

Douglas Thayer. *Hooligan, a Mormon Boyhood*.

Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2007

Reviewed by Richard H. Cracroft

Autobiography or personal history seems to be a favorite literary genre among the Latter-day Saints, probably because it deals with truth (not fiction), recreates our unique personal dramas of conversion, and enables us to render an accounting of our earthly stewardship. A *memoir* is a selective autobiographical narrative that focuses on the subject's role as a participant in or a witness of significant events. Douglas Thayer's *Hooligan, a Mormon Boyhood* is a memoir that makes growing up during the Great Depression in the Sixth Ward of Provo, Utah, a significant event.

In twenty-seven engaging chapters, Professor Thayer, who is in his (record) fifth decade of teaching English at BYU, recalls Provo as it was, circa 1930–46, before he left B.Y. High School to join the U.S. Army (too late for the war but still in time for the G.I. Bill). Provo, still in its pre-Second World War, preindustrial, impoverished simplicity, was, like Mark Twain's Hannibal, "a heavenly place for a boy," with its unspoiled, fishable, swimable (in the buff) river, huntable lake and marshes, and hikeable canyons. Freer than kids in the twenty-first century could ever imagine, Thayer grew up with a fishing pole in one hand, a .22 in the other, and oodles of unsupervised free time on both hands. After climbing with buddies to a lookout over Utah Valley, Thayer recalls how it was:

Yet, sitting on our ledge looking down, pleased but not knowing why, we were glad that we lived there in this place and in this time. For, whatever adults may have thought, the Sixth Ward, Provo, and Utah Valley belonged to us boys, all of it accessible to us because we were largely free to roam as we pleased, as long as the police, sheriff, and truant officer didn't haul us in and we didn't maim or kill ourselves or each other, or otherwise interfere with adults and their dreary lives. (12)

While *Hooligan* piles on detailed remembrances of vacant lots, underground forts, Flit fly-spray, rubber-band guns, quarantine signs, tree huts, maypoles, chewing fresh hot tar, Mercurochrome, and Trail Builder bandalos (“Out west where the sunset glows”), this memoir is much more than nostalgic rummaging through a bygone era, fun though that is. *Hooligan* is the universal story of growing up, flavored with a large twist of Mormon and stirred with a generous ladle of irony. Old Doug, armed with hindsight and experience, skillfully recreates the experiences of young Doug, a sensitive and observant boy who is puzzled by the mysteries of adulthood. Undergirding the boy’s story is the omnipresence of the mature Thayer who retells events of the boy’s life as one who is still intrigued by life’s mysteries and still fascinated by the journey of innocence to experience—but also as one who knows that the gains of adulthood and experience are bittersweet, offset as they are by the loss of the simple, carefree, uncomplicated blessedness of youth and innocence.

The ironies resulting from these mortal incongruities and polarities shape and inform the nonfictional *Hooligan* just as they affected Thayer’s two novels, *Summer Fire* and *The Conversion of Jeff Williams*, and his two collections of short stories, *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone* and *Under the Cottonwoods and Other Mormon Stories*. *Hooligan* abounds with irony arising from the tension between young Doug’s desire to add the rare Perfect Boy pin to his Eagle Scout badge and his desire to let loose his natural propensities for “hooliganism” (37). He began early to see the benefit “of being good, or at least trying. Adult brothers and sisters in the gospel liked you better . . . if they thought you were good” (51). But righteousness was a private and lonely aspiration: “I don’t remember any of my friends saying they wanted to be good, and I certainly didn’t mention my decision” to them (51–52). Uncertain about the road to perfection, he often stumbled, Huck Finn-like, into the barrow pit separating the ideal boy and the real boy: “We were sometimes told we were supposed to be clean and pure. But when we were younger, no Sunday School or priesthood teacher or Scoutmaster ever defined that particular requirement in any graphic detail, and we were reluctant to ask” (17). One helpful sister in the ward “told me that she knew I would never swear and that should I ever be provoked or feel inclined to, I should simply say, ‘Oh, sugar!’” He adds, “Given my companions, it was advice I feared to follow” (52).

Thayer’s style underscores the ironic foundation of the book. Young Doug, a literalist, runs again and again into confusing adult clichés and puzzling idiomatic expressions: “money doesn’t grow on trees,” “we’re not made of money,” and “you’re still wet behind the ears.” Boys were “accused of having hollow legs, eating day and night, stuffing ourselves, always

being hungry, growing like weeds, having eyes bigger than our stomachs, all indicating how carefully we needed to be watched” (136).

His ironic vision focuses on the myriad of imagined terrors and dramas of boys in any era: the fear of imminent death from illness (which turns out to be growing pains); the fear that the bishop, “entitled to revelation,” has a built-in mind reader and sin-detector and might, one Sunday, “suddenly stand up as I or one of my priest friends knelt to say the sacrament prayer and say, ‘Stop! You are an ardent sinner and not worthy to bless the sacrament! Come with me to my office. You must repent!’” In describing a backyard sleepover, he recalls how the boys imagined fearful consequences for boyhood capers: “Later, the neighborhood fast asleep, the shadows dark, we dared each other to run around the block in our shorts”; they then ran, in shorts, barefooted and deliciously wicked, hiding in the bushes “if a car came down the street, terrified that a cop might reach out and grab you and put you in jail.” Then, safely back in their sleeping bags, “not knowing exactly when it happened, we fell asleep to the sound of crickets and the far-off lonesome wail of a train going through Provo to some faraway and distant place” (143). Nice writing, huh?

Irony—the tension between *ought-to-be* and *is*, between expectation and reality—lurks on every page of *Hooligan, a Mormon Boyhood*. Young Doug’s fervent prayers for directions to the whereabouts of a fishing hole filled with trout went unanswered and occasioned the boy’s first doubts. Still, he persevered in his resolve to be a good boy and resist temptations of the flesh, even when he was momentarily tested at a high school dance by the stark and alluring reality of a warm back exposed by a backless evening dress. Choosing the right when the choice was placed before him, he carefully avoided putting his hand on the girl’s bare back by spreading the clean pocket handkerchief (thoughtfully provided by his mother) over his right hand. Then, “properly insulated,” he put his hand on her back. His righteousness was instantly rewarded: “She thought I was cute and held me close with her long, naked arms” (181).

*Hooligan, a Mormon Boyhood* will become a classic of Mormon literature. You’ll find yourself reading passages aloud to others of your ilk; relishing a delightful memoir of growing up in a Provo that is no more; enjoying a gentle book fraught with comical, ironical observations about the human condition; and treasuring words which will be appreciated only by those who have ever been young and seeking perfection, and aren’t anymore.

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