

In Memory of Dr. Bill

Mary Lythgoe Bradford

Dialogue—and, indeed, the world of Mormon literature and history—have lost a loyal friend and critic in William Mulder, who died quietly in his sleep in March 12, 2008, in his ninety-third year. The influence of “Dr. Bill,” as his former students affectionately call him, continued long after his retirement as a professor of English at the University of Utah. When my fellow classmate Fred Buchanan phoned me with the news of his death, saying, “The light has gone out. Our mentor has left us,” I thought, “No, the light will not go out until we stop hearing his voice in our heads.” Whenever I write anything, I hear his wise voice, speaking of the introduction to my M.A. thesis as “wooden and flatfooted” and advising me to put it aside until “You have something to introduce.” (I took his advice; and my introduction to Virginia Sorensen’s work, written after I finished the work, was much better.)

Fred and I and another former student, Dale LeCheminant, acquired the habit of taking Dr. Bill to lunch during my visits to Utah. Bill usually suggested a favorite haunt, and he usually gifted us with books from his commodious library. At the dinner celebrating his honorary doctorate, bestowed by the U of U in 1999, he introduced us and thanked us for nominating him, saying, “Here are my students who have excelled me.” He was always gracious—and always had the right word at the right time, like jewels placed carefully in the necklaces of his perfect sentences.

Interestingly, English was not his native tongue. Born in Holland, he emigrated as a child with his parents to the United States, where, as he reported in an interview with Dennis Lythgoe of the *Deseret News*, he “had to learn English in an academic way before it became my native tongue. That might have led to particular attention to how things could be said. The building block is the sentence. I always rewrite.”¹ As a result, his writing and teaching style were characterized by a quality that his colleague Professor Ed Leuders describes as “always civil, always delivered with dig-

nity and directness. He never had to search for the right word—it was always there.” The grace and polish of his writing may be sampled not only in his many essays but also in his landmark study of the Mormon Scandinavian migration, *Homeward to Zion*, which was based on his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard.²

As a graduate student searching for a thesis subject, I submitted plans for original poetry based on the Book of Mormon. (Poet John Ciardi had recommended it at a writers’ conference. “You have a ready-made mythology,” he said.) When the English Department rejected this idea, I approached Bill Mulder, who suggested that, if I was really interested in creative writing, I should choose a Mormon author whom I admired as my topic. The result was a thesis on the writings of Mormon novelist Virginia Sorensen, who had a background similar to mine.³

Interestingly, Dr. Bill proved similarly inspirational for Virginia, who was his near contemporary. Because of her own Danish ancestry, she had read an article about Bill’s *Homeward to Zion*, and, as she put it, “felt the call.” A Guggenheim fellowship took her to Denmark where she followed Bill’s directions while researching her ancestors and visiting their sites. The results were two Danish novels: *Kingdom Come* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1960), and *Lotte’s Locket* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1964). Dr Bill was famous for his ability to lead his students and his friends along fruitful career paths.

I felt it a privilege while I was one of Bill’s graduate students to index his fascinating study of Mormon history, *Among the Mormons*, a collaboration with Russell Mortensen of eyewitness accounts about the Mormon migration and the founding of the Church. Subtitled *Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers*, it was brilliantly organized into biblical sections—Genesis, Exodus, Chronicles and Judges, Lamentations and Psalms.⁴

After I moved away from Utah, Bill continued to follow my activities in *Dialogue* and elsewhere. When my Bennion biography came out,⁵ he phoned me, “You have hit a triple header.” He was equally supportive of my plans for a Sorensen biography, which sad to say, has not yet appeared. He and I had such a good time reading his file of letters to and from Virginia that we collaborated on a paper that I delivered at an Association for Mormon Letters meeting in Ogden in 1994.⁶

I hadn’t realized until I began researching Bill’s influence on *Dialogue* that a group of which he was a member was an influential forerunner

of a new generation of scholarly journals and societies. The group, which named itself the Mormon Forum (humorously nicknamed “the Swearing Elders”) met from 1949 until 1955 at the University of Utah to hear addresses about important subjects being researched by other academics. According to Thomas Blakely, “The Swearing Elders came into being in the 1950s, *Dialogue* came on the scene in the 1960s, *Sunstone* and the Mormon History Association were born in the 1970s [sic; actually MHA was founded in 1965] with the history and theological symposiums gaining popularity in the 1980s. . . . In retrospect, it is clear that the Swearing Elders played an integral part in the founding of a movement that stressed intellectual honesty, scholarly integrity, and reflective pondering. If the glory of God and man is intelligence, then the Swearing Elders were glorious indeed.”⁷ Bill Mulder and Sterling McMurrin became leaders of the group after it had flagged and Lowell Bennion had begged them to take over. As Lowell later recalled, “We wanted to use our minds in relation to religion, as well as to exercise them in hope and faith.”⁸ The list of the intellectual luminaries who presented papers before the group is impressive. It includes such persons as Leonard Arrington, Hugh Nibley, and Juanita Brooks.

Bill would go on supporting a scholarly and artistic investigation of Mormon life for the rest of his life. Through a long retirement, he remained a familiar figure at cultural events along the Wasatch Front, lending quiet support, encouraging authors and artists, and always speaking with grace and good will. As Mario De Pillis—a non-Mormon scholar of Mormonism and a friend of Bill’s—puts it, Bill possessed a “rarely appreciated aspect of great scholarship: what I call scholarly citizenship, such as helping others with their research, encouraging young people, and being sensitive to discrimination against women and the racially different in the fields of history and English. . . . Bill Mulder was a great citizen in the world of learning. For me an almost unique part of his greatness as a citizen was his ability to navigate the dangerous currents of Insider/Outsider life in the Mormon world. . . . Bill did great good, made few enemies, and survived.”⁹

Although Bill left the Mormon Church, becoming, as he said, a “secular humanist,” he never ridiculed the Mormon faith, or any other faith; and he continued to nurture his own keen interest in Mormon studies. Always a supporter of *Dialogue* (being its fiction editor in the early 1980s), he published a brief but eloquent statement, “Problems of the

Mormon Intellectual,” in the autumn 1970 issue,¹⁰ which he later used for a lecture at the Humanist Society of Utah in 2002. In this and in his important article, “Telling It Slant: Aiming for Truth in Contemporary Mormon Literature,” presented before the Association for Mormon Letters, he clarifies his credo: “Although I find myself badly out of step with institutional Mormonism . . . I feel myself in tune with the Mormon *experience*, by which I mean the sum of Mormon history and culture as lay Mormons have lived it and lay writers have striven to describe, critique, and celebrate it.”¹¹

I was moved by an email message Bill sent after the publication in *Sunstone* of my brief spiritual memoir and statement of faith, presented originally at a Sunstone symposium.¹² He called it “beautiful. Its beguiling simplicity is a firm foundation for your belief. A secular humanist like me stands at the window looking in and wishing he could share your faith but grateful for your friendship and forgiveness.” Needless to say, I reciprocate his sentiments, being profoundly grateful for his friendship and tolerance.

Notes

1. Dennis Lythgoe, “The Eloquent Dutchman: Literary Giant Being Honored for Service,” *Deseret News*, Sunday May 22, 2005, E12.

2. William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion* (1957; rpt., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000).

3. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, “Virginia Sorensen: An Introduction” (M.A. thesis, University of Utah, 1956).

4. William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

5. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian* (Salt Lake City: Dialogue Foundation, 1995).

6. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, “Virginia Sorensen: Literary Recollections from a Thirty-five Year Friendship,” *Association for Mormon Letters Annual 2* (1994): 97–104.

7. Thomas A. Blakely, “The Swearing Elders: The First Generation of Modern Mormon Intellectuals,” *Sunstone*, Issue 53 (December 1985): 13. I am remiss for missing this connection in my biography of Lowell Bennion, one of its founders.

8. *Ibid.*, 11.

9. Mario S. De Pillis Sr., email to Mary Bradford, May 6, 2008.

10. William Mulder, "Problems of the Mormon Intellectual," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1970): 121–23.

11. William Mulder, "Telling It Slant: Aiming for Truth in Contemporary Mormon Literature," *Association for Mormon Letters Annual* 2 (1994): 225.

12. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, "It Takes Many Villages," *Sunstone*, Issue 140 (December 2005): 37–41.