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Article

Isolation, Inferiority, and Illness

The Widespread Effects of the Nineteenth-Century Mormon “Adoption” Program on Native American Children

Taylor Tree

THIS IS THE STORY OF MARY MOUNTAIN, AN INDIAN MAIDEN WHO chose and preferred the life of the white people to the life of the wandering red men, and the story of the white people who gave her that home.”¹ Thus begins the biographical manuscript narrating the story of one of the many Native children brought into the homes of white Mormon settlers in Utah territory during the mid-nineteenth century. According to this manuscript, after a skirmish between the Timpanogos tribe and the Mormon Battalion in 1849, the men fled, leaving women and children hidden in their valley encampment. Elnathan Eldredge, a Mormon soldier, noticed a Native child who he described as being “a sad, dark eyed girl about nine years old, holding herself aloof from both Indians and white men.”² Elnathan took the girl home to his wife, Ruth, who called her “Mary Mountain.” The biography notes that Mary was well cared for and soon learned to “set the table, go to the stream for water” and tend to the Eldredge’s baby.³ Eventually, Mary learned to fear the Natives that passed by the town, and chose to stay with the Eldredge family rather than rejoin her tribe. Mary Mountain never married, and lived to be around the age

1. Mary Mountain, typescript, 1950, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 1.

2. Mountain, 1950, 4.

3. Mountain, 1950, 4.

of thirty, before she “began to get sickly and pale, developing a slight cough, and in a short time died with consumption.”⁴

Mary Mountain, along with hundreds of other indigenous children, became entangled in the collision of cultures that followed the settling of Mormon pioneers into Utah Territory in 1847. The relationship between these pioneers and the indigenous tribes native to the land was complex and largely guided by the beliefs and teachings of the Latter-day Saint church. The Book of Mormon, a Latter-day Saint scriptural text, documents the lives of a family who migrated to the Americas the Middle East. This family becomes split into two groups, the Nephites and the Lamanites, with the Nephites following the commandments and the Lamanites rejecting them. The Book of Mormon records how as a result of separating themselves from God, the Lamanites were cursed with dark skin.⁵ Up until 2007, the introduction to the Book of Mormon stated that the Lamanites are “the principal ancestors of the American Indians.”⁶ Thus, most early Mormon settlers believed that Native Americans descended from the Lamanites, and it was their duty to “accomplish the redemption of these suffering degraded Israelites.”⁷

Mormon interactions with Native Americans in the mid-nineteenth century was characterized by a desire to convert them, as well as by religious figurehead and Governor of Utah Brigham Young’s maxim that “it was cheaper to feed the Indians than fight them.”⁸ When settlers first moved into the Utah territory, they hoped to remain uninvolved in the preexisting slave trade carried out between slave trading tribes and Mexican buyers. However, this was easier said than done, as Native slave traders stopped at almost nothing to expand their markets to the newly arrived Mormon population. Daniel Jones recorded an instance where Mormons declined buying Native children for sale, to which the slave trader responded by “[taking] one of these children by the heels and dash[ing] its brains out on the hard ground” and then telling the settlers that they “had no hearts, or [they] would have bought it and saved its life.”⁹ Seeing

4. Mountain, 1950, 5.

5. Alma 3:6 (The Book of Mormon).

6. Book of Mormon Introduction, 1981.

7. Orson Pratt, “Salvation of the House of Israel to come Through the Gentiles” (1855), in *Journal of Discourses* 9, (1862), edited by Brigham Young, G.D. Watt, and J.V. Long, 178.

8. Lawrence G. Coates, “Brigham Young and Mormon Indian Policies: The Formative Period, 1836–1851,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (July 1978): 428.

9. Daniel Jones, *Forty Years Among the Indians: A True yet Thrilling Narrative of the Author’s Experiences Among the Natives* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1890), 53.

Native children treated with such cruelty within the slave trade evoked sympathy within the white settlers. One traveler observed two Native children, who “were on the open, digging with their little fingers for grassnuts, or any roots to afford sustenance. They were almost living skeletons.”¹⁰ After seeing the poor treatment of these indigenous children, there was a shift in the mindset of Mormons regarding purchasing Natives. This transition is marked when Brigham Young proclaimed that Mormons should purchase Native children so that they might be “redeemed from the thralldom of savage barbarity.”¹¹

In 1852, the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Utah passed the “Act for the Further Relief of Indian Slaves and Prisoners” which established a legal system for what Brigham Young referred to as “purchasing [the Natives] into freedom.”¹² Through this act, any white person living in Utah territory with “any Indian prisoner, child, or woman, in [their] possession, whether by purchase or otherwise” could receive approval by a probate judge and then indenture the Native person for up to twenty years, with the only caveat being that they must send children between the ages of seven and sixteen to school for three months of the year.¹³ This act provided the legal framework for the Eldredge family to bring Mary Mountain into their home, as well as led to the indenturement of hundreds of other Native children.

It must be noted that through buying indigenous children from slave traders, the Mormon settlers became complicit in human trafficking. Despite intentions to save children from the harsh conditions they faced, they became a new market for the slave traders to profit off of, and thus fed the slave trading system and allowed it to continue thriving in the Utah Territory. Although the slave trade existed prior to the Latter-day Saint arrival, the settlers provided a closer market for Native children than buyers in Mexico or California. Additionally, the poverty that they were attempting to save children from was in part caused by their settlement of the land traditionally belonging to Native tribes. Through claiming the best land and water sources, Mormon settlers exacerbated indigenous peoples’ struggle of having access to adequate amounts of food and water.

10. Solomon Nunes Carvalho, *Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1954), 260.

11. Brigham Young, “Governor’s Message: to the Council and House of Representatives of the Legislature of Utah,” *Deseret News*, January 10, 1852.

12. Young, “Governor’s Message.”

13. “Act for the Further Relief of Indian Slaves and Prisoners,” Utah State Constitution and Historical Statutes (1852), 93–94.

One sympathetic settler recorded the concerns voiced to him by an indigenous man, who plead “my corn is Dying for water what will I feed my chidrin next winter the Mormonas are youseing the water in Pine vally you Said tey would not youse it thare onley for cutting pine logs we once could feed our children on Radits when they was hunry now thare is no Rabits for us what do you think about it.”¹⁴

Although the system of indenturement was widespread—one man traveling through Utah noted that most Mormon families had “one or more Pah-Utah children”—the current historiography on the topic is limited.¹⁵ Early written works about the Mormon “adoption” program tend to be extremely forgiving of the Mormon settlers, arguing that they saved the Natives from both themselves and from the Mexican slave trade.¹⁶ In recent years, historians such as Andrés Reséndez have condemned the settlers for their evil intentions of exploiting and enslaving the Native populations.¹⁷ Although historians differ in their interpretation of the morality of the settlers, they are all similar in that their writings focus mainly on the Mormons, whether it be the settlers’ motives for indenturing Natives, or the effects of this system on white society. Overall, the historiography on this topic neglects analyzing the Native children themselves and the ways in which they were affected.

The purpose of this paper is to contextualize Mary Mountain’s biography within a broader understanding of the time period in order to analyze the common experiences of the hundreds of Native children brought into Mormon settlers’ homes in the mid-nineteenth century. Regardless of the intentions of Latter-day Saint’s settlers, the “Act for the Further Relief of Indian Slaves and Prisoners” inevitably had many harmful consequences. Although the effects of this act were numerous, this essay will focus on three central consequences faced by the indentured Native American children: isolation from their own culture, confinement within a racial hierarchy in Mormon communities, and premature deaths.

14. Jacob Hamblin, Journals and Letters of Jacob Hamblin, 1969, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 43.

15. Gwinn Harris Heap, *Central Route to the Pacific* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1957), 224.

16. Juanita Brooks, “Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier,” *Utah Historic Quarterly* 12, no. 1–2 (1944).

17. Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 272.

Interpreting Sources

The narrative of Mary's life is solely derived from a six-page typescript, titled "Mary Mountain." According to the Harold B. Lee Special Collections, this document was likely created around 1950, and the author is unknown. The lack of information surrounding the biography presents a multitude of challenges. First, one must question the existence of the characters mentioned in the story. However, a census record confirms that Mary, an indigenous girl, was living with the Eldredge family in Salt Lake County.¹⁸ Thus, the official census record substantiates the biographical timeline of events as well as the people themselves. Although the author is not known, one can infer that they are most likely a descendant of the Eldredge family, due to their in-depth knowledge of the Eldredge family history presented at the beginning of the biography as well as the diction lauding Ruth, Elnathan, and their descendants. Furthermore, the biography romanticizes the way by which Mary came to live with the Eldredge family. Although the biography notes that Mary and other Native women and children were abandoned by the men in their tribe after a conflict with the Mormon Battalion, the diary of Hosea Stout, one of the Mormon soldiers present during this skirmish at Battle Creek, reveals a much darker narrative. He wrote that the Native men "fought with the most determined resolution to die rather than yield."¹⁹ After the battle, all but one of the Native warriors were dead, and thirteen women and children of the Timpanogos tribe were left hiding in a freezing creek and then rounded up by the Mormon Battalion and brought to their camp.²⁰ This is the more likely story of how Mary Mountain came into contact with the Eldredge family.

The typescript narrating Mary Mountain's story, similar to most other sources written by settlers, comes from an extremely biased perspective. The author of the biography constantly praises the Eldredge family, seemingly attempting to make them the hero of Mary's story. The biography begins with three pages describing the lives of Ruth and Elnathan Eldredge; it is not until the fourth page that Mary is mentioned in any detail. A page and a half later, the typescript addresses Mary's death. However, it continues after Mary's own

18. 1850 U.S. Census, Utah, Salt Lake County, population schedule. Digital Images. Familysearch.com.

19. Hosea Stout, *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout*, vol. 2, ed. Juanita Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 346.

20. Coates, "Brigham Young and Mormon Indian Policies," 437.

death in order to more fully discuss Ruth Eldredge. Although Ruth and Elnathan are directly quoted on multiple occasions, the writing does not contain a single quote from Mary but is rather riddled with assumptions of her feelings. This presents another difficulty in determining the effects of the system of indenturement on Native children: of the evidence used, there are very few written sources directly from the children themselves. When the children are quoted, the references come from oral histories that have passed down their dialogue through generations.

It is likely that the reason for the lack of written sources from the Native children is due to the system of indenture itself. The “Act for Further Relief’s” sole requirement for schooling mandates “The master . . . to send [indenture] to school, if there be a school in the district, or vicinity, for the term of three months in each year; and at a time when said Indian child shall be between the ages of seven years and sixteen.”²¹ These education stipulations did not provide ample educational opportunities for Native children to become fully literate. Conceivably, this is a contributing factor to the lack of primary source documents written by the children themselves.

Although the biography provides useful information on the life of Mary Mountain, it cannot be taken at face-value and instead must be analyzed in conjunction with other sources from the time period. These sources include diary entries from settlers mentioning the children they acquire, newspaper articles, and speeches given by authorities from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although census records occasionally mention Native children in Mormon homes, the records are not exhaustive, and the children were oftentimes not included. Due to the lack of systematic records surrounding the children, it is impossible to cite numerical statistics, but rather patterns and trends must be gleaned from small anecdotal information. Mention of Native children are most often found in Mormon journals; however, the children are most always mentioned briefly, with nothing more than a sentence or two documenting their obtainment or, more often, their death. The few lines of information found in settler’s journals must be combined with each other in order to create broader pictures and observe commonalities. Through diving in-depth into Mary Mountain’s life, the experiences felt by indigenous children indentured according to the “Act for Further Relief” will be personified and brought to light.

21. “Act for Further Relief,” 94.

Isolation from Native Culture

As a direct result of being indentured, Mary Mountain faced isolation from other Natives as well as a loss of her cultural identity. The “Act for Further Relief” was once described by a man traveling West through Utah, as “a system which ameliorates the condition of these children by removing them from the influence of their savage parents.”²² Erasure of the Native children’s cultural identity was inevitable, as one of the fundamental purposes of the Mormon system of indenture was to redeem them to the Latter-day Saints’ ethnocentric and white standard. Ezra T. Benson, a man involved in both the leadership of the Latter-day Saint church and the Native American indenture system, exhorted, “It is our duty, brethren and sisters, to go to work and bring these natives to an understanding of the principles of civilization. . . . In a short season we shall be rewarded for all that we do to civilize this lost and fallen race.”²³

As a result of constantly being told of the inherent sinful nature of her people, Mary Mountain was conditioned to fear Natives. The author of the biography describes how “when she saw any of the Indians [Mary] would go and hide.”²⁴ Although no more information about this is given, it can be assumed that she hid from members of her tribe out of fear for them. A couple of settlers’ diaries note that their indentures would hide when members of their tribe came near them, for fear of being sent back to live with them. It is possible that Mary was afraid of her tribe due to their past mistreatment of her, however a likely possibility is that she hid from her tribe because she had been taught to negate their “savage” influence in favor of white Latter-day Saint culture. The author then champions this avoidance of her own tribe members as proof that “Mary didn’t belong with these Indians,” rather than recognizing the harm in teaching children to fear their own culture. As Mary grew older and Native men attempted to court her, she “would have nothing to do with [them].”²⁵ After being raised in a white household, Mary held herself to a standard that excluded Native men because they were not as “white” as she was. Undoubtedly, the quagmire of believing her own culture to be inferior to that of white society resulted in an abundance of complex emotions, including a fear and distaste of

22. Heap, *Central Route*, 224.

23. Ezra T. Benson, July 13, 1855, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 3:64; George A. Smith, Journal, typescript, 12, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, HBL.

24. Mountain, 4.

25. Mountain, 5.

Native people, and likely, a sense of personal inferiority to the white children she was raised around.

Mary's experiences of isolation from Native culture was a commonality in the lives of most indentured children. Historian Juanita Brooks postulated that "the [Native] children growing up among white [children] . . . must have sensed their differentness . . . Some were afraid of Indians . . . and often, with characteristic thoughtlessness, their playmates made sarcastic comments. Everything combined to create a feeling of inferiority."²⁶ The official act itself consistently describes Native people as being "degraded," and while discussing the act, Brigham Young stated that one of the goals was to redeem the children from the "thralldom of savage barbarity."²⁷ Regardless of the living situations of the indentured Native children, and regardless of if their foster parents were loving, the experience of being one of these indentured children inescapably resulted in a sense of inferiority due to the racist principles of the "Act for Further Relief."

From examining anecdotes of different Native children, a common reaction to this isolation and instilment of racist ideologies was a fear and shame of Native people. Just as Mary would run and hide when Natives passed by, so too did other Native children. Rhoda, another Native indentured girl, similarly ran and hid when any of her own race came around.²⁸ Undoubtedly, Native children grew up hearing the Mormon belief that Native Americans were a degraded people who needed to be redeemed. This racialized perspective barraged the children at church, at school, and in their homes, teaching and conditioning them to internalize the racism, reject their own cultural identity, and fear indigenous people.

Confinement within a Racial Hierarchy

Despite being taught to despise her own culture and to strive for whiteness, Mary Mountain did not receive the same opportunities as other children. The biography notes that "Mary remained Mary Mountain to Ruth—solid and dependable in practical things, but not a daughter for solace and comfort in things near her heart."²⁹ Perhaps this admission reveals that Ruth, the woman

26. Brooks, "Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier," 47–48.

27. "Act for Further Relief," 93.; Young, "Governor's Message."

28. Michael K. Bennion, "Captivity, Adoption, Marriage and Identity: Native American Children in Mormon Homes, 1847–1900" (Master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2012) 84.

29. Mountain, 5.

who was supposed to assume a motherly role towards Mary, viewed Mary as being too different from her to be considered a daughter. It appears as if Mary was thought of as someone who was practical to have in the home due to her ability to cook, watch the children, and clean. The official “Act for the Further Relief of Indian Slaves and Prisoners” does not refer to this system as an adoption process, but rather a system of indenture, with the white families being specified as the “masters.”³⁰

As previously discussed, Mary Mountain refused romantic advances from Native men. However, when “the white men came courting . . . Father Eldredge advised them against taking an Indian maiden for a wife.”³¹ It is hard to comprehend that a father would advise men to avoid dating his daughter due to her race. This further proves that Mary was not the Eldredge’s daughter, rather an indenture they viewed as inferior.

Despite claiming that the purpose of the indenture program was to help the Natives to become white, many settlers continued to reinforce racial hierarchies through avoiding marriages with Native Americans. When Susie, a Native indentured girl, was called to answer for her sins of having children out of wedlock, she bravely told church authorities, “I have a right to children, no white man will marry me. I cannot live with the Indians. But I can have children, and I will support the children that I have.”³² The testimony of Susie confirms that Native children were isolated from their Native roots while simultaneously refused the opportunities that other white children would have. A common trend seen among Native children indentured in Mormon families was the frequency by which they remained single, almost never marrying white Mormon settlers. Even some Latter-day Saint men married more than one wife, they were still hesitant to take on a Native woman as an additional bride.³³ In a study of 174 indentured Native children, historian Brian Cannon found that of the indigenous males raised under this system of indenture and chose to stay in white society, just one fifth of them married. Most of the children who chose to remain in white settlements upon reaching adulthood never married, and occupied a “lonely, liminal state on the margins of society.”³⁴

30. “Act for Further Relief,” 93–94.

31. Mountain, 5.

32. Brooks, “Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier,” 44–45.

33. Brooks, “Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier” 39.

34. Brian Q. Cannon, “To Buy Up the Lamanite Children as Fast as They Could: Indentured Servitude and Its Legacy in Mormon Society,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 2 (April 2018): 20.

In settler's journals, it is evident that they did not view the Native children they "adopted" the same way in which they viewed their own children. While listing who was present during a journey to a new house, Mormon settler Mary Minerva Dart Judd wrote in her journal, "It consisted of myself, one daughter, Lucinda, our son Zodac and the Indian boy Lamoni."³⁵ If the Native children were truly adopted into Mormon families, why would they be listed not as children, but as adjuncts to the family members?

Brigham Young, in his proclamation regarding the "Act for Further Relief," declared that although they should treat Natives with humanity, they must not "elevate them . . . to an equality with those whom nature and nature's God has indicated to be their masters, their superiors."³⁶ This telling statement reveals the prevailing perspective that governed how these indigenous children were raised. The children were kept isolated from their tribes while simultaneously being restricted from fully becoming a part of the white Mormon community.

Premature Deaths

Mary Mountain died around the age of thirty due to consumption and was buried in the Salt Lake City Cemetery. Although dying at the age of thirty was a premature death—Elnathan lived to be sixty-one and Ruth lived to be seventy-four—many Native children died much earlier on in their lives.³⁷ All too often, the children indentured by Mormon families faced early deaths, most likely due to their bodies vulnerability to the foreign European pathogens.

Of the previously mentioned study of 174 indentured Native children, Cannon discovered that twenty-five percent of them died before the age of twenty, with a median death age of twelve.³⁸ Offhand comments mentioning the early death of indentured Native children frequent settler journals. In many cases, the "adopted" Native children remain unmentioned in settler journals until their premature deaths. In one striking instance, Mary Minerva Dart Judd recorded in her journal that as Lamoni, a Native boy she indentured, was dying, he told Nellie, a Native girl indentured by the same family that "she would die as he was going to die, if she remained with the white folks [because] the food

35. Mary Minerva Dart Judd *Autobiography*, 1885, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 19.

36. Young, "Governor's Message."

37. Mountain, 5.

38. Cannon, "To Buy Up the Lamanite Children," 19.

of the white folks would kill the Indians if they eat it.”³⁹ With his dying breath, Lamoni warned other Native children of the harsh realities of being a Native child indentured in a white home. Regardless of whether or not the families indenturing the Native children were loving, an inevitable result of bringing Native American children into white homes was the increased possibility of the child contracting diseases that their bodies were not equipped to handle and dying at a young age.

Conclusion

While on her deathbed, Lucy, an indentured Native girl, remarked that she was mistaken to ever believe she could become a white girl. “Indian children,” she said, “should be left with their own people where they could be happy; when they were raised in white homes they did not belong anywhere.”⁴⁰ After experiencing being indentured by a Mormon family in the nineteenth century, Lucy came to the conclusion that she would have rather been left with Natives. Often, the Native children who felt similarly to Lucy took their fate into their own hands and chose to run away from the white families in favor of living with other Natives. Examples of Native children succeeding or attempting to run away are regularly seen in settlers’ journals. Mary Minerva Dart Judd noted that Nellie took heed of Lamoni’s advice, and in the middle of the night, ran away to rejoin her tribe.⁴¹ Native children were not passive victims, but actively made decisions with their best interests in mind. Oftentimes, Mormon families allowed them to leave on their own free will, however, there are multiple instances of families forcing children to stay with them. A descendant of a Mormon family who indentured an Native girl recalled that when her family first purchased a young girl, she “did not want to stay, but cried so and tried so hard to get away that they had to lock her in a back bedroom.”⁴² Additionally, a local newspaper article from 1852 titled “Ran Away” offered a reward to anyone who could help return “an Indian boy, about 12 years old” who “supposed to have gone back to Parowan.”⁴³

39. Mary Minerva Dart Judd Autobiography, 31.

40. Brooks, “Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier,” 38.

41. Brooks, “Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier,” 33.

42. Brooks, “Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier,” 46.

43. Christopher Merkley, “Run Away,” *Deseret News*, September 18, 1852.

When bringing Native children into their homes, Mormon settlers were often blinded by their own religious fervor, causing them to overlook the inevitable damages inflicted on the Native children themselves. Through taking a closer look at Mary's story, the wider experiences of Native children are brought to light and can be more fully understood. The experiences of these children have largely faded from public memory. It is essential that the effects of the "Act for the Further Relief of Indian Slaves and Prisoners" are acknowledged, and the story of these children gets told. When the lives of these Native children are ignored, it invalidates their experiences as well as impedes our ability to learn from the past in order to avoid its repetition. The history of the Mormon indenture system of the nineteenth century must be confronted head on in order to adequately heal from its scars.

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