

GERALD N. LUND. *Pillar of Light: A Historical Novel*. Vol. 1 of *The Work and the Glory*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990. 437 pp. \$14.95.

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Writing from a deep-seated belief in the divinity of the Church's origins, Gerald N. Lund has crafted a well-written and often moving Latter-day Saint historical novel—a genre in which there are many proclaiming “Lo, here,” but in which there are few works about which readers can cry, “Lo, *there!*” *Pillar of Light* is a “lo *there!*” kind of accomplishment, a good novel which I recommend to Latter-day Saint readers. Some Modern-day Saints will doubtless wince about its being so unabashedly grounded in the Mormon cosmos, but most will see that grounding as a refreshing point of departure, grant Mr. Lund his *donnée*, and hail this novel as the solid contribution to the literature of the Latter-day Saints which it undoubtedly is.

Pillar of Light is a faithful recounting of the historical and religious events of the Restoration from March 1827 through April 1830, often as told by the young Prophet Joseph, the primary figure of the Restoration but only a secondary character in the novel. The book is a fictional conversion story celebrating the nascent Church's impact upon Benjamin and Mary Ann Morgan Steed and upon their sons, the rebellious Joshua (age 20) and his younger and believing brother, Nathan (age 18); and, less directly, upon Melissa (age 16), Rebecca (age 9), and Matthew (age 7).

Mingling fiction and history in the tradition of Nephi Anderson's better conversion novels—but much more skillfully—Lund poses in the preface his controlling dramatic question, “If I had been living back then, how would I have reacted? What would I have done? Would I have believed?” He explores the implications of that question for each of the Steeds, focusing, in this first volume of a projected multi-volume saga, on Nathan Steed's very personal response to Joseph's account of the First Vision and the remarkable events which crowded upon each other in the years 1827–1830.

Upon this carefully presented historical framework of dramatic events and figures, Lund imposes the fictional Steed family's individual struggles with young Joseph Smith's claims. Representing Everyperson in their gropings with faith and doubt, the Steeds respond according to their individual faith: Nathan hears, struggles, and believes; his mother, Mary Ann (and the other children), responds likewise—seeing the Restoration as the

realization of an earlier spiritual presentiment. But Benjamin, an impulsive free-thinker who has been disappointed by institutionalized faith, vigorously rejects Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon and forbids his wife and children from having anything to do with the Church—until the strain on his family and his marriage causes him to relent. Recoiling from his headstrong father, Joshua falls into dissolute ways, leaves home, is shamed by his complicity in the attempt to steal the plates from his one-time friend, Joseph, and leaves Palmyra and his beloved Lydia McBride (18) to flee to Independence, Missouri. There, learning he has lost Lydia to his brother Nathan, he marries Jessica Roundy on a drunken rebound. Doubtless, we will hear much more from this western branch of the Steed clan.

The love story of Lydia and Nathan is complicated when Nathan, giving in to the very traits of gentleness, faith, and love which originally deflected Lydia's interest from Joshua to him, is forced to choose the Church over her and becomes one of the first converts to the faith. The dramatic events leading to Lydia's conversion and a happy ending are complicated by her being disowned by her outraged parents. Volume one draws to a breathless pause following the organization of the Church, having recounted the conversion stories of Nathan, Lydia, Mary Ann, and Melissa (and Rebecca and Matthew), but leaving unfinished the conversion of father Benjamin and the hard-drinking and unhappy Joshua and his sympathetic wife, Jessica.

Volume two therefore beckons the reader with the prospects of following the Steed family through the Kirtland and Missouri and westering years, as the Steeds complete their conversions and undergo hardships, persecutions, and sacrifices as members of the dynamic and demanding young Church.

The predictability of such conversions raises one of the literary problems inherent in conversion fiction—in all faithful fiction, for that matter: because the purpose of faithful fiction is to instruct, to caution, to warn, and to demonstrate how God touches the individual lives of his children to effect their salvation and exaltation, the reader of such fiction knows that the characters will transcend doubt and despair and every kind of obstacle to achieve testimony and conversion.

The challenge for the writer of *faithful* (as opposed to *maverick*) fiction is, then, to make his or her fiction credible by both a transcendent, spiritual—vertical—standard and a realistic, earth-bound—horizontal—literary standard. Judged against the standards of modern literature, any kind of Latter-day Saint fiction must seem quaint and naive. Thus the writer of faithful fiction must

find ways to render a God-centered *Weltanschauung* believable in a fictional genre which is decidedly human. Lund has made a respectable effort in meeting this challenge, delving convincingly into the psychological *and* spiritual motivations of his characters. He makes credible Lydia's and the Steeds's centrifugal vs. centripetal struggles with self and faith and doubt, struggles typical of those experienced by converts from the beginning of the Restoration to the present, by men and women who were and are, as Maurine Whipple says in her preface to *The Giant Joshua*, "human beings by birth and only saints by adoption."

Testimony comes to various characters in believable ways ranging from quiet and peaceful assurance to dramatic personal revelation. Mary Ann, about to hear Joseph read from the newly printed Book of Mormon, prays, "O Lord, if this be thy word, help me to know it without question. Open my heart to thy feelings, Heavenly Father, I pray in Jesus' name." After Joseph reads from 3 Nephi of Christ's ministration to the Nephites, she comes to quiet testimony: "Mary Ann did not move, barely aware of what was going on around her. *Hosanna! Blessed be the name of the Most High God!* Thus had the people [of Zarahemla] cried. So now did her own heart cry out. It was enough. This was the anchor she had been seeking" (331).

While Lund's characters are well-developed and organic, they keep Time the Latter-day Saint way—with an ear to Eternity, ever aware of a spiritual dimension to their lives. This sense of human purpose and divine destiny sets Lund's kind of faithful fiction at odds with our *fin-de-siècle* real and fictional mentality, devoid as it often is of transcendent meaning or suggestion of divine control or intervention and favoring as it does "minimalist" depictions of unshaped and unresolved lives, lives without transcendent purpose or meaning or the willingness to see possibilities for conclusions ("closure") in the human condition. Such literature is certainly a philosophical remove from the belief in an all-knowing Heavenly Father, whose *work* and *glory* (the title of Lund's saga) is to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).

In centering the novel on the Steeds and their various responses to the incipient Church, Lund wisely avoids the problem which Vardis Fisher confronts in *Children of God* and Orson Scott Card encounters in *Saints* (1984)—that of featuring protagonists Joseph Smith, Jr., and Brigham Young in their most intimate, human moments, much to the discomfiture of some readers, who prefer their prophets on unassailable pedestals—not using bedpans or bedding their plural wives. In Lund's novel it is through Nathan—via Joseph—that we learn about the major events of the

Restoration. The Joseph we are permitted to see is warm, believable, charismatic, and approachable, but he remains at a dignified and comfortable distance—even while besting Nathan at stick-pulling—which allows the reader to keep his or her own conception of the Prophet—and thus Lund’s message about divine origins—intact.

Some will disagree, but for a related reason I believe that Lund was wise in choosing to have Joseph recount his first vision in the language of his canonized 1838 account (even though Joseph tells the vision to Nathan eleven years earlier, in 1827, a time much nearer to the other, earlier accounts in our possession). Emblazoned as the 1838 account is in the souls of the Saints, taking fictional liberties with the words would jar many readers’ sensibilities—as does Vardis Fisher’s rendering of the First Vision. Lund couches the account of the First Vision in a dialogue between Joseph and Nathan, achieving a natural and refreshing variation on familiar words without meddling with Holy Writ:

“When the light rested upon me, I saw two personages—” He stopped, noting the expression on Nathan’s face. “I saw two personages,” he continued firmly, “whose glory and brightness defy all description. They were standing above me in the air.”

Now it was Nathan who involuntarily passed a hand across his eyes. A pillar of light? Two personages?

“The one spoke,” Joseph continued, softly now, and more slowly, as though giving Nathan time to digest the words. “He called me by name. ‘Joseph,’ he said, ‘this is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!’ ”

He stopped, watching Nathan closely.

Nathan’s mind was reeling. “Are you saying . . .” He faltered, overwhelmed. “You mean you saw . . .” He could not bring himself to say it.

Joseph nodded with the utmost solemnity. “I saw God and I saw his Son, Jesus Christ.” He sighed, suddenly weary. “I know how that must sound to you. But I say again, Nathan, and I say it with all the power of my soul: I saw the Father and I saw his Son.” . . .

Nathan leaned back, totally astonished. He could only nod.
(56–57)

In this manner, Joseph Smith, Jr., teaches Nathan, who in turn teaches his own mother and sister, the truths of the Restoration. The Steeds struggle with doubt and belief and thereby become representatives of millions of men and women who will follow similar patterns in coming to testimony. Repeatedly, Lund answers the questions he poses in his preface, affirming that, had the reader been there, he or she, too, would have been convinced.

Eager to anchor his spiritual account to an authentic time and place, Lund has taken pains to fold into the novel considerable detail about soapmaking; the Erie Canal's sociological and physical impact on Palmyra; querns (a refinement on the hand mill); ice cutting and storage; and life in early Palmyra and frontier Independence. Unlike Maurine Whipple, who integrated a rich collection of local lore and color throughout *The Giant Joshua* (1940), however, Lund supplies his enrichment in excellent chunk-style descriptive passages found primarily in the first chapters of the book but does not sustain this meaty detail and turns, almost abruptly, to telling the story without such enrichment. The shift is marked.

For the most part, however, Lund succeeds in bringing the era of the late 1820s to life, along with his characters. He soars in frequent, excellent descriptive passages and throughout spins a strong and well-paced narrative, replete with lively and realistic dialogue which contains just enough interspersed dialect and homespun to make it credible. And though he has evoked enough well-worn plot devices to edge the novel toward, horror of horrors, popular fiction, he kindles and sustains the reader's curiosity and involvement. No doubt, some will fault Lund's sunny handling of the darker side of the Prophet Joseph's life—from his reputation among neighbors in upstate New York to his courtship of Emma or his treasure-hunting interlude—but handle them Lund does, capable scholar-apologist that he is, and in believable and soundly historic ways which enhance Joseph's reputation without becoming hagiographic.

Without trivializing, sentimentalizing, or sensationalizing an important subject which has often been manhandled on all counts, Lund treats the events surrounding the Restoration realistically yet reverently, showing at once a thorough grasp of his subject and a literary finesse in transforming those familiar events into fresh and moving fiction. The effect is telling and bodes well for future volumes in *The Work and the Glory*, as well as for the promise of faithful Latter-day Saint fiction.