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Worth Their Salt Too

Colleen Whitley

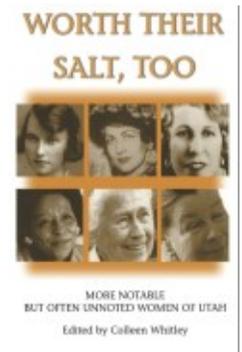
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VIRGINIA EGGERTSEN SORENSEN WAUGH

Utah's First Lady of Letters

Mary Lythgoe Bradford

Mary Lythgoe Bradford grew up and was educated in Salt Lake City. A former editor of Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, she is a prolific writer and speaker. She has authored two books, Lowell Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian¹ and Leaving Home, Personal Essays.² As she points out in this article, her interest in Virginia Sorensen began in graduate school; since then that interest has grown. She has written several articles about Sorensen and is currently working on a complete biography with Susan Elizabeth Howe and Sue Simmons Saffle.

In 1988, Utah's first gentleman of letters, Dr. William Mulder, named Virginia Sorensen "Utah's first lady of letters." Honoring her election to Phi Beta Kappa, he noted that paradoxically her works were out of print. But he noted also that rebound volumes in public libraries show "out of print" does not mean "out of mind."³ It does not follow, however, that educated Utahns will have heard of her. Although I have always been an omnivorous reader, I was in graduate school at the University of Utah in 1955 before I was introduced to her works, and to Virginia herself. As my thesis chair, Dr. Mulder, suggested I analyzed her works under the title *Virginia Sorensen: An Introduction*. It is one of the ironies of my life and hers that I have been introducing her ever since. But it is a task I accept with delight.

Some writers live within the walls of their own minds, but Virginia Sorensen lived an adventurous life as dramatic as any novel.



Virginia Sorensen celebrated her Utah roots in her novels and stories. Photo by Brenda Schneider, courtesy of Mary Bradford.

Her first marriage of twenty-five years, to Frederick Sorensen, made her a published author. Her second marriage, to British travel writer and novelist Alec Waugh, made her an insatiable traveler, whose letters recorded a passionate love of places and people. When she died at seventy-nine, she left nine adult novels and seven children's novels, seven with Utah or Mormon themes. She is the only Utahn to win both the Newbery Medal and the Child Study award for two of her children's novels.

Further study reveals reasons for our neglect of Virginia. She was part of a "lost generation" of Mormon writers, named thus by critic Edward Geary, who noticed that certain novelists and historians of the 1940s were unappreciated by their natural audiences. Vardis Fisher, Maurine Whipple, Richard Scowcroft, Jean Woodman, Fawn Brodie, and Sam Taylor were published in New York City to some acclaim but were greeted in Utah with what Samuel Taylor called a "deep freeze." In rereading Virginia in 1967, Taylor opined, "Her sensitive first book [*A Little Lower Than the Angels*]⁴ reads for the most part like something *The Improvement Era* would like to serialize." He thought that Virginia and other writers of the forties had suffered from "bad timing."⁵ Reviews of her first novel show that the book sold well everywhere but in her own state. Mormon readers and critics, of which there were few, suffered from a paranoia left over from the pioneer era. Virginia's era is the transition period immediately following "anti-Mormon" persecution.

Edward Geary points out that "the rural-agrarian economy had reached the saturation point. . . . Economically Utah was being pulled into the American mainstream. . . . The Manifesto and statehood signaled a decisive accommodation." Geary declared that Virginia is the "author who writes most perceptively about this provincial period."⁶

Virginia Eggertsen spent her early childhood and young adulthood in three Mormon towns—Manti, American Fork, and Provo. The third of six children, and second daughter, of Helen ElDeva Blackett and Claud E. Eggertsen, she descended from pioneer Mormons on both sides. Her mother's grandfather was a soldier in the Mormon Battalion. She was proud of her great-grandfather, Simon Peter Eggertsen, who pushed a handcart filled partly with books. "There were many important things he could have taken that weighed less and might seem more

important in a pioneer society, but he chose books." She concluded that "when I choose to stay anywhere, most of my weight is in books."⁷

As Professor Susan Elizabeth Howe put it, Virginia "recognized the heroism and the humanity that became source material for her fiction." The fact that her mother was Christian Scientist and her father a "jack Mormon" meant that as she participated in Mormon society, she always stood slightly outside it. This "insider/outsider" stance helped her to "understand the deep beliefs of church members, but she was also learning to identify with the values of those outside the Church."⁸

Virginia's childhood was ideal for a writer. Ensnared in her favorite apple tree or tucked away in a windowed closet under the stairs, she could read and write and observe to her heart's content. She shared her verses at the dinner table and spent happy hours developing lifetime friendships. When her enchanting short story collection was published in 1963, she dedicated it to Carol Reid Holt, who had shared so many events represented in her *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood*.⁹ In fact, her gift for friendship sustained her, and her expansive letters to her many friends are gold waiting to be mined by biographers.

Virginia's gift for stories and friendships carried her through American Fork High School, where she appeared in school publications and graduated as valedictorian in 1930. Then it was off to BYU where she excelled in English and journalism, with a year at the University of Missouri. She married Frederick Sorensen, a high school English teacher from Mendon, Utah, in 1933, departing shortly afterward for Stanford University and Fred's doctoral studies. Close to the moment that Virginia gave birth to daughter Elizabeth (Beth), 4 June 1934, Virginia's mother collected her diploma for her. Son Frederick Walter (Fred) followed two years later.

Life in cramped student housing with two children and her mother-in-law did not deter Virginia. In a course from renowned critic Ivor Winters, she wrote a verse play about Mt. Timpanogos. She also wrote her first novel (still unpublished) about Mother Sorensen's experiences in training poverty-stricken young women in domestic science. Writing habits forged during these lean years would come to Virginia's rescue in the challenging years to come.

Fred's first professorship took the family, including his mother, to Indiana State Teachers College at Terre Haute. Its proximity to

Nauvoo, Illinois, was propitious. *A Little Lower Than the Angels* grew from research about her husband's pioneer ancestry and the LDS Church's Nauvoo period. She sought to please her difficult mother-in-law, her difficult husband, and her Mormon contemporaries, yet was surprised to find her efforts tarred with suspicion.

Virginia had accepted her culture's customs that dictated a BYU education and a temple marriage. Like other faithful wives, she followed Fred from one English professorship to another, each never lasting longer than six years. During this trek, she also followed him out of the church. It is paradoxical that even as she rebelled against the teachings of her youth, she became a family chronicler who took her best stories and themes from the culture she had left behind. These mirrored her personal conflicts as well as her passionate joy in living.

After the success (except in Utah) of her first novel, which imaginatively recreated the Nauvoo period of the church with Eliza Snow, and Joseph and Emma Smith as secondary protagonists, her publisher, Alfred Knopf, urged her to write another historical Mormon novel. But the novel she wrote about Samuel Brannan was rejected, and she turned back to her own intimate experiences, producing two "Manti" novels: *On This Star*¹⁰ and *The Evening and the Morning*.¹¹ The latter is considered her best by most critics. Dr. Geary pronounced it "a well-finished study of three generations of Mormon women. . . . Her sympathetic characters are all skeptics and rebels to some degree, but they also acknowledge the inseparable ties that bind them to the community and a nostalgic loyalty which amounts to an act of faith."¹²

She pursued similar themes in her Colorado novel, *The Neighbors*.¹³ In 1951 she departed from her own past to write *The Proper Gods*,¹⁴ a novel that grew out of a Guggenheim to Yaqui Indian country in Mexico. "It was not the strangeness, not the exotic quality of the Yaquis that forced me to write their story; it was their similarity to my own people, their humanness, the fact that asking questions of these strangers taught me what questions to ask myself, what questions to ask of life."¹⁵ As Jacqueline Barnes has said, "*The Proper Gods* is a gift to us so that we may value and empathize with another culture."¹⁶

(In 1954, she returned twice to Utah settings—first for *The House Next Door: Utah, 1896*,¹⁷ and then to the small town of Mendon, where her husband was born, to tell an unusual love story about post-Manifesto life, *Many Heavens*.¹⁸) Professor Susan Elizabeth Howe notes,

“The love stories in Virginia Sorensen’s Mormon novels were groundbreaking works for Mormon literature. She was the first to write of a woman’s experience in Polygamy, the first to write about illicit love among Mormons, and the first to write about Mormon adultery from a woman’s perspective.”¹⁹

Reviewer James Gray said of *Many Heavens*, “Mrs. Sorensen has created as appealing a pair of lovers as recent American fiction has to offer.”²⁰ The title comes from Crenshaw’s poem: “Happy proof! she shall discover / What joy, what bliss / How many heavens it is / To have her god become her lover,” thus echoing the same theme of polygamous love she had explored in *Angels*. For this and her other novels, critic-historian Dale Morgan praised her for dramatizing “the age-old questions that are always new: on what terms a man and woman may live together, what they can possess of life, and what can life do to their possession of each other.”²¹

Virginia’s characters faced issues like these wherever she settled, for she had vowed to “find stories that came out of the ground wherever I am,” succeeding in creating what Geary calls “a visitable past.” Throughout, she kept a childlike wonder that prompted her good friend, Anna Marie Smith, children’s librarian at Utah State University, to suggest that she turn to fiction for children: “Your children are your best characters,” she told her.²²

In Auburn, Alabama, Virginia wrote her first book for children, using her experience in obtaining bookmobiles for rural families. Virginia recalled that she had Curious Missie’s teacher say “in self defense when she is too overworked to answer all of Missie’s questions, ‘Everything in the world is in some book or another.’ And books, she adds, ‘will never be too busy.’”²³ The success of *Curious Missie*²⁴ gave her the courage to move on to her prize-winning and most successful books: *Plain Girl*²⁵ and *Miracle on Maple Hill*.²⁶ She finished them in the seclusion of the famous writers’ retreat, MacDowell Colony in Vermont. There she met Alec Waugh, who was finishing his own most successful novel, *Island in the Sun*.²⁷

Virginia’s troubled marriage came to an end in 1957. Fred, whom she described as “stormy petrol,” was drinking heavily and recovering from treatment in a mental hospital. His simmering jealousy and resentment of Virginia’s success seemed to push him over the edge into violence. She finally left him after he tried to strangle her.

Despite upheavals at home, she finished her Danish novels—*Kingdom Come*²⁸ and the children's book *Lotte's Locket*,²⁹ the product of a Guggenheim to Denmark—between December 1954 and 30 April 1955. Published in 1960, *Kingdom Come* was dedicated to her aunt, Ane Grethe Nielsen Eggertsen, Esther Peterson's mother, with whom she had boarded as a student at BYU. In this novel, Ane's pioneer family history, set in Aalborg, Denmark, was combined with William Mulder's pioneering work on Scandinavian immigration to Utah.³⁰ After reading one of his articles, Virginia wrote to him: "It was so exciting that I began reading to everybody and getting ideas about how I might do better. 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 a while and listen and pause always by the gate where I could hear and see it?—that I was the one to tell the story you speak of. Almost I have heard the call!"³¹ *Kingdom Come* is a story of Danish conversions in the twentieth century and could be profitably studied with faith-promoting missionary histories of today.

When I asked Virginia about her methods of merging history and fiction, she replied, "Things can be twenty years apart when I was a child. This makes me realize that I was always busy with fiction and no good at history. When I gather masses of history, as I did when I was writing *Kingdom Come*, I was using church history straight . . . much of it from *The Millennial Star* and Bill Mulder. I felt a great obligation to Bill that I should get it right."³² A good novelist can transform research into something new but true on a deeper level. Virginia identified with Wallace Stegner's comment: "It takes a literal and pedestrian mind to be worried about what is true and what is not true. . . . Any material that comes under my eye is legitimate for use as an imaginative re-creation."³³

After the Danish books, Virginia traveled to Utah where she stayed with her widowed father in Springville and wrote her last western work, the short story collection *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*.³⁴ The title story and "The Face" had been previously published in the *New Yorker*. In each story the narrator is an adult recalling her childhood in Manti. Virginia's dedication called it "a dream dreamed out of memory." She saw her childhood as "a paradise of space" and a "good place for Saints to spend a millennium."³⁵

Her “long traveling friendship” with Alec Waugh led to marriage in 1969, after she accepted a writers-in-residence stay at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, where she began her last adult novel, *The Man with the Key*.³⁶ As her second departure from the Mormon story, it was greeted with almost total silence. Even the publisher failed to advertise it. That she considered it a failure is attested to by her inscription on my copy where she promised to “abandon the byways” and return to “the initial path.”

The Waughs settled in Tangier, Morocco, where they lived for twelve years, returning to the United States in 1981 just before Alec’s death. Her life with Alec produced two children’s books, *Around the Corner*³⁷ and *Friends of the Road*.³⁸ She berated herself for this dry spell as Alec worried that he had “redomesticated her.” Her plans for a sequel to *Kingdom Come* melted in the Moroccan sun and in her happiness with Alec. “I was married to an angry man, and now I am married to a peaceful man.” This sophisticated bon vivant from England was stimulating company, dedicated to world travel, and acquainted with most of the best continental writers. She was entertained at lavish celebrity dinners; she and Alec had standing reservations at the Algonquin Club, that famous watering hole for writers. She traveled on his research trip to the West Indies while he worked on his history of the islands. She enjoyed her closeness to Alec’s children, Veronica, Peter, and Andrew. Although she never met Alec’s brother, Evelyn Waugh, she was acquainted with his son, novelist and humorist Auberon Waugh. In Tangier, they were friends with Graham Greene, Ezra Pound’s son Omar, and Jane and Paul Bowles. As members of International PEN, they participated in exciting writers’ congresses in exotic ports. Is it any wonder that Virginia, who during her first marriage had to “steal” writing time, now found herself unable to retain her productive habits?

She was now married to a writer who appeared at his desk every morning by 5:30, inscribing by hand meticulous, seldom altered manuscripts, to be turned over to his typist and waiting publishers. He expected Virginia to be at the office he had arranged for her, working on sequels to her Danish books. He spoke to her of the sacred quality of “the work,” reminded her of the great “advantage” it was to have such a “peculiar people” as subject matter. Virginia’s cousin, Shirley Paxman, remarked that Alec “expanded Virginia’s physical world” and therefore

her “view of life.” But this open-ended happiness had restricted her creative powers.

Paradoxically, her unhappy first marriage had driven her into her fictional worlds. Now the real world was too engrossing to miss. “I would rather make a meal for Alec than write a story,” she told me once. Her son Fred guessed that living in exotic Tangier, so far away from her wellsprings, had dammed her creative stream. The domestication she needed was actually foreign to Alec’s way of life.

In 1980 the Waughs returned to America to live near daughter Beth in Florida. A year later Alec, at eighty-three, died of a stroke, and Virginia retired to Hendersonville, North Carolina, where her children later joined her. Her grieving took the form of meditative diary-keeping and comforting domestic chores. She made friends with kind neighbors that included Carl Sandburg’s family. Another neighbor, Mary Kenyon, helped ready her voluminous papers for the archives at Boston and Brigham Young University. Her last diaries and letters are worthy of publication under the title “Meditations on Aging.” A comment to Shirley Paxman typifies their elegiac tone: “I’m beginning to talk in centuries. I wish I could start over. . . . There are so many stories to tell . . . but now it is a time *where everything is long ago*.”³⁹ Writing to Anna Marie Smith on Alec’s birthday, she “felt like writing to someone I love—Alec would have been eighty years old. How he would have hated it! His one big dread was that he might live to be the Old Club Bore—to be a nuisance—to depend on anyone.” She was glad he was out of it, and she was feeling the pains that would lead to her death from cancer five years later. In her diary, she wrote, “Everybody who wrote to me after Alec’s death remembered wonderful occasions he had made for them. And I—what a wealth I remember! And now, among the ruins, my son and daughter still make pleasures for me and I hope I am able for a little while yet to make some pleasures for them.”⁴⁰ A few months before she died on Christmas Eve, 1991, she wrote, “I feel easy only when I am alone, which seems sad. But I feel somehow finished, which is quite different from feeling complete. Was I ever completely happy except in love?”⁴¹

On her last trip to Utah, she visited her family’s graves in the Provo Cemetery. Shirley Paxman accompanied her: “We went to say goodbye to her mother, her father, and her sister Helen. She placed a bouquet on each grave, then folded little notes she had written and

tucked them under the tufts of grass around the headstones. It was her farewell to them.”⁴² Virginia had stipulated that her ashes be interred in the family plot.

One of the last of the many paradoxes of Virginia Sorensen’s life was that she was finally rediscovered by her natural audience just as her life was ending. The Mormon audience had matured under the tutelage of the independent journals and magazines of the 1960s and 1970s, and the founding of associations for the encouragement of good writing and reading, like Association of Mormon Letters (AML) and Mormon History Association (MHA). Critics and professors who were finally raised up in these latter days—professors like Edward Geary, Eugene England, Robert Rees, Bruce Jorgensen, Susan Howe, and Maureen Beecher who trained young scholars in the skills of understanding “imaginative re-creations.” Older scholars and teachers like William Mulder, Lowell Bennion, Sterling McMurrin, Juanita Brooks, and Leonard Arrington had lit the torch and opened the doors. Now an energetic younger group critique Virginia’s work and that of other members of the lost generation. Practitioners of a more expansive Mormon literature brought her to Logan, Ogden, Salt Lake City, Provo, and Manti.

This renaissance began in 1980 when the editors of *Dialogue* devoted part of an issue to her work. In 1983, she made her first public appearance after Alec’s death at Shirley Paxman’s McCurdy Doll Museum in Provo. That same year, the editors of *Exponent II* honored her and Esther Peterson at their annual retreat. Thanks to the efforts of Bradford Westwood and the late Dennis Rowley, and with the cooperation of Dr. Howard Gotlieb of Boston University, BYU now has a Virginia Sorensen Waugh archive. As I write, three of her novels are being reprinted and a biography is planned.⁴³ Professor Howe is editing Virginia’s so-called “little books”—seventeen handmade books of poems Virginia presented to Fred for his birthday, to be published by BYU’s English Department.

Today most westerners can appreciate Virginia’s sense of history, her domestic love of the hearth, her celebration of love between man and woman, and her sympathy for those who occasionally must break out of society’s pattern to find themselves. All of her works call for “freedom within a tradition [with] an ever-widening tolerance for the traditional values of others.”⁴⁴