

REVIEWS

Dining with the Devil

R. A. Christmas. *A Long Spoon: Poems*. Morrisville, N.C.: Lulu Enterprises, 2005. 61 pp., \$11.13.

Reviewed by Robert A. Rees, former editor of Dialogue and specialist in American literature at various universities

Over the past forty years, Robert Christmas has been one of the best and most consistent poets writing about Mormon life and culture. His distinctive style and voice are readily recognizable. What makes Christmas's poetry so interesting, and so valuable, is the extent to which he probes Mormon experience with personal candor and penetrating honesty. As an inside outsider (or is it the other way around?), Christmas writes his poetry from the perspective of a believer (a true believer, but not in the way that term is generally understood), a reformed (but struggling) sinner (who, like J. Golden Kimball, is readily forgiven because "he repents too damn fast"), an astute social critic, and, always, a multi-dimensional saint. As a Mormon, Christmas's poetry reveals a persona who is, to adapt Cole Porter's line, "always true to the Lord in his fashion," even if that fashion is irreverent and brash while at the same time devoted and humble.

I first learned of Robert Christmas through his wonderful essay on Parley P. Pratt in the first issue of *Dialogue* ("The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt: Some Literary, Historical, and Critical Reflections," 1, no. 1 [Spring 1966]: 33-43) and then shortly thereafter through his poetry, also published in the same journal. It was my privilege as the second editor of *Dialogue* to publish what I consider some of Christmas's best poems. To be honest, during this period I was not certain that he would stay in the Church. He seemed more suited to being a jack Mormon than a Mormon. But, like Faulkner's Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, he has endured; and more than this, he has prevailed, serving recently two missions for the Church, one in California and one in France. Nevertheless, along the way he has traveled a rocky road, with three marriages, seven children and four stepchildren, itinerant teaching positions at various colleges and universities, and a variety of business experiences, demonstrating all along the truth of Bruce Springsteen's line, "It's hard to be a saint in the city." If

nothing else, all of these experiences have provided him with a rich mine for his poetry.

A *Long Spoon* fits clearly in the tradition of confessional poetry. As explained on the Art and Culture website, “Confessional poetry [in America between 1955 and 1975] ruptured the topical taboos of its time. Abortions, alcoholism, divorces, mental hospitals, suicide attempts—nothing was sacred and everything was fair game. The Confessional poets created a disturbing, often autobiographical, poetic of pain that shocked the world with its raw anatomy of human suffering.”¹

Thus, through Christmas’s various transparent personae (“Rob,” “Our Hero,” “the other fella,” “I,” but mostly “He”), he writes about being sexually abused by a Scout leader (“some dirt won’t wash away”), adultery, a homosexual encounter, making out with a BYU English teacher, surreptitiously sneaking a cigarette, drinking beer or mescal, and other *petits vices*. He also writes about picking up hitchhikers, hiding his poetry from his wife, picking up a son who returns early from his mission, disobedient and recalcitrant children, a senior couple having sex on their mission (“They started some days with sex— / a practice not covered in the *Missionary Handbook*”)—not exactly the material one associates with main-line Mormon poetry, which makes it all the more relevant—and enjoyable to read.

As the line from the above poem reveals, Christmas’s poetry is often humorous. Sometimes he plays off Mormon language, teachings, and practices. In doing so, he writes in the long tradition of poets who, as my teacher Helen White said of John Donne, “play hob with holy things.” White also remarked that Donne sometimes had a fear of God’s displeasure with his writing—“as well he might.” Christmas might, too! Thus, in “Matriarchal Gripe,” Christmas takes a standard Mormon temple concept, “the patriarchal grip,” and turns it into a long wifely complaint about how her husband is not living up to his role as patriarch of the home.

Some might be put off by Christmas’s playing hob with holy things, as, for example, in “Liahona,” a poem about his father’s last menial job, replacing toilet paper in bathrooms. Here he compares the Book of Mormon directional spindles for pointing the way the Nephites should travel in the wilderness to “those / little spindles in the bathrooms.” In doing so, he appropriates the language of a powerful religious symbol (“curious / unworkmanship,” “restoration of toilet paper,” “sense of direction”) for something so completely and absurdly opposite

that it becomes a metaphysical conceit wherein two things so dramatically dissimilar create an incongruity, the purpose of which is to somehow connect them. In this way, the poet pays honor to a father reduced in the world of work to something so potentially demeaning but who nevertheless, by “faithfully attending to the / way the spindles worked,” somehow finds dignity in what he does.

The wife persona in these poems represents the practical, stable, anti-poetic voice. She worries, for example, that the poet will write things that will embarrass her and the Church. In “Couldawouldashoulda,” he says,

She wanted him to write
something she could buy at
Deseret Book and share with
her sisters in Relief Society.

Not much chance of that, thankfully.

My favorite poem in his collection is “Hop Hornbeam,” a poem that beautifully illustrates a common sentiment for contemporary Mormons, as it was for members of the Congregational Church during the first century of this nation—the inability to reach the spiritual standards set by the founders of the religion. In this poem, the narrator stands in the Sacred Grove, the beginning space for the Restoration. As he surveys the scene, he says, “There’s hardly a tree / old enough to have been / around when Joseph / Smith envisioned the / Father and the Son.” The lone exception is an ancient ironwood,

somewhat off the path
by the west boundary—
dark and nearly leafless

standing in contrast to how it must have appeared that spring day when young Joseph went into the woods to pray. Joseph sought to know who on the earth had the authority to act for God on the American frontier, not imagining that it was he who would bear the mantle of that authority. In contrast to the trees that witnessed that first calling to authority, Christmas’s ironwood stands with

limbs raised to the square
 like some monstrous
 authority—ghostly
 branches that in 1820
 might've been just what
 a fourteen-year-old
 prophet would swing on,
 but now I can't reach.

The final line of the poem brings us to the present and the distance between that first foundational experience in the Sacred Grove and the contemporary challenge of rising to match it.

The title of the collection comes from an old proverb, “If you’re going to dine with the devil, make sure you have a long spoon.” In this collection, Christmas does indeed dine with the Devil (as well as with the Lord), but keeps his long spoon, just in case. In “The Philosophy of a Man (Mingled with Scripture),” as the narrator and his wife are preparing talks for sacrament meeting, his wife warns, “Don’t start confessing your sins,” to which he responds (to himself), “his struggle with sin / was the best part about him.” And so it is.

Note

1. “Confessional Poetry,” Art and Culture website, <http://www.artandculture.com/cgi-bin/WebObjects/ACLive.woa/wa/movement?id=548> (accessed October 14, 2006).

Safe Haven for a Time

Thomas Cottam Romney. *The Mormon Colonies in Mexico*. 1938; rpt. with new foreword by Martha Sonntag Bradley, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005. 352 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by Paul H. Wright, Dallas, Texas, who was raised in Texas among Tenneys, Pratts, Turleys, and Romneys

The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) and its currently jailed leader, Warren Jeffs, recently established the