

## IN MEMORIAM

# WALLACE STEGNER

By William Mulder



*If I have a home town, a place where part of my heart is, it is Salt Lake City, and the part of western history that seems most personal and real to me is Mormon history.—The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail (1964)*

WALLACE STEGNER was possibly one of the best friends the Mormons have ever had, equal in esteem with that early great friend Col. Thomas L. Kane, whose sympathetic address “The Mormons” before the Pennsylvania Historical Society in 1850 remains a classic and whose intervention during the “Utah War” in 1857 avoided bloodshed and negotiated a peaceful succession in territorial governors. Stegner’s legacy is literary rather than political, although his intervention on behalf of the West as conservationist, embracing far more than Mormon country, has had political consequences. He finally deplored the ecology of making the desert “blossom as the rose.”

Stegner died at eighty-four on 14 April in Santa Fe, despite intensive care after a car accident. His death invites us to review and reflect on his lifelong cordial relationship with the Mormons. His own explanation of that cordiality, even affection, expressed on many occasions, is simple and sincere. It began in boyhood almost like a Tom Sawyer idyll. He was eleven when the Stegner family (the Masons of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*)

moved to Salt Lake after failures in homesteading in Saskatchewan and a brief sojourn in Montana. It was a city of about one hundred thousand, Stegner remembered, “with a strong sense of family and community . . . small enough to know, and I learned it, on foot or by streetcar.” Wally, as his friends called him, and his brother Cecil, a few years older and a good athlete, discovered LDS Mutual:

There may have been a covert proselyting motive in the welcome that the wards extended to strange gentile kids, but there was a lot of plain warmth and goodwill, too. I have never ceased to be grateful for what they gave us when what they gave mattered a great deal; and though I was never tempted to adopt their beliefs, I could never write about them, when it came to that, except as a friend.

Although Stegner never wrote a “Mormon novel,” the years of his youth in Zion pervade *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and, through flashbacks, its sequel *Recapitulation*, in which Bruce Mason, the sensitive second son of the first novel, returns as a diplomat, matured in foreign service, to reflect on his past.

Stegner attended Salt Lake’s East High School and, as the runt he described himself to be, went into training “by overeating and muscling bricks” to get into ROTC and went through the ranks, as he had done in Scouting, “like smoke up a chimney.” He was “a demon activist in school Latin clubs and drama societies.” He wanted to belong, “and Mormon institutions are made to order for belongers.” Then, “suddenly,” in his senior year, between fifteen and sixteen, he grew six inches. “It was like a second graduation . . . and the beginning of the happiest years I ever knew or will know.” He was big enough to hold his own in sports, had friends who looked at him “as an equal and not as a mascot.” When he enrolled at the University of Utah he played on the freshman basketball squad and later on the tennis team, alongside David Freed (still living), who was destined

to lead the U.S. Davis Cup team. And Stegner edited the *Pen*, the college literary magazine. Vardis Fisher, who threatened “to take a can opener to our closed minds,” stimulated his literary ambitions. Of his teachers at the University, Stegner would later acknowledge that “It is the love of books I owe them.”

In 1930, the year he got his undergraduate degree at the “U,” Stegner began graduate work in English at the University of Iowa, until his studies were interrupted in 1933 by his mother’s illness in California. During a long summer stay at their Fish Lake cottage, Stegner undertook “the desolate duty of helping her die” of cancer. She was buried in Salt Lake next to Stegner’s brother, who had died of pneumonia two years earlier. Stegner would later say that “My childhood was buried in Saskatchewan, my youth and all my dead in Salt Lake City.”

Back in Iowa in 1934, following a pattern nearly every graduate student would still find familiar, Stegner married a fellow graduate student, Mary Stuart Page of Dubuque, and in 1935 he took his “first real teaching job” at the University of Utah, “back where I came from and yearned to return to.” “If contentment were the only basis for choice,” Stegner once reflected, “we might as well have chosen to stay there, but I had my father’s blood in me, and the habit of moving.” They stayed two years, long enough for Stegner to write *Remembering Laughter*, a dark love triangle based on a story Mary had told him about her grandfather’s town. It won the Little, Brown novelette prize of \$2,500, enough to give the Stegners a summer on bicycles in France and England before “coming home broke” and moving on to the University of Wisconsin, an experience later “fictionalized to taste” in *Crossing to Safety*.

The point of this early chronology is to anchor Stegner’s affection for Mormon country and society in a few relevant details, most of them evoked in his own reminiscent prose.<sup>1</sup> It was a natural choice to have him give the major address at the dedication of the University of Utah’s Marriott Library in 1968, an address titled “The Book and the Great Community,” published the following year as the final chapter in *The Sound of Mountain Water: Essays on Changing the American West*. “It strikes me,” he said on that occasion, “that to erect a great library in the year 1968 is an act of stubborn and sassy faith, an affirmation in the spirit of the philosopher who said, ‘If I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant a tree.’”

It seems as much a continuation as a

climax of Stegner's largesse toward the community he felt he owed so much to that during his lifetime he arranged to make Special Collections at the Marriott Library a major depository of his books and papers, manna from heaven in the form of original correspondence and manuscripts for researchers in Western Americana. They will discover why it is such a challenge to write about him, whether of his life or work, because he himself seems to have said it best already in his fiction, his histories and biographies, and his personal and critical essays.

As historian, Stegner wrote like a novelist; as novelist he drew heavily on history, seeking truth in that "middle ground" between history and imagination that is the world of fiction. Because, as Jane Martin has observed, he believed "living is a continuum," with "the present . . . just a stopping place" between past and future, his fiction has a "quality of retrospection" giving it an "extended perspective."<sup>2</sup> Retrospection and perspective are equally true of his writings about the Mormons, who provided him with a kind of paradigm for his pondering about the changing West. A dramatic instance, amounting to a fateful irony in Mormon western history, is the vision and program of desert conquest, rooted in Isaiah, which worked well enough for survival in pioneer times when the available water could be managed on a human scale, but which presages disaster in a corporate "hydraulic society" unable or unwilling to perceive the limits nature has set on "development." "Why should deserts be asked to blossom?" he wanted to know. "They were doing all right until we set out to reform them."<sup>3</sup> Stegner's aroused jeremiads on the endangered West were tempered before his death by his eloquent "geography of hope," in which he held out the possibility that the West, and Mormon country along with it, would save itself in time.

Mormon historians may thank Stegner for his scrupulous use of sources. He knew better than most the literature on the Mormons is "enormous, repetitious, contradictory, and embattled." He called the welter of Mormon and anti-Mormon sources and conflicting opinions a "morass." "There is no firm ground here," he concluded. He sought the facts in original documents as often as he could, aware that "those who reported events as eye-witnesses were very often blinded by pentecostal enthusiasm, tribal loyalty, or imperfect information." For those inclined to think he wrote from a bias favoring the Mormons, he defined his "stance" (the word is his): "I write as a non-Mormon but not a

Mormon-hater." As we have seen, he had a "warm admiration" for the "everyday virtues of the Mormons as a people," but he was "suspicious of the hierarchy . . . in the way I am suspicious of any very large and very powerful commercial and industrial corporation." He insisted he wrote as an outsider who made "no attempt to whitewash the Mormon tribal crimes, which were as grievous as their wrongs."<sup>4</sup>

Mormon writers, at times perhaps a bit envious of Stegner's preferred status in Zion (I am not aware that his books had to be sold under the counter), may thank him for his example of how to achieve an identity living and writing in the West. Within their own tradition they could, "writing Mormon" as he had done "writing Western," establish a place for themselves in "a true community, an authentic landscape, a defining literature."<sup>5</sup> It could be for them, as it had been for him, a calling.

Mormon readers may thank Stegner for telling their story with such clarity and verve, enabling them to see the familiar, both in their history and in the daily life around them, in fresh terms. Only an authentic inside outsider, attuned to their congregational lore and language, could have written "Meet Me at the Ward House" and "In Our Lovely Deseret." They should have no difficulty embracing his basic values, dramatized in the fiction, personified in his historical heroes (John Wesley Powell, for one), and made explicit in such essays as "Goodbye to All T\_\_t!," "One Way to Spell Man," and "What I Believe," a credo some might find troubling for its secular humanism, dread word. Nearer to the universal bone and heart than any formal declaration is his "Letter, Much Too Late,"<sup>6</sup> a delayed tribute to his mother which strikes the chord Wordsworth must have heard when he listened to "the still, sad music of humanity." Stegner would not have touched Mormon theology with a ten-foot pole. He wrote of life's ambiguities, not gospel certainties; from first to last his fiction leaves no doubt that the wages of sin are death and that happiness, when attained at all, may consist in finding an "angle of repose" and in "crossing to safety" with the intangibles of love and memory.

Wallace Stegner's personal qualities were as admirable as his talents: he was upright, a good man as well as a great writer. What in an old-fashioned era we could call manly virtues seemed to speak out from a face romantically handsome in youth, increasingly dignified by the lines the years engraved on it, leaving strength and gravity in repose, a rugged visage in old age. Mormons would

appreciate a faithful husband of nearly sixty years, a responsible father, an active citizen. Anyone who ever spent more than ten minutes with him probably feels a special claim, because he gave everyone direct attention, even during the rituals of book signings.

I myself experienced his kindness and encouragement in a memorable way. I met him at Harvard in 1941 when he happened to be working on *Mormon Country*, a book he started, he said, "out of sheer nostalgia." My classmate from Utah, Joel Dorius, was engaged as Stegner's research assistant on National Youth Administration (NYA) funds, a holdover from the Depression. Through Joel I was included in a quartet of graduate students invited to Stegner's Cambridge apartment for a cheese-and-crackers evening with Robert Frost. Stegner had become acquainted with Frost at Breadloaf and became a good friend to Frost, who was also living in Cambridge as poet-in-residence at Harvard, alone and bereft by the recent loss of his wife, Elinor. Frost seemed subdued but amiable. I remember his chiding Stegner, already known as a talented novelist and good teacher (he was in the creative writing program), for spending time on "a Mormon project." When he learned that Joel and I were from Utah, he told us he had passed through Springville once and thought it a "pretty little town," tempting to settle down in "if there weren't so many other places like it." That was my closest encounter with Frost, though happily not the last with Stegner.

Wallace Stegner—the strong trochaic rhythm of his name embodies his durability. He will be missed, but we have his work and the memory of his friendship. Mormons can echo a moment from the history he knew so well and say that "as long as grass grows and water runs" he will be read and remembered among them. ☐

## NOTES

1. Autobiographical pieces on which I have drawn include Richard W. Etulain's *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1981); "Finding the Place," in *Growing Up Western*, ed. Clarus Backes (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1989); "Hometown Revisited," in *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers*, ed. William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1958); "It is the Love of Books I Owe Them," in *Remembering the University of Utah*, ed. Elizabeth Haglund (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1981).

2. Jane Martin, "Wallace Stegner and All the Little Life Things," *Arts Magazine* 1:8 (May 1993).

3. Introduction to *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: Random House, 1992).

4. All the quotations in the paragraph come from Stegner's "A Word on Bibliography" in *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (New York: McGraw, Hill, 1964).

5. Charles E. Little, "Books for the Wilderness," *Wilderness Magazine* (Summer 1992).

6. It may be found in *Where the Bluebird Sings*.