

Guest Editor's Introduction

Neal E. Lambert*

Over the years *BYU Studies* has offered its readers a scattering of short stories, poems, and critical articles on matters of literary interest to the Latter-day Saints. Now for the first time in its recent history it presents an issue completely devoted to such pieces. Not that this is intended as any literary declaration or manifesto. What this issue does acknowledge, however, is a growing body of significant writing, both imaginative and critical, by and about the Latter-day Saints. So in devoting a whole number to the subject we hope not so much to set permanent landmarks as to suggest the range and variety of the territory that we might label "Mormon literature."

One of the difficulties of defining this area lies in the ambiguity of the terms we use. One might expect, for instance, that in a "literary" number our attention would focus exclusively on poetry and prose fiction. But such limits would cut us off from much material that has genuine merit: the journals and diaries of the Saints, the narratives of Western travellers, the spiritual autobiographies of the converts—these are but three possibilities. As one considers, he is finally forced to acknowledge that wherever the author's imagination has come into play, wherever he has begun, either consciously or unconsciously to use the tools of the imaginative writer to shape and form an image of the Mormons, there we have a situation that is of literary interest, whether or not the author's ostensible purpose is travelogue or novel, history or poetry. So our concerns may be less exclusive than some might expect.

*Dr. Lambert is associate professor of English at Brigham Young University, specializing in the literature of the American West.

Defining the "Mormon" limits of our literary landscape is no easier. One might say that when we use the term we simply mean a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But even as we say that, we have to ask ourselves, what about the man who belongs to the Church but doesn't believe? Or what about the man who believes but doesn't belong? And this still says nothing about what it is that a Mormon may believe in, what he may accept as articles of his own faith. For some, "believing" may simply mean acknowledging a culture characterized by a remarkable number of meetings, organized activities, and cash contributions sweetened by a generous flavoring of neighborliness. For others, it may mean taking up a position on an historical foundation built of a succession of dramatic episodes and the biographies of spiritual supermen. But particularly for the modern Mormon, cultural or historical definitions don't work. His sense of community with Saints ultimately arises out of a particular theology, out of the unique philosophical anthropology that defines man as a literal child of God. As a man moves closer to that belief he comes more and more to accept modern prophets, modern scriptures, and an ecclesiastical organization that are the concrete corollaries to that belief. This is not to establish categories so much as it is to set up, for literary purposes at least, a continuum that would be wide enough to include not only the cultural observer who writes about Mormons because they might interest him or his readers, but the tithe-paying, temple-going member as well, who writes out of the pride and humility and hope and frustration of infinite potential bound up in finite flesh.

But perhaps the best evidence for the necessity of broad definitions is the collection of pieces presented in this issue. These range from the intense personal introspection of the poet to the broad dispassionate synthesis of the objective scholar. All the authors are Latter-day Saints, but each takes a slightly different path into the territory of Mormon letters.

Leonard Arrington is already familiar to readers through his writings about the Mormon in fiction. In the pages of *Dialogue*, *Western Humanities Review*, and *Western American Literature* he has presented the best discussion we have so far of the image of the Mormon in nineteenth century American literature. In his essay presented here, Professor Arrington summarizes and adds to that work with some significant ob-

servations on the influence that non-Mormon writers may have had on the direction of Church history, as well as some remarkable challenges to the young Mormon writer who is trying to find his own artistic territory today. A companion piece to Dr. Arrington's article is Wilfried Decoo's "The Image of the Mormons in French Literature." Narrower in focus, this piece is the first of a three part series which will, when completed, offer the most thorough study yet published of French conceptions of Mormons and Mormonism. Already this first installment has made it necessary to readjust some of our received notions about European attitudes towards Mormons in the nineteenth century. Karl May does not speak for the whole continent when it comes to Salt Lake City and the Elders of Zion.

Another pair of articles which fit well together are the pieces by Tom Schwartz and Richard Cracroft. Indeed, the work done by Mr. Schwartz began as part of a Master's degree project under the direction of Dr. Cracroft. Well-known to readers of *BYU Studies* for his work on Mark Twain and the Mormons (Winter, 1971), Professor Cracroft maintains a lively scholarly interest in Mormon Studies: he teaches a course in Mormon literature at BYU and is co-editor with this writer of an anthology of Latter-day Saint literature, *A Believing People*, which will be published soon by BYU Press. His discussion of Artemus Ward and Mark Twain, and Tom Schwartz's treatment of Bayard Taylor's play, demonstrate that following "the Mormons" as a theme can be a rewarding pursuit for the judicious scholar of American literature. These articles show that this was not an uncommon subject for American writers but more than that, they demonstrate that by studying the ways in which authors have handled Mormons, we find an intriguing means of comparison which not only helps us understand and appreciate the writer's own talents, but which also gives us a glimpse into the forces that impinge on the creative process itself.

Sid Jensen's discussion of Wallace Stegner is published here because of both the author and the subject. In the first place, Dr. Jensen's critical vision is focused by both his training and his "testimony." For while he works with the tools and vocabulary of the literary critic, his analysis also implies certain assumptions about the nature of man and the moral imperatives of the universe, assumptions which are more than familiar

to the Latter-day Saint. In the second place, Wallace Stegner needs to be included in any discussion of the Mormons in literature. In *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *Mormon Country*, and *Handcarts to Zion*, he has shown a sympathetic interest and unusual understanding of the Latter-day Saints, and in speaking of Salt Lake City as "home," he demonstrates his identity with the ethos of the homeland of the Saints.

"Joseph and Emma" is, so far as the usual forms of literature are concerned, an anomaly. It fits none of the standard categories of poetry, fiction, or drama (though it may come closer to the last by way of the fact that it is a script for a slide-film production, a "presentational piece.") It is not strictly biography because Joseph's "Song to Emma" is a wholly imaginative product of the twentieth century. Nor is this what we would call good history, for the whole subject of Eliza R. Snow and the other wives of Joseph Smith is entirely absent. Nevertheless, by this particular arrangement of historical detail, and through the medium of our own associational sympathies, the piece has a remarkable ability to affect us, especially when the reader's attention grows to include both the text and the pictures. As his imagination recreates the presentation for which the text is intended, the reader may well discover a new Emma who, instead of deriving from the old stereotype of a petty, carping shrew, now takes on dimensions of patience, endurance, and courage. This may be, for many readers, a new Emma—a woman of truly remarkable stature, impressive in her own right, but who also carries with her the suggestion of genuine tragedy.

The two short stories in this issue, both about what we would now call old Mormon houses, are written by two of the best writers of fiction in the Church today. "Sayso or Sense" by Eileen G. Kump is a delightful and skillfully handled piece, a fine example of tone which may well serve to remind us that we needn't always take either ourselves or our ancestors with unqualified seriousness; that a healthy acceptance of both history and authority can acknowledge with a smile the failures and foibles of either. Douglas H. Thayer's "Zarahemla" may be a different reading experience for those used to short stories with fast moving plots and surprise endings. Not a great deal happens in this story, but the tensions which inform it are significant for Latter-day Saints, for many of us, like the Jared of this story, recognize within our own feel-

ings, about our ancestral past, a complex set of emotions. At what point does our respect for the past change to worship of it? How do we maintain those essential roots which tie us to the past without at the same time being unduly circumscribed or even stunted by the limits of that connection? These are not easy questions, but they are necessary questions for the modern third and fourth generation Mormons, and "Zarahemla" raises them in a way that is at once familiar and discomfoting.

The poetry of this issue is also representative, coming from both the student and the acknowledged author. In Stephen Taylor's poem we see a good example of some of the very interesting and sophisticated work being done by young, talented writers of the Church. "Hay Derrick," by John Sterling Harris, presents us with a poem uncommon in its clarity, hard conciseness, and simple beauty. In Arthur Henry King we have a man of secure reputation who by the power of his poetry provides us with his own passionate apprehension of moments of significant experience. With Clinton Larson we have the nearest thing in Mormondom to a professional poet, at least in the sense that he is best known by a remarkable succession of plays and volumes of poetry. In his poems published here we recognize the confident technical experimentation and the sure strokes of the mature poet as he presents scenes from the natural and spiritual landscape of our own exterior and interior worlds.

If by this gathering of articles, poems, and stories we may provide interest and pleasure for an hour, that is good; but if by what is published here, we may encourage the reader in his own creative and scholarly efforts, that would be better still.