as death. When I begun to move again, they begun too. . . . Well, I begun to call on the Lord, you bet. . . . I told him that if he would help me out this here one time, I'd stay clear of beer joints and wouldn't do nothing to offend him. And lo and behold. . . . A great light. It was something like the moon, but it wasn't no moon, it didn't shine nowhere else only just round about me. . . . I was protected you see, and they daresn't come any closer. Next morning, though, we found our sheep dead and not a mark on them (p. 141).

With that introduction, I hurried to the bookstore the next day and asked for a copy of *Goodbye to Poplarhaven: Recollections of a Utah Boyhood*.

As the title of the volume indicates, the twenty-three essays describe what it is like to grow up in Utah, specifically southern Utah. The first section deals with early childhood experience; the second traces seasonal rituals of a small farm town; the third develops diverse themes viewed from a more adult perspective. Many of the essays have appeared by different titles in both *DIALOGUE* and *Deseret News*. The volume itself is soft bound, cream colored, with a black-and-white illustration on the front cover, by Ralph H. Reynolds, showing a road and a few struggling poplars. Other sketches by Reynolds, a Utah graphic artist who died in 1984, are used throughout the volume.

The reference in the title to Poplarhaven might confuse some Utah readers since there is no town in Utah by that name. In an author's note Geary explains that the town he is actually describing is Huntington, nestled between Price and Green River. "I call it Poplarhaven," says Geary, "not to conceal a reality but to reflect my awareness that the place as I experienced . . . it will inevitably be different in some respects from the place that others have known" (Author's Note). And in another essay, also printed in Richard H. Crockett and Neal E. Lambert's anthology, *A Believing People* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), Geary explains: "Indeed, my private boyhood name for the town, replacing the prosaic Huntington, was Poplarhaven, and I used to imagine myself immortalizing it in fiction someday as Joyce did his Dublin or Faulkner his Jefferson" (p. 169).

Geary's range in these essays is impressive. One moment he is talking about predictable topics such as Christmas or the Fourth of July or high school basketball or harvest time; the next moment he is

telling how fun it is to poke around the flour mill or tease Retty Mott, the renegade lady of the town who once danced with Butch Cassidy. But throughout all the essays one notices Geary's sensitivity—the detail, the quiet voice, the carefully turned phrase. Geary is a gifted craftsman, but his talent goes beyond mere craft. Literary critic C. S. Lewis made an observation that perhaps sums up Geary's greatest strength: "No man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth . . . you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it" (1943, 190).

That is how Geary achieves his originality. He tells the truth. You feel as if you've just slipped on a pair of comfortable overalls (as a child Geary hated them as unglamorous—cowboys never wore them) and that you're walking around town and through the fields with an amicable farm boy who explains things as he goes. Blair West, a friend of my sister, heard excerpts read over KSL radio from Hillsboro, Oregon. Blair, who grew up south of Payson, said, "It was so real. That's just exactly the way it was."

I have never milked a cow or bucked hay; but after Geary, those experiences seem like my own. Below the surface details of the essays lie themes that *are* my own: the reality of family, work, and love; ruminations about religion; the fears of adolescence; the need for belonging; the more important need of becoming an individual; the reality of change and war. As I read about Geary's experiences, I found myself rewriting my own.

Geary's literary triumph is muted by the diminishing status of the personal essay as a serious literary form. According to E. B. White, whose essays were published regularly in *The New Yorker* until his death in 1985, "the essayist must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen. . . . A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play" (1977, vii).

Despite limited interest in the genre, certain critics of Mormon letters see the personal essay as possibly the truest form for Mormon writers. Eugene England, whose collection of essays, *Dialogues with Myself* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), won the Association for Mormon Letters prize in 1985 as Geary's did in 1986, thinks the personal essay is "most congenial to the Mormon vision and experience" (1982, 132). Columnist Clifton Jolley calls the personal essay "utterly responsible, its point of view is owned. In it, one may take neither comfort nor refuge in the satisfaction of pose or form; one must face the beast, naked and alone" (1978, 138).

E. B. White also speaks of the essayist's integrity, for although he has freedom "there is one thing the essayist cannot do . . . he cannot indulge himself in deceit or in concealment, for he will be found out in no time" (1977, viii).

Geary meets this test, in my opinion, in "The Girls across the Valley," an essay that captures the rush of adolescent love and longing: "I remember the airiness of summer dresses as a crowd of girls walked arm in arm up the Bench Road on a Sunday afternoon, girls with skinny, coltish limbs, and features still forming, beauty in the bone in process of becoming beauty in the flesh" (p. 100).

"Hying to Kolob," my personal favorite, explores a boy's understanding of the mystery and marvel of immortality:

Then the undertaker pressed a lever, and the coffin sank smoothly into the straight-sided hole. I remember with a special clarity how straight and clean-cut the sides of the grave were, like the walls of a house, or rather, since the grave was so narrow, like a hallway leading from one room to another, perhaps a part of a great subterranean mansion whose dim, cool chambers stretched on and on (pp. 46–47).

Geary's essays stay with me. I keep remembering certain people: Len Wight, the hired man with a devilish grin; Jim Wilson, the farmer who made an art of swearing; and Mr. Nagelvoort, the transported