IN MEMORIAM

SAMUEL W. TAYLOR

By Levi S. Peterson

I FELT privileged to conduct a public interview with Sam Taylor during a session of the 1994 Sunstone symposium in Salt Lake City (tape # SL94-270). At eighty-seven, Taylor was fragile, white haired, and halting in speech, yet his good humor and sharp insights roused a warm empathy among an audience of close to one hundred persons. Now I feel equally privileged to write a tribute to this notable contributor to Mormon letters.

Taylor enjoyed a long, successful career as a free lance writer, a profession littered with failures. Born in Provo in 1907, he was son of apostle John W. Taylor and grandson of Church president and prophet John Taylor. His intimate connections to Mormon polygamy are demonstrated by the fact that he had some thirty-five siblings, most of whom he outlived. He married Elizabeth Gay Dimick and with her made Redwood City, near San Francisco, his long-time residence.

Upon graduating from BYU, he began supporting himself by writing stories for pulp magazines. Later he broke into the more lucrative markets of slick magazines of national circulation. His stories number in the hundreds. Some of them were made into films. Following service as a military correspondent during World War II, Taylor began to write books. These include a documentary, novels, biographies, and histories. Perhaps his most successful book in terms of sales was the novel The Man with My Face, first published in 1948 as a six-part thriller in Liberty magazine. This novel, still in print, has appeared in eleven foreign editions (eight of them in foreign languages). He also wrote movie scripts for Disney, Columbia, M-G-M, and Warner Brothers. His script for The Absent-Minded Professor was nominated for the best-written American comedy in 1961 by the Writers Guild of America.

Close to a dozen of Taylor's books deal with Mormon history and culture. He looked upon his people from a certain removal, perhaps influenced by the trauma of his father's expulsion from the Quorum of the Twelve and later excommunication. Taylor's personality, as it appears in his writings, is experienced, skeptical, a little cynical, always funny, and always cogent. His style reads easily and finds its felicitous metaphors among the speech of ordinary people.

His first Mormon novel, Heaven Knows Why (1948), has delighted a couple of generations of readers and has been analyzed and praised critically by Richard Crampton (SUNSTONE May–June 1980). In this comic work, a deceased grandfather returns to earth as a spirit to see that the good folks in his former rural environment are duly rewarded and the bad ones duly punished. Family this is Taylor's finest book, written with a passionate eloquence derived from his affinity for his beleaguered ancestor, who rose to become president and prophet of the LDS church. Rocky Mountain Empire: The Latter-day Saints Today (1978) is an account of the radical metamorphosis of Mormon character from 1883 to the present.

For many years, Taylor thought of himself as an inactive Mormon. During that period of his life, he called himself an "Eating Mormon," one who attended ward dinners and nothing else. Around 1962, he became, by his own account, an active Mormon. However, as he revealed during my Sunstone interview with him, he shared the feeling of many liberal Mormons, that, despite their best efforts, they are forever at odds with the Church at large. Taylor has always had a circle of devoted readers. Indicative of his reputation was the honorary life membership awarded him in 1994 by the Association for Mormon Letters. I confess I came late to an appreciation of Sam Taylor. His books await discovery by many others, who, like me, will regret having delayed so long.