

## IN MEMORIAM

# VIRGINIA SORENSEN

By Mary L. Bradford

ON 10 JANUARY 1992, a group gathered at BYU's Maeser auditorium to honor one of the school's most illustrious graduates, who the *Provo Daily Herald* said was "one of Utah's premiere gifts to literary America." Virginia Eggertsen Sorensen Waugh succumbed to cancer at her home in Hendersonville, North Carolina, on Christmas Eve, 1991, with her son Fred by her side. She was seventy-nine.

Mourners included professors who had loved and studied her works, not only from BYU, but also from the other Utah universities; relatives and childhood friends; librarians who loved her children's novels; other writers, editors, and publishers who had worked to keep her works available. As her words were read aloud they recreated her childhood in Provo, Manti, and American Fork; her college years in Provo; her marriage to another BYU graduate, Frederick Sorensen; and her moves to Stanford and other college towns throughout the country. They recalled her replenishing visits to Utah, especially in later years.

The occasion contrasted meaningfully with the memorial service in Hendersonville that took place the previous month. Virginia's daughter Elizabeth (Beth) Hepburn, her son Frederick (Fred) Sorensen Jr., and two of her grandchildren, Susan and John Anderson, met in the St. John of the Wilderness Episcopal Church to hear a minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church. This ecumenical gathering symbolized the directions her life had taken after her divorce from Sorensen. The Episcopal service indirectly honored her second husband, the late British novelist Alec Waugh, an Anglican. The Unitarian minister represented her daughter's church that Virginia had attended sporadically. Fred read from his original poetry, and Beth read from



"The Apostate," Virginia's fictional recreation of her maternal grandmother in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*. The character represented, in part, that "first step away" that leads out into the great tempting world. After leaving Utah and settling in California, the character sent miraculous—"through flying snow"—boxes of fruit that included the exotic pomegranate. "Do you remember the verses about pomegranates in the Song of Solomon?" she wrote to the child protagonist of the story. "After I came in from picking these, I looked up the song in my Bible. *Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth.* It goes on to speak of all manner of 'pleasant fruits' and that's exactly

what I have here, the whole year around. A lot better than pine nuts and sagebrush!"

This description is vintage Virginia: "When they are still white and transparent they look like a cup of pearls, as beautifully arranged as a honeycomb. When they are ripe they are brilliant red and shine like rubies. It is best, I think, to cut them straight across the middle and eat the seeds with a spoon. Watch the juice, it'll likely stain."

Like the pomegranate, the world could be opened, little by little, revealed as honeycomb and rubies, but likely to stain. Virginia chose to leave the mountain safety of her childhood. But in her many return visits she raveled up psychic threads, healed lingering wounds, honored her roots, and lived long enough to be honored by another generation of readers.

The two services fittingly symbolized a life and career that seem to open like a beloved book divided into two distinct sections. The first and most productive encompassed her childhood, schooling, first marriage, and the rearing of her children; the second, her marriage to Waugh with its relative "dry spell" in her writing which she blamed on her happiness. After ten years in Tangier, the Waughs moved back to the States where Alec died in 1981. Shortly afterward, in a speech to an Exponent Retreat in New Hampshire, Virginia spoke with satisfaction about her two twenty-five-year marriages, glossing over the sufferings, recalling only the growth and satisfactions.

During the section bracketed by her first marriage, she wrote her "Manti" books, other books with Mormon themes, and her most important children's books. She also wrote fifteen "little books" of poems for Fred, soon to be published. She showed an abiding pride in her pioneer heritage, often crediting

it with her successes. She traced her genetic love of books through her grandfather Simon Peter Eggertsen, a school teacher, "who chose to take his books in a handcart. There were many important things he could have taken that weighed less and might seem more important in a pioneer society, but he chose his books." From this she concluded that "when I choose to stay anywhere, most of my weight is in books."

As the wife of a graduate student and then as faculty wife, she carried her books from Stanford to Terre Haute, Indiana, to rural Alabama, to Colorado, to Pennsylvania. As she put it, "I try to find stories that came out of the ground wherever I am." She succeeded in creating what Edward Geary has called "a visitable past," a term borrowed from Henry James.

VIRGINIA was born in Provo, 17 February 1912, the third of six children of Claude and Helen Blackett Eggertsen. Her father was a railroad agent, a "jack-Mormon," and her mother was a Christian Scientist, both descendants from Mormon pioneers. They sent Virginia to the LDS church. At Brigham Young University, she earned a degree in journalism that included a year at the University of Missouri's journalism school. After marrying Fred Sorensen and moving to Stanford, she enjoyed associations with other writers with Utah backgrounds like Wallace Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, and one of her BYU classmates, Samuel W. Taylor. She and Fred became fast friends with another Stanford couple, Grace and Obert Tanner. She wrote to me, "It was there that Grace Tanner and I had our redheads the same week and Obert and Fred, celebrating, climbed the tower of the Golden Gate Bridge then being built."

She also studied creative writing under Ivor Winters at Stanford, a move that shifted her away from journalism forever. Fred's appointment to Indiana gave Virginia the chance to complete research in Nauvoo for

her first novel. Alfred Knopf proudly introduced *A Little Lower than the Angels* in 1942: "I have seldom introduced a new novelist with the confidence I feel in the author of this remarkable book. It marks the debut, I believe, of a major American writer." *Angels* was

public events, never losing sight of the individual heart.

Her next two "Manti" books—*On this Star* (1946) and *The Evening and the Morning* (1949) were praised by Ed Geary for capturing better than anyone else "the social atmosphere and rhythms of daily life in a substantial and deep-rooted provincial town in the twilight of its golden age." The books portray a time and place vital to the understanding of a people.

She fashioned the pioneer lovers in *The Evening and the Morning* after Fred's grandparents and dedicated it to Fred's mother, who lived with them. Although the relationship was difficult, she later attributed much of her literary productivity during her childbearing years to the freedom her mother-in-law gave her. In a letter to me, she wrote, "The books finished themselves as an absolutely necessary thing to ease the frustrations and discomforts of wifehood and household."

*The Neighbors* (1947), though not a Mormon book per se, treats the same themes from her time in Colorado, and *Many Heavens* (1954) returns to a historical Mormon background set in Mendon, another small town in northern Utah.

In 1951, she departed from the Mormon story to write *The Proper Gods*, a novel that grew out of a Guggenheim Fellowship to Mexico. She had been "chasing Sam Brannan," the Mormon pioneer who traveled by ship to California and founded Yerba Buena (San Francisco). She amassed enough material for a novel and a biography, but when Virginia fell in love with the Yaqui Indians

she abandoned Brannan for this vibrant evocation of a culture that shared themes with her previous novels—faith, doubt, rebellion, reconciliation.

Responding to readers who told her, "Your children are your best characters," she tried her hand at children's literature. In Auburn, Alabama, she based *Curious Missie* (1953) on her experience in helping the county obtain a bookmobile. The success of this heartwarming book led to her two prize-

## BRIDE

### I

What is being woman  
But wanting and not wanting?  
Love of fresh water, running,  
And love of deep pools, not running;  
Forcing flowers open, and watching them full  
With regret;  
Pulling petals,  
And trying hopelessly to put them back  
For a safe fringe about a heart too seen.

What is being woman  
But wanting and not wanting?

### II

I am one of the countless hands to turn slow pages,  
The satin-clad symbolic portent of the ages;  
I am the fearless kernel sleeping in the grain  
Eager to stretch itself into the pinnacle of pain.  
I am a shrouded seeker, soon to burst a mystery,  
Wakened to a shameless sense of the miracle of me.

### III

I shall feel as a bird must feel  
Who spreads her wings to silence little motion  
And sounds as faint as breathing.  
I shall feel as an urn must feel  
Full of ashes, as memorious of bloom as a jar of rose petals.  
I shall feel like the bare staff  
About to burst into bud.

—VIRGINIA SORENSEN, 1933

well received by the non-Mormon press. Stegner hailed her as "a young writer with a present and a future." In Utah, John A. Widtsoe turned up his nose at certain "unlovely scenes" like a child's bed-wetting, and others were shocked at her portrayal of Joseph Smith's romance with Eliza R. Snow. But readers in general welcomed the book as a sensitive contribution to the "great tradition of the novel"—in Geary's terms—the treatment of private life against a background of

winning children's novels. *Plain Girl*, the story of an Amish child, won The Child Study Award in 1955, and *Miracles on Maple Hill* (1957) won the Newberry Medal. She considered these her "greatest successes."

Shortly before her divorce from Sorensen, she applied for a Guggenheim fellowship to Denmark. William Mulder's doctoral study of Mormon Scandinavian emigrants inspired Virginia to seek her own roots. She wrote Mulder: "For years and years I have believed—for what reason I wonder, since I never really lived in the houses where the true tradition was but could only visit and pause always by the gate where I could hear and see it—that I was the one to tell this story you speak of. Almost I have heard the Call." She declared she used Mormon history "straight, most of it from the *Millennial Star*" for *Kingdom Come* (1960), a Danish conversion story. She dedicated this book to the oldest living Danish emigrant, Ane Grethe Nielsen Eggertsen (mother of her cousin, Esther Eggertsen Peterson) "for her 93rd festival." (Out of the Danish period, she wrote another children's story, *Lotte's Locket* [1964]). In 1963, she wrote her popular "Mormon" adult book, the delightful collection of short stories, *Where Nothing is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood*.

During the writing of *Plain Girl* and *Miracles*, she retreated to the woods of MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire where she met the British writer, Alec Waugh. In 1967 she married him in Gibraltar, and for a time they lived in Alexandria, Virginia, and later as writers-in-residence at the University of Oklahoma. Out of these two places, Virginia fashioned another children's novel, *Around the Corner* (1971), and her last adult novel, *The Man with the Key* (1974). The jacket blurb pointed to this book as her second departure from the Mormon story. She inscribed my copy with a promise to return with her pen to the "essential path."

But she never did return to the path of Mormon writing, although she had intended *Kingdom Come* to be the first of a trilogy and planned a children's book on the Mormon maritime emigration. Under Alec's urging to keep on with "the work," she penned a children's book set in Morocco; but she never fired up the energy to finish another major novel.

When *Dialogue* honored her work in 1980, she wrote that it made her "feel more worthy of the last decade in which I have done almost no work at all. . . . I've felt all right about The Works being put in place by the unanswerable verdict of General Neglect." And she offered this advice, "I guess

the lesson ought to be that one should do the best work one can because, who knows, with books it's never too late until some fool hits the button."

She was, however, still mourning that the books were not readily available. "That they are not has to say something to you, namely, that I'm probably one of your favorite wind-mills. But making a fine breeze, my sweet, and bringing up a lot of sweet water."

In 1977, she joined the Anglican Church, writing that during an illness Alec had confessed his desire to have her become a "proper Anglican." In 1980 she wrote of their anniversary visit to Gibraltar, the scene of their wedding: "We had the Wedding Day Lunch and held hands coming back on the ferry. Two old Romantics mislaying our canes all over the boat."

After they moved to Tampa near her children, she seemed satisfied. "We do well, Alec and I, a dear old couple rocking in our chairs on our dear old porch."

Ever since I was introduced to Virginia's world in 1955 by my thesis chair, Bill Mulder, I have been her grateful friend. Mulder convinced me that she was a fitting subject—a living, breathing Mormon novelist representative of a host of others I had not yet read. It seems a clue to our culture that an English major could pass through graduate school in Utah without reading Maureen Whipple, Sam Taylor, Richard Scowcroft, or Helen Hinckley Jones. I was immediately drawn to Virginia's sensitive portrayals of characters and landscapes so much like those of my own childhood and ancestry. She had a Danish Old World charm, a seeking spirit, and an observant eye; add to these a childlike delight in living, a sense of humor, insightful attention to detail, and the ability to mesmerize.

A year later, after reading her books and papers, meeting her and her family, I finished my M.A. and embarked on a mini-career as an introducer of her works at conferences, study groups, and in the pages of independent journals and newspapers. Not that she needed introduction anywhere but in her home state.

For a while, she was part of Mormon literature's "lost generation," one of those writers who felt unappreciated by her natural audience. In other states and countries, she was recognized for her superior children's books as well as for her novels. They went out of print about the time that Utah finally began inviting her to visit and speak about her craft. Though she had always been recognized among Utah librarians, it took the founding of independent Mormon journals and the Association for Mormon Letters to

introduce her to a wider Mormon audience.

In one of her last letters to me, she wrote, "I woke this morning from a delicious dream of Alec and me staying in a chalet in the south of France. I wrote it down on the first page of my new clean book—Perhaps this one will be a book of dreams? I wonder." In my own dreams, I see a shelf of her books, newly reprinted, a resurrection that should assuage my loneliness until the dawning of that other glorious Morning. In any trip I hope to take, I will fill my handcart with Virginia's works. ☞

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