

The Witty and Witless Saints of a Nobel Prize Winner

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When it was published in English in 1962, Nobel Prize-winner Halldor Laxness' novel about the Mormons, *Paradise Reclaimed*, went virtually unnoticed in the Mormon community and, as far as I can tell, is still largely unknown.¹ The history and ideology of the Church have been the subject of only a few works of fiction of quality in the hands of outside observers — Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872), William Dean Howells' *The Leatherstocking* (1916), Wallace Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943). Laxness' novel is the most recent and one of the more interesting. By and large the works about the Church are in the tradition of frontier literature, but Laxness' novel is concerned with larger matters: the innocence of man's idealism and the disparity between dreams and realities.

Paradise Reclaimed is in a number of ways perhaps a light-weight novel (Laxness himself modestly refers to it as a "longwinded, tedious book" and yet "not entirely devoid of meaning"),² but it is of considerable interest for its artful and ironic use of nineteenth-century Mormon materials for twentieth-century fiction. Of its composite, Laxness writes:

I travelled to Utah three times because of this book: first time in 1927, second time thirty years later, in 1957; finally in 1961, staying in Utah for several weeks, staying at the Newhouse Hotel in Salt Lake City and travelling about with Mormon friends to many places; after which I went to Lugano, Switzerland, where I stayed until the next summer (1962), making a final printable copy of this book that had taken me 35 years to write. The book has appeared in many languages, among which are all the big languages of the western world, such as English, French, Spanish, and German.³

Sometimes gently satiric and sometimes ironically owlsh in its humor, the novel is the story of the misadventures of a thickheaded but warmhearted convert to the Church in Iceland in the 1850s, Steinar Steinsson from Hlidar in Steinahlidar. As his name suggests, he identifies himself closely with

¹*Paradise Reclaimed*, translated by Magnus Magnusson (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1962). First published under the title *Paradisarheimt* (Reykjavik: Helgafell, 1960). Other works of interest by Halldor Laxness are *Salka Valka* (1936), *World Light* (1940), *Independent People* (1946), *The Happy Warriors* (1958), *The Atom Station* (1961), *The Fish Can Sing* (1967). Laxness was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955.

²In a letter to this writer, 13 July 1971.

³*Ibid.*

his fatherland, its sagas and heroes, its blessed poverty and continuing belief in a miraculous universe. It is appropriate that the novel begins and ends with Steinar trying to keep the stone walls of his forefathers in place. Through the characterization of Steinar there is a juxtaposition of the Golden Age of Viking heroes and modern man with his struggles and foolishness. Steinar too is heroic in his spiritual journey from Iceland to Utah — and just as insubstantial.

In a decidedly non-heroic age and a hardship-ridden place, dreaming of a real earthly paradise is all one has. Such a dream, Laxness is saying, is what the Mormons and the Icelanders had in common in the nineteenth century. In the novel, America and the communal life among the Mormons become a symbol of Steinar's dreams of a better, even a heroic, life. But the dream is as foolish as it is stimulating. The paradise Steinar finds is less than otherworldly. Better stick to the earth than follow one's dreams too far!

In a land like Iceland, Laxness writes fondly, where joy had been banned by Danish kings for centuries and where men "cannot even achieve the minimum of human virtue because of their poverty," Mormonism came as a rescue and refuge to innocents like Steinar Steinsson. Their simplicity and simple-mindedness are the result of a land without entertainments, love, money, light indoors, or understanding of the human heart. The Icelanders "understood God, many could understand sheep (more or less); none the heart," Laxness writes, and so were sometimes attracted to Utopian ideas "with their unreliable heads and even more indiscriminating hearts." In the hard Icelandic life a man like Steinar is "overwhelmed with the news that Zion was to be found on earth, with vacancies available."

After a while, Steinar revealed his curiosity to see this country that the King of Hosts had indicated as part of the true doctrine. If all the needs of soul and body were provided in that country, then Steinar thought it obvious that Joseph Smith propounded a truer doctrine than the Danish kings, and he wanted his children to benefit therefrom. Hence it followed that he, old Steinar of Hlidar, on behalf of himself and his family, should become a disciple of this revelation. . . .⁴

Steinar moves from dream to dream — that he has a wonderhorse, that he can please the Danish king by making a special little casket, that he can find paradise in America, that life in a Mormon community will bring him the kind of happiness that perhaps only substantiality of purpose and power of mind can bring. His impracticality in such matters is seen in his inability to commit himself with a yes or no, his easy infatuation with whims and indifference to matters of his family's survival, and the naive adoration he inspires in others. Like many others in the nineteenth century, Steinar simply has a hankering after the Ideal — a spring of pure mineral water in Copenhagen, the company of royalty, making bricks that will last a millennium, the Mormon paradise in America.

The man who makes it possible for him to realize something of his idealism is a Mormon missionary, Bishop Didrak. Steinar is drawn to him because "his whole appearance bore witness to some exceptional experience."

⁴*Paradise Reclaimed*, 245, 92, 132, 125.

On one occasion, Steinar refuses to lend his horsewhip when others want to beat Didrik, and on another, he frees him when bound and gagged outside a Lutheran church on the sabbath. "You must be a fearless sort of a man," Steinar says to him. "It's just as well, if you have to put up with injustice."⁵

Didrik's preaching across Iceland gains enough souls to form a small Mormon community at Land Isles and to convince enough Icelanders to emigrate and form a small community at Spanish Fork in the Utah Territory. For Steinar and other Icelanders, Didrik characterizes Mormonism in terms of sacrifice and devotion:

Only the man who sacrifices everything can be a Mormon. . . . No one will bring the Promised Land to you. You must trek across the wilderness yourself. You must renounce homeland, family, and possessions. That is how to be a Mormon. And if you have nothing but the flowers that people in Iceland call weeds, you must take your leave of them. You lead your young and rose-cheeked sweetheart out into the wilderness. That is how to be a Mormon. She carries your baby in her arms and hugs it close. You walk and walk, day after day, night after night, for weeks and for months, with your belongings on a handcart. Do you want to be a Mormon? One day she sinks to the ground from hunger and thirst, and dies. You take from her arms your baby daughter who has never learned to smile; and she looks at you with questioning eyes in the middle of this wilderness. A Mormon. But a child cannot get warm against a man's ribs. Few can replace a father, none a mother, my friend. Now you trudge alone across the wilderness for miles and miles with your daughter in your arms; until one night you realise that the biting frost has nipped the life from these tiny limbs. That is how to be a Mormon. You dig a grave with your hands and bury her in the sand, and put up a cross of two straws that blow away at once. That is how to be a Mormon. . . .⁶

If they are willing to endure such privations, Didrik offers the people of Iceland a promised land among the Mormons. His logic: because the Mormons prosper, their doctrine is therefore true. To Didrik it is an indisputable fact that the new paradise exists and that it is functional. For Steinar and a few others in Iceland that is enough.

For the portraits of both Steinar and Bishop Didrik in his novel, Laxness used as his sources two nineteenth-century Mormon journals in Icelandic. Of his interest in these writings Laxness writes:

Paradise Reclaimed is based on two books written in Icelandic by Mormon authors. One of them, which I read as a schoolboy, is an autobiographical sort of document composed by the Icelandic farmer Erik(ur) Ólafsson, a Mormon convert who lived in Utah for a number of years in the late nineteenth century and whose progeny I met in Provo, Utah (they had given up Mormonism though). Erik Ólafsson himself went to Iceland as a missionary, but lost his faith on the way and invented a new religion for himself and his family. The other book was a pious treatise, partly translated from the English, put into Icelandic by a Mormon missionary bishop who went to Iceland several times on missionary expeditions and was mistreated

⁵*Ibid.*, 27, 46.

⁶*Ibid.*, 49.

by Lutheran rabble there. Some of his adventures as a Mormon missionary in Iceland are retained in my novel as well as, partly, his name (Bishop Didrik; his real name in Icelandic was Thordur Didriksson). He was a fine man and a great character, and I became acquainted with some of his descendants in Utah and even saw the fifth generation from him there. One of my best friends here in Iceland is Mrs. Kristín, the daughter of Gudmund Didricksson, who was a younger brother of Bishop Thord(ur) Didrik(sson). These are wonderful people; whether they live in Utah or in Iceland does not matter.⁷

To both Steinar and Didrik in the novel, as with their real-life counterparts, Laxness attributes ideals that both trap and ennoble them. They are made as lovably innocent as their counterparts and as narrowly wise.

After becoming acquainted with Mormonism in Iceland only in passing, Steinar leaves for Copenhagen. He has given his best pony to the king and has spent an entire winter on a second gift that he takes to him, an intricate casket accompanied by a poem. He visits the king but gets only pictures of the royal family in return. All of his chasing after his dreams turns out the same, but he is satisfied. He survives by a happy innocence. The irony of such naive idealism is that it is so easily satisfied.

As the story progresses, Steinar is about to return home to his family at Hlíðar when Didrik talks him into going to America to become a Mormon. He leaves, hopeful of the Utopian pleasures ahead of him. For him it is a fairly easy transition from Danish mineral water to cold Rocky Mountain water, from wooden caskets to the design of the Salt Lake Tabernacle, and from Icelandic sagas to Mormon scriptures. "When you eventually reach journey's end in Salt Lake Valley," Didrik instructs him, "do nothing except ask for the main road to Spanish Fork, and say you are from Iceland. Everyone will kiss you in welcome." Heartily welcomed in the new paradise by Didrik's wives and others, Steinar is not bothered by the fact that Utah is a place "where freedom grew, but no grass." To Steinar it becomes the place where "man had achieved prosperity through having correct thoughts."⁸

The disparity between Steinar's dream and the realities of the world is emphasized by Laxness in the shift of scene from mist-shrouded Iceland to the desert flats of Utah. After Steinar deserts his family for America to play with his dream of an earthly paradise, his livestock and farm are ruined back in Iceland, his family becomes desperately destitute, his daughter is made pregnant by the local lecher. In Zion, Steinar (now baptized Stone P. Stanford) works very hard as a bricklayer, symbolic of his eagerness to help lay a foundation for the Mormon Utopia, but it is all less than heaven to him.

In the scope of the novel, Laxness allows his characters a full range of views of the Mormon Paradise. To the frozen-hearted Icelanders, the Mormon Zion is "that arsehole of a place on the other side of the moon. . . . Compared with [Mormonism], it's a blessing to be able to see your loved ones to the graveyard." Others who have joined the Church but are not entirely satisfied are more social: "Other things being equal, I prefer to

⁷Letter, July 13, 1971.

⁸*Paradise Reclaimed*, 128, 241, 158.

follow the folly of man, for that has brought him farther than his wisdom." But those who share Steinar's enthusiasm see it as the place where Brigham Young has led people to "a greater bliss in this world and the next than most other leaders have ever achieved."⁹

The Mormons are satirized on only a few points in the novel: excessive enthusiasm over mundane and material matters (immigrants go to Utah on the promise of "Good Times") and an occasional lack of charity (a woman is an outcast for associating outside the Church), but no greater and no worse than in other communities. By and large the portrait is a sympathetic one. Everything in Utah testifies to "the cosmic wisdom" of the Church, and polygamy is described in terms of its sympathy for homeless, helpless women. Of his care in writing sympathetically about the Church, Laxness comments:

Imperative to me when writing *Paradise Reclaimed* was never to give anybody a reason to think that I wanted to imply that the Mormon idea was in any way inferior to other comparable sets of thought known to me, for instance, Lutheranism, Catholicism, Islam, or Marxism. If I had become a cropper on that point I would have considered my book a failure. Under no circumstances would I admit that Mormonism, anymore than any other similar doctrine, was only of value to the naive and innocent. I submitted my book to two good friends, one a Mormon, Federal Judge Sherman Christensen of Utah, the other an agnostic, the eminent Nordic medievalist and philologist, Professor Jón Helgason of the University of Copenhagen, asking their opinion on whether the book was biased and opinionated in regard to Mormons or not. Judge Christensen wrote to me that he could not see that my novel was in any way inimical to Mormons or Mormonism, and Professor Helgason told me that it was beyond his capacities to find out whether the author was a man who declined Mormonism altogether or a regular Mormon believer.¹⁰

Laxness is reverent and respectful, even amid his reservations. The novel, as Virginia Sorensen has noted, is neither for nor against Mormons but for mankind in his age-old quest for an elusive paradise.¹¹

Where Laxness has his greatest fun writing about America and Utah as a Promised Land is in watching the Mormons regard their material possessions as a sign of God's favor. ("What is the extension of the Golden Book itself if it is not a sewing machine?") The Mormons of the novel feel they have "achieved prosperity through having correct thoughts." They therefore live by a somewhat self-righteous Puritan Ethic: "The man who has the best doctrine is the one who can prove that he has the most to eat." The claim to truth and revelation in daily affairs and mundane matters is viewed whimsically by Laxness:

Salt Lake City is a place, of course, where the highest truth is a little complicated in parts, as is only to be expected; but the more simple facts are more obvious than in other cities. It is quite impossible to get lost in it. One can see the whole city lying in its

⁹*Ibid.*, 185, 188, 147, 139.

¹⁰Letter, 13 July 1971.

¹¹*New York Times Book Review*, 18 Nov. 1962, p. 67.

basin under the Wasatch Mountains. It is laid out according to the fundamental principles of logic and the first diagrams in the geometry book. One always knows where one is in that city; and one also knows at once in what direction and how far away other places in the city are. It is a city where the cardinal points have been revealed to people through God's inscrutable power and grace. For a man newly-arrived from a country where the nation had grown bent at the knees from riding too much along narrow tracks — was it any wonder that he was impressed by the fact that God had prescribed in public writ that the streets there should be as wide as the home-fields in Steinahlidar?

Was it likely that the streets of Zion in Heaven were any wider than these streets in Zion on earth?¹²

It is a paradise that has built into it the human virtues of hope, endurance, and good will, but also the human frailties of otherworldly innocence, self-satisfaction, and expectations of the world that are too high. As a result, it is evidence of man's virtues but at the same time a little elusive.

Steinar finds that out eventually. The Mormon Utopia begins to disintegrate when polygamy is persecuted by the Feds. Bishop Didrik has to go into hiding. The one sewing machine in Utopia ("a token of the victory of the All-Wisdom here in Spanish Fork") is sold. Houses and fields deteriorate. Steinar's friend, Pastor Runolf, goes back to Lutheranism. And Steinar himself goes back to Iceland as a missionary for the Church, but when received there with "amiable indifference" and converting no one ("Not a living soul in the town went out of his way to hear about the good country where peace reigned and truth lived"), he goes back to his old farm. Like his real-life counterpart, Erik Ólafsson, Steinar plans to stay in Iceland, "laying stone against stone in these ancient walls, until the sun went down on Hlidar in Steinahlidar."¹³ At the end, Steinar poses the eternal question of the returning immigrant — whether as much of the Ideal that man can know might not be found at home just as much, or as little, as elsewhere.

In Spanish Fork, Utah, where the people of this novel are claimed on a granite monument to have been the first Icelandic settlers in America since Leif Ericson, Halldór Laxness' novel has not been received well. "Some of Utah's descendants," writes Virginia Sorensen, "have already read the story of Steinar, . . . and they are not particularly pleased that Mr. Laxness chose to write of the more earthy and 'common' of their ancestors."¹⁴ Laxness himself has been aware of the novel's reception in Spanish Fork:

It is lamentable if the local people of Spanish Fork, not accustomed to reading serious fiction, and least of all fiction about their own local surroundings, were feeling unhappy about my book; and that my book perhaps only contributed to provoking in them an inferiority complex as they probably did not find my portraiture as shiny as the color prints on their walls. Only, I am sorry to say, this is the general psychology and fixed rule with local people when they find their home represented in fiction complete with proper names

¹²*Paradise Reclaimed*, 158, 164, 143.

¹³*Ibid.*, 241, 252, 249, 254.

¹⁴*New York Times Book Review*, 67.

of persons and places and so forth. We all want to be treated as saints and heroes combined. I have had that experience so often that I can talk of it as a common rule. My last novel was a micro-cosmic church history of the world in which I was using a very small valley parish in Iceland as a pretext and paradigm. The farmers in this little valley complained that I was smearing and scandalizing them and selling them down the river.¹⁵

In spite of its reception, the novel remains one of the best fictional explorations of the Mormon experience, universalized, to be sure, as a comment on the Utopian in all of us.

¹⁵Letter, 13 July 1971.

