

History, Memory, and Imagination in Virginia Eggertsen Sorensen's *Kingdom Come*¹

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MANY YEARS AGO VIRGINIA SORESENSEN wrote me a prophetic letter. She had just read my article, "Through Immigrant Eyes: Utah History at the Grass Roots."² She sounded breathless: "For years and years," she wrote, "I have believed—for what reason, I wonder, since I never really lived in the houses where the true tradition was but could only visit a while, and listen, and pause always by the gate where I could hear and see it?—that I was the one to tell this story you speak of. Almost I have heard The Call!" That letter (dated January 29, 1954) began a sustained exchange of letters and materials between us for several years and started her on her Danish Mormon immigrant novel, *Kingdom Come*, published in 1960 after six arduous years of research, writing, and re-writing, and several extended stays in Denmark itself.³

By December of 1954 (the very year of that prophetic letter), she was already in her ancestral homeland on a Guggenheim fellowship, being befriended by blood relatives met for the first time, and looking into the archives of such collections as the *Folkemindesamling* (the folklore collection) at the Royal Library in Copenhagen and the *Historisk Samling* and *Den gamle By* at Aarhus, seeing firsthand the realistic genre painting, *Mormon praedikanter* by Christen Dalsgaard at the Statens Museum for

1. This paper was first presented Thursday, 29 June 2000, at the 35th annual meeting of the MHA in Aalborg, Denmark.

2. *Utah Historical Quarterly* 22 (January 1954): 41-55.

3. Virginia Sorensen, *Kingdom Come* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1960). Hereafter KC.

Kunst, and, at one time or another, absorbing the sights and sounds of Copenhagen and the physical and human landscapes of Jutland's countryside.⁴ One January, for example, found her in Aalborg, Mariager, and Hvidsten Kro near Randers, and a family farm at Vedddum. She wanted, she said, "to see Jutland in the grip of winter, especially how it is on the old farm."⁵ Jutland and Copenhagen would become the poles of action in her narrative, their prominence reflected in the gratitude she expressed in her published acknowledgments to "Christian and Li Ostergaard and to young Chris, and to Gregors and Kate and Jorgen and Gunni, and to all the good folks on the farm at Vedddum, and to Bendt and Tove at Charlottedal." The Ostergaards, she told me, checked her work for any "unDanishness."

Before she ever left the States, I had sent her reprints of pertinent articles, copies of diaries and personal narratives—some on microfilm (a medium she hated to read)—and, as I approached the finish line, carbon copies of the chapters of my Harvard thesis on the Mormon migration from Scandinavia. This left her feeling quite overwhelmed, yet, as she put it, remembering something she didn't know she knew. "[I] discovered something better than I knew," she wrote: "'[C]ousin' Gregers Christensen of Copenhagen is an authority on ancient history!"⁶ "My need," she said, "is to go and look and listen and absorb for a few months."⁷ In fulfilling that need, she was as intrepid as any historian doing fieldwork, with the result that *Kingdom Come* was universally praised in the reviews for its authenticity.

In this first novel of what she planned as a trilogy spanning three generations, she had to work backward from the familiarity of being one of, and living among, the descendants of the early settlers in Sanpete Valley, widely known as "Little Denmark." She regretted having "missed Great Grandfather Eggertsen's household. The wrong generation, born too late!" she lamented,⁸ but she had lived in Manti from age five to thirteen, when as a curious youngster she had created a "world in a closet," a space under the staircase at home to which she brought her books from the town's Carnegie Library and scribbled stories. Later she would reminisce about "people with marvelous and comical accents who came from a country they called The Lovely Land, across the sea" and confess she never would have felt complete in herself had she not finally traveled to that place.⁹

4. Virginia Sorensen to William Mulder, 30 January 1955, 8 February 1955, 28 February 1955.

5. *Ibid.*, 30 January 1955.

6. *Ibid.*, 18 May 1954.

7. *Ibid.*, 22 April 1954.

8. *Ibid.*, 18 May 1954.

9. Virginia Sorensen, "World in a Closet," *TJLA Newsletter* (Spring 1956).

As a mature writer, she wrote two novels treating second- and third-generation descendants in Sanpete: *On This Star* in 1946,¹⁰ the story of a tragic rivalry between half-brothers of the polygamous Eriksen family, with Manti thinly disguised as Templeton; and *The Evening and the Morning* in 1949,¹¹ the story of Kate Alexander, who late in life returns to face her past. Bruce Jorgensen has said that this novel is notable for its "moral realism." Virginia's short stories collected in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood*, which appeared in 1963,¹² drew from the same well, essentially the era of the 1920s, when Manti, Virginia said, "was as bilingual as you can get."¹³ Edward Geary describes her Manti books as "historical fiction of a particular kind, rooted in what Henry James calls a 'visitable past,' a period within memory yet sufficiently remote to allow for some imaginative freedom."¹⁴ This is "the past," says James in Geary's continuing quotation, "fragrant of all. . .the poetry of the thing outlived and lost and gone, and yet in which the precious element of closeness. . .remains appreciable." Denmark presented Virginia with a broader canvas, a greater antiquity, but through her living connections with a contemporary generation of Danish friends and kin and their memories and her immersion in the history of both the country and the Mormon mission in Scandinavia, she achieved in *Kingdom Come* another "visitable past."

In her Sanpete childhood and through later visits to survivors and descendants, Virginia had a rich source of Danish remembrances. One letter, midway in her labors, describes a delightful evening spent with Aunt Annie: "What a wonderful time we had with Aunt Annie and her Danish memories! . . . She wants me to hurry with the book and said, 'I cannot die in peace until I have seen it.' We read some parts aloud—a fine experience for me, with her smiles and comments."¹⁵ When *Kingdom Come* appeared four years later, the dedication read "For Ane Grethe Nielsen Eggertsen, for her 92nd festival."

Two years after her initial determination to create the ancestral story, Virginia wrote that "a hundred pages are now told and nary a Mormon in sight! Not even so much as a Baptist. . . Yet so very much has happened to these good people already I am breathless. . . Maybe they'll get a move on now we're all acquainted."¹⁶

10. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946.

11. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949; Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999.

12. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.

13. Mary Bradford, "Virginia Sorensen" (master's thesis, University of Utah, 1956),

23. Quoted in Edward A. Geary, "A 'Visitable Past': Virginia Sorensen's Sanpete," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 216-31.

14. *Ibid.*, Geary, 220.

15. Virginia Sorensen to William Mulder, 9 August 1956.

16. *Ibid.*, 3 February 1956.

It's time for us to get acquainted with "these good people." Virginia confines her story to the beginnings of Mormon activity in Scandinavia, from the spring of 1850, just ahead of Erastus Snow's arrival, to the end of December 1852, when the first large group of converts known as the Forsgren Company embarks at Christianshavn in Copenhagen on the first leg of their journey to Zion. She tells her story in a chronological succession of five major divisions, each about 100 pages long and each firmly anchored by place and season.

She opens the novel in Jutland in the early spring of 1850 at the fictional farmstead of Johannedal near Mariager. There we meet the fictional characters who in time will hear of and encounter the historical characters, the Americans who have come to Scandinavia with a new gospel. At Johannedal we meet the landowner Henrik Dalsgaard, upright and authoritative, his inflexible wife Amalie, and their sixteen-year-old daughter Hanne, spirited and beautiful, who at one point is told by her friend Thea she resembles a Thorvaldsen sculpture.

Also on the estate lives the Malling family, the house servants and field hands who know they must never enter the big house by the front door. We meet Martha, the visionary grandmother; Stig, her sturdy son; his wife, Maren, soon to give birth to a son Paul; and another son, the skeptical Arne, who loves the sea and is a good friend to Svend Madsen, an eighteen-year-old orphan. Handsome and self-reliant, he lives with them as one of the farmhands. His most precious possession is his late mother's Bible in which she had marked many passages that will prove providential.

Svend and Hanne, the landowner's daughter, are strongly attracted to each other, a dangerous crossing of class lines. Their love story lies at the heart of the novel, a love story intertwined with a conversion narrative when Svend goes off to fight in the Slesvig-Holstein war with Prussia and—on his return with victorious troops—encounters a fellow soldier, the ardent Baptist Simon Peter (one of Virginia's notable creations), who takes him to Pastor Peter Mønster's meeting. Mønster is in the history books as the friendly Baptist who, it turned out, lost half his congregation to the Mormons. Svend and Simon Peter have doubts when they read a tract called *A Voice of Warning*, and they decide to seek out the Americans.

By the time Svend meets Erastus Snow—portrayed to the life, including his habit of smacking his lips when he talks—we are on page 153 of the novel. Virginia is faithful to the facts of mission history, using the real names of the first American missionaries (Erastus Snow, Peter O. Hansen, John Forsgren, George P. Dykes) who were on the scene by June of 1850, and the real names of a number of their converts whose diaries and memoirs served Virginia well in constructing her story. "How did I

know my plot was going to require that nice little ship?" she wrote me.¹⁷ She was referring to convert Svend Larsen, skipper of a small vessel he christened *Zions Løve* (the *Lion of Zion*) in which he did, in fact, ferry native missionaries to Norway and back, as he does in the novel, including Svend Madsen, sent on a mission to Norway. I had forgotten about Larsen, but found him in the index to *Homeward*.¹⁸ It illustrates how a single factual sentence becomes a fully developed scene in the novel.

Virginia valued Andrew Jenson's *History of the Scandinavian Mission* for its portraits and biographies of the valiant early missionaries and converts, converts who were baptized one day and sent out the next as missionaries themselves with a supply of *A Voice of Warning* or *Snow's En Sandhed's Røst* (*A Voice of Truth*). "[F]aith is a feeling and belief a strength," Virginia wrote. "I have it with the old Saints. I can say 'I know.'" ¹⁹ Virginia's imagination is at work everywhere, transforming history and memory to serve her creative ends, resulting in what one reviewer called "a deftly described panorama of life, its social and intellectual climate, in [mid-nineteenth century] Denmark."²⁰ At Johannedal she takes that hundred pages she mentioned to create her characters "in the round," as the British novelist E. M. Forster said they should be. We come to know what they think and how they feel. Virginia tells her story as the omniscient author, but there is little exposition. Everything is reported through the eyes and sensibilities of the characters, both real and fictional. Dialogue predominates—dialogue without dialect, but which nevertheless characterizes the speakers, whether the formal preaching of the establishment ministry or the folksay of the Malling family at Johannedal.

All, including both classes, landlord and laborers, are members of Pastor Lauritz Olrik's congregation and attend his country church, complete with bell tower and old Ole, who rings the bells and blows the bellows for the organ. Virginia is respectful of the Lutheran establishment, its history and culture, and lavishly—even lovingly—describes the interiors of the old churches. At the same time she allows members of the Malling family to voice their disillusionment with a church that has lost its vitality. When Svend after his conversion visits Johannedal (entering the big house by the front door, by the way) and is allowed to speak at

17. *Ibid.*, 13 October 1956.

18. William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

19. Virginia Sorensen to William Mulder, 23 November 1956.

20. *Chicago Tribune*, n.d.

the old grandmother's funeral in the parish church, everyone, including Pastor Olrik, is impressed by the simplicity and strength of his remarks. Hanne now knows she loves him and harbors the illusion she can bring him back to the established church with a scholarship from the bishop to prepare him for the ministry. Svend is left wondering whether this might be God's way of reformation, not as a Mormon but as a Lutheran priest, but he shakes off the temptation.

The two levels of Danish society and culture, represented by the landowner's big house and the lowly cottage of his laborers, provide Virginia with opportunities to explore the Danish past and the late nineteenth century present at both levels: a sophisticated level, on the one hand, expressed in conversation when Hr. Dalsgaard's circle of friends come together; and a vernacular level on the other, with the Malling family's conversations rich in folklore and proverbial country customs, such as the belief that housewives butter their lips when they go to market to hire a maid, or the good luck a stork brings when it builds its nest on a cottage chimney. In Martha, the grandmother, a natural storyteller, Virginia has created a perfect remembrancer of the indigenous past. One reviewer said Virginia's characters "sometimes bring to mind, though they are less tragic, the men and women in Sigrid Undset's novels."²¹

Danish and Mormon antiquities meet when Svend, as missionary, visits the Mallings and tells them Joseph Smith's story. "There were sheets of gold telling of the old time in America," he says, "just like the old stories written on rune stones here in Denmark." "I saw such a stone once," says Ole. "A farmer ran onto it after a rain when he was plowing the field." And Maren, Stig's wife, says, "It's like a wonder story. H. C. Andersen might tell such a tale."²² We encounter Andersen in person, by the way, "with a face like a knot of oak," in Copenhagen at the royal festival celebrating the end of the Slesvig-Holstein war, with Svend and Simon Peter also there, you may remember.

Svend continues with his comparisons. Answering a question about the Dippers (as the Mormons and Baptists were called), Svend quotes Luther himself, who wrote that "baptism should be by immersion, but he could never get his followers to break from their old customs. . . and the bishops and pastors never speak of it."²³ As a New England reviewer observed, "[Sorensen] has a magical way with simple folk."²⁴ Virginia treats with some amusement, even indignation, what becomes "the coffee question." Stig Malling, after his conversion, astounds the family

21. *American Statesman* (Austin, Texas), 13 April 1960.

22. KC 228.

23. *Ibid.*, 229.

24. *Telegram* (Worcester, Mass.), 8 May 1960.

when he says, "The elders say the Saints in America never drink coffee." "What do they drink then?" his wife Maren demands. "Nothing but tea?" "No tea either. Or beer. Or snaps. But chocolate they can drink." "Well, that settles it, Bedstemoder," she says and begins to laugh. "I will never go where there's no coffee or tea." When Stig tells the family about plans for a farewell dinner in Copenhagen for Apostle Snow where three hundred people will sit down together at the Hotel du Nord, Maren snaps, "And all three hundred Danes without coffee."²⁵ Late in the novel, when Simon Peter lectures on the Word of Wisdom, Virginia calls it "surely as unpopular an edict as could ever be delivered in the State of Denmark."²⁶

Svend, who as a missionary violated Norway's ban on proselyting, has been released from custody in Oslo, and he speedily heads for Copenhagen to help John Forsgren organize a company of about 300 Saints who, after several transfers by way of Kiel and Hamburg, will finally board the *Forest Monarch* in Liverpool, a sailing vessel, which I have called the Mayflower of the Mormon migration, chartered by and for the Mormons. Stig and his family, motivated by the promise of an inheritance in a valley in Utah set aside for the Scandinavians, are also going.

Hanne, now 18, is angry that both her mother and Pastor Olrik have been keeping Svend's letters from her. She makes her way to Copenhagen, relieved to find Svend. She plays the piano for the congregational singing, including songs from the new Latter-day Saint hymnal in Danish about a land they have never seen but long for, such as "O Du Zion i Vest," the Danish version of "O Ye Mountains High," and "Zion, when I think of thee, I long for pinions like the dove."

To her great surprise, her mother has relented and sent Hanne her big, carved dowry chest, almost too heavy to wrestle aboard. She knows it could never cross the plains. She tells Svend they can sell its silver and linens and all its precious contents in England to pay their emigration debt to Brother Thomsen, who sold his land to enable sixty Saints to emigrate. That's one of the historical facts among many in the preparations for the emigrants' departure which Virginia's narrative skills illuminate as the fictional and historical characters mingle in the novel's final tableau.

Hanne has yet another surprise: Onkel Hans, who lives in Copenhagen, has come to see them off, almost too late, and sends a package hand over hand to her, already aboard the ship. It is the Kitchen Book, a final gift from her mother. "This," says Virginia, "no Danish housekeeper could ever do without."

25. KC 334.

26. KC 390.

As the ship *Obetrit* moves out, an old sea captain from Falster "came and stood by Hanne. 'Well, there goes Denmark,' he said, his hands hard on the rail. 'She's a Lovely Land, that's the truth. But on a voyage, it's a strange thing. . . . Soon you begin to look for land the other way.'" But as the water widens between the ship and the pier, Hanne thinks, "I could swim so far," and "for a time she had a foretaste, a knowledge that flowed up and filled her mouth with gall."

That dark sentence anticipates Virginia's plan to develop her trilogy. We catch a glimpse in her reply to a late reader who hoped Hanne "did not need to give up her big beautiful chest" and urged Virginia to get on with the sequel.²⁷ Virginia replied:

So somebody still reads *Kingdom Come*. I'm glad. If there had been more of you, I'd probably have done the other book. Too bad. I wrote outlines and even chapters but my life changed just then, and I moved to North Africa with my wonderful British husband and forgot all about poor Hanne. I wrote that she left her chest with some "Saints in Liverpool for the missionaries to send to Utah" when she and Svend could afford to send for it. But Svend went back on a mission and brought home a Norwegian girl he converted, daughter of the jailer, you recall. Hanne couldn't stomach another wife and was a convert on his account anyhow—so she inherited Johannedal. . . .and went back to play the organ. Should she marry the poor [blank], after all? *You decide!*²⁸

Equally light-hearted, but less cavalier, Virginia wrote me a brief hand-written note that same year, 1982, about her notion to write a Svend and Hanne Madsen Family Reunion novel. "So simple and natural to use the same characters. . . . Make it a single volume quite on its own, since *Kingdom Come* is long out-of-print." [It had sold some 10,000 copies, by the way, not bad for her, she said elsewhere.] "Much of this Reunion Novel," she continued, "is already done." Nothing came of it, although it seemed a perfect solution to get the monkey of the unfinished trilogy off her back.

Almost a decade later, four months before her death in 1991 at seventy-nine years of age, Virginia wrote me a disheartened but revealing letter: "I feel a great flood of remorse and sadness when I think of my failures, especially that I abandoned the *Kingdom Come* trilogy. I was troubled that KC was never translated and published in Denmark, and of course felt that it was not good enough. . . . I went back several times to look and work, did you know? I am still very chagrined that somehow Bedst[e]moder was printed møder. I wanted very much to have an edition I could correct."

27. Virginia Eddings to Virginia Sorensen, 17 November 1982.

28. Virginia Sorensen to Virginia Eddings, 2 January 1983.

I'm afraid I have dwelt more on the history and making of *Kingdom Come* than on the elements of history, memory, and imagination in the novel itself. It comes from looking over Virginia's shoulder as page by page emerged from her manual typewriter, and from her letters, a *Babette's Feast* of words.