

*Stretching the Heavens: The Life of Eugene England and
the Crisis of Modern Mormonism*
By Terryl L. Givens

Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021

Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal
By Kristine L. Haglund

Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2021

Reviewed by Steven C. Walker

Kristine Haglund's compact biography, *Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal*, is an illuminating contribution to the new *Introduction to Mormon Thought* series. *Mormon Thought* provides "short and accessible introductions" to those who have "shaped" the many manifestations of "Mormonism" (vii). Haglund situates England historically, as a liberal influence on a developing faith. Born 1933—the year of the deaths of old-style expansive theologians B. H. Roberts and James E. Talmage, and the same year J. Reuben Clark introduced more conservative influence in the First Presidency—Gene was caught in the collision between Mormonism's original enthusiasm for innovative theology and the increasing rigidity of maturing orthodoxy. That kind of conflict at historical crossroads makes for ideological fender benders for any person of conscience in any institution. It is a train wreck for a Mormon who honors his faith traditions and simultaneously respects God-given intellectual capacities. It can be a *Titanic*-versus-iceberg confrontation for one who loved his church and also valued personal integrity as much as Gene England. Terryl Givens's *Crisis of Modern Mormonism* looks more closely at the trauma of that liberalizing life and views its personal costs more tragically.

Haglund considers her biography overshadowed by Givens's, describes her work as a kind of warmup for Terryl's. That may be appropriate in the sense that her version of England's life analyzes many of the same historical elements in less detail and arrives at surprisingly similar conclusions for coming by such a different route. But benefits from *A Mormon Liberal* in addition to *Eugene England and the Crisis of Modern Mormonism* go beyond the obvious advantages of condensation

factors like overviewing the biography in a third the space of the Givens version. The books look at the life through lenses different enough that their purposes contribute complementarily to fuller biography. As the dueling titles suggest, Givens sees England less in ideological and more in cultural terms, concerned more with Gene's often frustrated and more often frustrating impact on Mormon history, whereas Haglund dwells more on the intellectual life—her editors applaud her portrayal of England as “the pinnacle of liberal Mormon thought” (viii).

Those synergistic purposes of the two volumes can be seen in the organization of Haglund's book—not the usual chronology of biography as with Givens, but rather analysis of the subject's intellectual life throughout the final three of four sections. “Toward Integrity” explores the impact of Eugene England's influential essays on Mormon culture. “The Possibilities of Dialogue” examines the exchange of ideas England counted on to expand understanding and extend progressive vision in the Mormon community. Haglund's climactic chapter, “Reconciliation and Atonement,” considers the “productive tension” (76) generated by England's untiring quest for integrity, his intellectual mode of dialogue, and a life committed to the integration of radically liberal social causes with thoroughly conservative church loyalties. Givens, in his conclusive chapter, describes that same fraught Gene England lifestyle in its historical context as “Dangerous Discipleship.”

Terryl Givens's tragic *Life of Eugene England and the Crisis of Modern Mormonism* might seem to contradict the happier-ending Haglund thesis of England as *A Mormon Liberal*. But both biographies concur on the factual details of his life. Both certify the big picture as well: how wild a ride Gene's life was for an academic life, his narrative more engaging than many action movies. Moreover, both biographers have researched widely, and both know the subject well, Haglund through professional associations as *Dialogue* editor, and Givens through access to England's personal papers and through interviews with those who knew him best—preeminently Gene's wife, Charlotte, whose intimate and candid inside information contributes invaluable to the biography.

For all their agreement on fact, the biographers look through lenses different enough to provide binocular perspective, assessing as they do the significance of Gene's life from complementary vantage points. Givens compounds Haglund's public life of a provocative progressive with the soul-searching, psyche-searing personal side of the England experience. The Givens biography adds poignant personal depth to Haglund's portrait of a *Mormon Liberal*, looking in depth at the personal struggle to

swim in the historical riptides that embroiled England's beloved church. Bottom line, the perspectives reinforce each other. The driving concern for both biographers is how a keen-intellect conscience navigates the ideological whirlpools fomented when the norms of a beloved culture cramp individual conviction.

Haglund's brief introduction on Oxford's *Very Short Introduction* model is based on readily available, mostly published materials, whereas the Givens book is meticulously researched, both archivally and journalistically. Givens, working with a wider canvas and the rich palette of Gene's personal papers (plus superhuman research energies that generate nearly a thousand references in this concise study), takes the England history to deeper levels in another way as well. Reaching beyond the historical account of progressivism nipping at the heels of cultural foot-dragging, Givens ultimately discovers in Gene's personal story the dynamic story of us all, both as a church group transforming from ongoing historical influences and as loyal Latter-day Saints responding individually to the transformations of continuing revelation.

The Crisis of Modern Mormonism comes alive in its penetrating detail. Givens relives with us Gene's intriguing life—Idaho farming origins; marriage and mission to Samoa with his companion and new bride, Charlotte; Stanford political activism; the founding of *Dialogue*; and the genesis of those culturally compelling essays, a venue where Terry's thoughtful reading of the major essays can be as illuminating as Gene's own insightful writing. The rich biographical narrative probes the professional life—the St. Olaf's deanship, the Brigham Young University professorship, and the Utah Valley University Mormon Studies directorship—and surveys career challenges compounded for Gene by the demanding expectations of his father and of church-authority father-figures. The climactic crisis of *Crisis of Modern Mormonism* features Gene rising to condemn—"J'accuse!"—ecclesiastical secret policing, then dissolves into the tragic anticlimax of a perennially buoyant Gene soul-searching in his brain-tumor last days.

From Gene's straight A's in grade school (except the D in comportment) to terminal wonderings whether his God had forsaken him, Givens's portrait of Gene takes us so up-close-and-personal into the England experience that many readers may find themselves as I did moving beyond a tableau of life triumphs and tragedies to sharing personal elation and profound anguish. I knew Gene long and well, so I assumed this engaging biography was reminding me of moments we'd experienced together. But Givens's thoughtful penetration runs deeper than

a reprise of Gene's dramatic life. Gene England is a "to know him is to love him" kind of man, and Givens gives us the gift of introducing him to us personally. That illumination of the interior of this remarkable man could only be managed by one of the few minds in modern Mormonism capable of keeping pace with Gene's.

This is a remarkable biography. It is not only a carefully accurate and judiciously insightful account of a pivotal contribution to our cultural history. It is also a lens into our own souls. *The Life of Eugene England and the Crisis of Modern Mormonism* does for the Church what Sandburg's biography of Lincoln does for the nation—it not only shows who the man was but also shows us something of who we are because of him. Givens is as good as Sandburg is with Lincoln at making us feel how much Gene England affects our culture. Sometimes in profound narratives we can dive so deeply into a protagonist's immediate experience that we find ourselves swimming in cosmic significance.

Churches naturally tilt in hierarchical directions, and the Church of Jesus Christ is about as centralized as churches get. Yet the Church encourages individual responsibility with equal enthusiasm. The Latter-day Saint conviction that "it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Ne. 25:23) makes us so personally responsible for our own salvation that other Christians doubt we qualify as grace-based Christians. There is inherent tension in our faith between individual responsibility and institutional authority. Gene England made the most of that tension, committed as he was to a church in full charge of what most matters devotionally, yet committed unequivocally, too, to his own conscience. In the Church of Jesus Christ, we revere revelation. We believe prophets reveal the literal will of God to direct his Church. We believe with equal fervency that every individual in the Church has the right and responsibility to receive direct inspiration to direct personal life. Those divine and finite inspirations are so mutually confirming that when dissonance arises we can find ourselves in the whirlpool of truth-claims that Eugene England's life exemplified, in that "deep water" Joseph Smith was "wont to swim in" (D&C 127:2).

Both Givens and Haglund observe strong love-him-or-hate-him attitudes toward Eugene England. Some thought him saintly, generous to a fault and greathearted in his determination to urge us closer to the better angels of our nature. Others saw him as a self-serving academic secularist whose leftist tendencies and penchant for throwing theological cream pies in the faces of revered Church leaders made light of sacred matters. Perspectives among us on Gene as a person and as to the positivity of his impact on our culture come down almost to a

Dr.-Jekyll-versus-Mr.-Hyde Mexican standoff. The Mr. Hyde side of that seems to me mostly politicized, primarily because the Gene I knew was all goodhearted Jekyll. I thought him miscast as a Socratic gadfly and never knew him to provoke disagreement for disagreement's sake in any venue, least of all in the Church. He did not in fact seem to me much interested in politics, especially ecclesiastical politics. What I saw of his motivation was a dedication, so intense it could be myopic, to making the world, and the Church as its revered vanguard, better.

Not that he didn't do, as both biographers attest, some obtuse things from a political perspective. Most of us learn as early as first grade that it's not a good idea to encourage the powers that be to be better. But Gene didn't think in such political terms. Gene thought more in terms of making goodness prevail in the world—*Dialogue* to provide an ear and a voice for the disaffected among us, Food for Poland because even communists get hungry, the home he and Charlotte provided as a haven for outcasts that some in the community considered better cast out. I saw his persistent tilting at our cultural windmills, however futilely, as certification of his unflinching determination to make the world a better place. Gene was not a political man. He was not even a politic man. Gene was a genuinely good man.

A few decades back, I confronted some serious professional pressures, compounded by financial difficulties. When I alluded to my career-threatening challenges during one of our Friday tennis games, Gene offered on the spot to loan me enough money to see me through the problems. I couldn't accept the loan—way too generous, and I was not sure he could afford it any more than I could. But that largehearted gesture, sincere as everything I saw him do, was a huge help to me. Not just more than my net worth, it was more at the time than I thought my soul might be worth. A miracle to me, it was everyday commonplace for Gene England, characteristic of the find-a-way-to-make-things-better, faded-jeans idealism he lived so comfortably in.

Givens and Haglund demonstrate in virtually every line how well their subject is worth knowing. Deep in the heart of many a Latter-day Saint is an England-like all-in love of the gospel and, as Gene loved to say, of “The Church [That] Is as True as the Gospel.” I doubt I am the only devotee to the Church of Jesus Christ besides Gene England with a passion to make Christ's church all it can be, true to the expansive legacy of the Prophet Joseph, true to the infinite promise of the Lord Jesus himself. I have not known a person better at trying to make that ideal real, at figuring out what is right and actually doing it, than Gene

England. Gene is the most authentic embodiment I know of both our down-to-earth practical pioneer realism and our high-risk skydiving toward divine ideals. I know it's impossible for a man that smart to be entirely without guile, but I never saw any in him. It's a testament to the thoroughgoing goodness of the man that he assumed all of us were as largehearted as he.

Whether you knew Gene as well as I thought I did, or whether you would just like to know what all the furor is about, these fine biographies are a happy chance to know Eugene England better—to clarify the legend, and even more illuminatingly, to know the man. Kristine Haglund's condensed biography vividly delivers the compelling details of his life and the central elements of his expansive life of the mind. Terry Givens's perspective brings us close to one of the most unique personalities of the twentieth century—in Mormonism, in some ways the most unique. His biography may even persuade you, as it did me, that *The Life of Eugene England* stands, with all the dynamically faithful, at the crux of *The Crisis of Modern Mormonism*.

Whether we think his influence was for the better or for the worse, Gene changed what it means to be Mormon. Few of us have taken to his example for blessing our sputtering cars as faithfully as pioneers blessed their oxen. But I hope many among us will come to share the pragmatic spiritual cure Gene proposed for the challenges of a faith that in the information age for the first time since Kirtland is threatened with loss of American membership—the clarifying and cleansing cure of dangerous discipleship. Personally, I come away from these fine reflections on this fine life more dedicated to honesty in what I say, more selfless in what I try to do, more determined to try to tell the truth and enact it. Gene's greathearted life, and Terry's and Kristine's vivid revelations of it, make me less anxious to defend the faith, more resolved to *be* faithful.

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