

are gifts to us as we struggle to make sense of our own agency and accountability.

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## Portrait of a (Latter-day) Saint

Terryl L. Givens. *Stretching the Heavens: The Life of Eugene England and the Crisis of Modern Mormonism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 344 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. ISBN: 978-1-4696-6433-0.

*Reviewed by Robert A. Rees*

I miss Gene England! I have especially missed his voice these past twenty years. So many times, I have wondered, “What would Gene have said about . . .” as we have stumbled and bungled into the twenty-first century. I have missed hearing his voice on the other end of the line, missed seeing his emails in my inbox, missed just talking with him about his latest passion or “the solemnities of eternity.” What a beautiful thing we believe, as Joseph Smith taught: “And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:2).

It takes a pound of confidence, an ounce of humility, and a dash of audacity to write a biography, especially of a great person. Eugene England was, in my judgment, a great man. Knowing him, he would have preferred to be known simply as a good man. He was also that.

In truth, Gene was one of the most remarkable Latter-day Saints of my generation, and I believe history will only enlarge his stature as a teacher, scholar, and especially Christian, in the original sense of that word—someone who follows, is devoted to, and attempts to emulate Jesus. History will also show him to be one of the most influential Latter-day Saints of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Not every great person is privileged to have a biographer capable of capturing the essence of his or her heart, mind, and soul, as well as the time in which he or she lived. Gene's family and friends are blessed in having Terryl Givens as his biographer, for three reasons: Like England, Givens is a literary scholar with a broad interest in the intersection of religion and the humanities; like England, he is someone who has sought to balance his intellectual/scholarly and religious/spiritual lives; and like England, Givens has had and is having a significant influence on Latter-day Saint thought and theology, sometimes, as with England, by being willing to challenge the axioms of conventional Latter-day Saint thought.

The one disadvantage Givens has is that he did not know Gene England well or intimately. That has led him at times, in my estimation, to be awry in some of his judgments and characterizations of England. For example, I don't think Givens is correct in seeing Gene as naïve, partly because he also sees Gene as a tragic figure, and naïveté and tragedy simply don't go together. Gene was savvy as well as smart, and he had an uncanny ability to see through some of the organizational foibles of the Church. He was hopeful that he could influence things, but he was not naïve. He recognized his contribution to some of the conflicts he had with individual Church leaders and was forgiving of them, even when the forgiveness wasn't always reciprocated.

Givens does do a masterful job of placing England within the context of his times and showing his continuing influence on Mormonism. That influence can be seen in multiple ways, not least through the lives of the thousands of students who were blessed to sit at Gene's

feet and in his classrooms. One of his students referred to him as “a marvelous work and a wonder!” To use Emerson’s image, England’s lengthened shadow continues to fall over both the institutional Church and Mormon culture twenty years after his passing. Given the quality of his books and essays, the various journals and organizations he influenced, and the number of colleagues, students, and fellow members he inspired, it will continue to do so.

I first knew Gene England from “The Possibilities of Dialogue,” the essay he wrote for the inaugural issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Still in graduate school when that first issue arrived, I sat down and read it from cover to cover—and, like many others throughout the Church at that time, I rejoiced to believe there was a place in the Church for people like me. When I started teaching at UCLA in 1966, I flew up to Palo Alto to meet Gene in person. That began a rich and rewarding friendship that lasted until his passing twenty years ago. In a sense, reading Gene’s biography is like reading my own, only obliquely. That is, not only were many of Gene’s and my experiences in and with the Church similar, but we also had hundreds of conversations over the years that included most of the experiences and episodes Givens chronicles.

Givens’s biography of Gene is also a biography of the Church during one of its most challenging periods. As Givens states in his preface, “I had come to appreciate not just the man and his legacy but also his place in the nexus of cultural conflicts and historic transformations within the church that deserved chronicling and elucidation. His life seemed emblematic not just of a personally fraught spiritual journey but also a watershed in the collision of faithful discipleship and a secular onslaught that had its own particular coloring in the church of the later twentieth century” (xiii–xiv). And, one might add, an entrenched Church polity and ecclesiology.

As an intellectual historian and a scholar deeply immersed in both historical and modern Mormonism, Givens provides a vivid picture of

the Church's belated lurch into modernism and the special role England played in attempting to bridge an entrenched conservatism with an emerging liberalism. It was a path littered with both risk and what Givens calls "paradoxical formulation." That paradox—how a Latter-day Saint can "be completely dedicated to the authority of the church and its prophetic leadership without abdicating his own agency and moral responsibility" (82)—was something that plagued England until the end of his life, as it has many others who have sought to change the Church while remaining devoted to it. As Givens says, "England was on the right side of his church's theological history but at the wrong moment in his church's institutional history" (119). The question, given the Church's long, deep, and even adamant insistence on near-absolute allegiance to authority, is whether any moment would have been right for someone to challenge the Church's teachings and practices in regard to such issues as polygamy, race, feminism, war, sexuality, and other doctrinal matters that England and others were and still are raising. Givens's subtitle, "The Crisis of Modern Mormonism" (which was not his choice, but rather the publisher's) acknowledges that the tensions England experienced are still with us, although the climate on some issues is more open and hopeful than when he was alive.

The fact is, several apostles, notably Boyd K. Packer and Bruce R. McConkie, were threatened by any notion that doctrine and practice could be questioned or interpreted, especially by what Packer characterized as "so-called intellectuals and scholars." As he said, "The doctrines of the gospel are revealed through the Spirit to prophets, not through the intellect of scholars" (245). Or, as McConkie said to England regarding a difference they had over the question of God's progressing (which McConkie had labeled one of the "seven deadly heresies of Mormonism"), "It is my province to teach to the Church what the doctrine is. It is your province to echo what I say or to remain silent" (167). Never mind that what McConkie called heresy some previous leaders had taught as doctrine or that he was reprimanded by President Kimball

for compiling his list of heresies without Church approval. As Givens notes, some of the teachings “McConkie labeled heresy enjoyed—and still enjoy—wide or even majority support among the leadership” (165). One can’t help wondering how things might have turned out differently had England interfaced with different apostles (several contemporary ones come to mind!).

The moral dilemma Givens shows England wrestling with throughout his life continues to face many contemporary Latter-day Saint scholars, intellectuals, and “activists” (“those who take intentional action to make a difference for others”): how does one resolve the conflict between allegiance to ecclesiastical authority and allegiance to one’s own conscience? For England and for others, that dilemma becomes much more acute when one perceives the Church’s position as causing real or potential harm to individuals and even to groups, as it certainly has with the priesthood and temple ban and LGBTQ policies and practices.

One of the most disturbing pieces of information in Givens’s biography is England’s report of a conversation he had with apostle Hugh B. Brown over the then-existing priesthood ban. According to England, Brown said, “I think all my brethren in the quorum are wrong on this decision, but I would do nothing to destroy the unity of that quorum on which your and my salvation depends.” Since such unity didn’t exist during much of the nineteenth century, one wonders at the cost of insisting on it today.

What is admirable about Gene England’s discipleship is that it was consistent throughout his life. Not only was he consistently faithful, but he also continued to lay his gifts on the altar of the Church even when he was censured, marginalized, and punished. Not many people know that during his times of darkest despair, when faced with the choice of keeping a large financial inheritance from his parents, Gene and his family elected to give it to the Church. For decades that gift has supported missionary work throughout the world. Today, two

Latter-day Saint temples sit on land Eugene and his family deeded to the Church.

Despite the fact that at times Givens sees England as naïve and strongheaded, he admires him for his devotion and vision: “In England’s motives and analysis, with the benefit of hindsight, we find a striking prescience vindicated in subsequent years” (216). “The Latter-day Saint church has in many cases responded in precisely those ways England advocated, and for which he was censured” (280). In reference to a 2016 address apostle M. Russell Ballard gave to Church Educational System faculty, Givens says Ballard was prescribing “almost precisely the strategy that had cost England the goodwill of the leadership” (217). Givens notes of Ballard, that in “Directly countering the anti-intellectual attacks and controversy-avoidance of the 1980s, he recast brutally honest scholars—of the type England was—as assets rather than challengers of the faith” (217).

At a fireside in Oakland, California on October 24, 2021, Givens concluded his portrait of England with these words: “I have never personally witnessed the evidence of a man who did more to exemplify the true Christian spirit.” Nor have I. It was a privilege to know Eugene England, to be taught by his expansive mind, to be blessed by his generous and forgiving spirit, to be inspired by his example of courageous discipleship.

Among the things that marked Gene’s discipleship was his passion for dialogue and his eagerness to seek reconciliation with those who differed with, criticized, and even spitefully used him. His largeness of spirit can be seen in his willingness, to a fault, to admit error, to apologize for and to seek forgiveness for his mistakes and misjudgments, and to make amends for and peace with those who might have been offended by his words or actions. Even at the end of his life he was apologizing and questioning himself. In a tribute to him, “Eugene England Enters Heaven,” in *“Proving Contraries”: A Collection of Writings in Honor of Eugene England* (Signature Books, 2005), the collection I

edited in his honor, I imagine him even apologizing to Jesus. Remembering Gene's love of Shakespeare and his essay, "No Cause, No Cause': An Essay Toward Reconciliation," I wrote: "I have imagined Gene entering heaven. I see him reluctantly approaching Christ's throne. In my imagination Gene begins to apologize to the Lord for his mistakes, his pride, his shortcomings, telling the Lord that there is cause for the Lord to be disappointed in his stewardship. But before the words are out of his mouth, I imagine Christ lifting Gene up, clasping him to his bosom and saying with cosmic tenderness [as Lear did to Cordelia], 'No cause, no cause'" (273).

Eugene England stretched the heavens—and for many of us, thank heavens, he stretched the earth as well.

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