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Liverpool, 1856: Nathaniel Hawthorne Meets Orson Pratt

RICHARD H. CRACROFT*

Although Nathaniel Hawthorne created a long line of idealistic heroes (Fanshawe, Aylmer, Dimmesdale, Hollingsworth), he seemed to have little talent for appreciating the real-life variety. Not only was he unenchanted by the torchbearers of Transcendentalism, but, in 1856, when he met Orson Pratt, one of infant Mormonism's brightest lights, Hawthorne was notably unimpressed, and his reaction, recorded in *Our Old Home and English Note-Books*, reflects no more than typical contemporary thinking on the harassed and misunderstood Latter-day Saints.

In 1856 Hawthorne had already completed three years of his appointment as United States Consul to Liverpool, England—a political appointment resulting from his life-long friendship with President Franklin Pierce, for whom Hawthorne had written an official campaign biography. Hawthorne was fifty-two and would live eight more years, but he was already entering a period of decline in his creative powers. Although he was still to write *The Marble Faun* (1860) and several other less distinguished works, his greatest writing lay behind him.

In 1856, Orson Pratt (1811-1881), forty-five, was on his fourth of fourteen missions to England and Europe. The apostle, president of the European Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, had begun this journey on April 22, 1856, and on this trip alone would convert upwards of thirty thousand persons to Mormonism before his return to Zion in 1858. He would continue to make significant contributions to the welfare of his Church through missions to Great Britain. For example, in 1865 he would, after being expelled from Austria-Hungary where he intended to open a mission, return to England and successfully preach to and preside over the conferences until August 1867; in 1876 he would again return to translate the Book of Mormon into Pit-

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man phonetic characters; and in 1878-79 he would once more return to arrange the stereotyping of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants into verses, including references and footnotes—a challenging task for the then sixty-seven year-old scholar.

As the last of the original Council of Twelve appointed by Joseph Smith, Orson Pratt was remarkably successful as an apostle and missionary, and that has made his life and visage familiar to all Latter-day Saints. Though dark in 1856, his long white beard was to become his trademark in later years, and Matthias F. Cowley describes him as a man of “medium height, and squarely built,” who wore a “flowing full beard, white as the driven snow, which made him to appear truly patriarchal.”¹

However, the sophisticated New Englander, Nathaniel Hawthorne, that Bowdoin-educated friend and associate of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Longfellow, and Pierce, was not so favorably impressed as had been the thousands of converts to Mormonism. On December 31, 1856, he wrote of Pratt’s visit to the consulate:

O[rson] P[ratt], the famous Mormonite, called on me a little while ago—a short, black-haired, dark-complexioned man; a shrewd, intelligent, but unrefined countenance, expressively unprepossessing; and uncouth gait and deportment; the aspect of a person in uncomfortable circumstances, and decently behaved, but of a vulgar nature and destitute of early culture.²

As unable to assess the inner greatness of his visitor as he was unable to sympathize with the impossible idealism of his optimistic Transcendental neighbors, Hawthorne noted of the self-taught mathematician, scientist, and author of such works as *Cubic and Biquadratic Equations*, “I think I should have taken him for a shoemaker, accustomed to reflect in a rude, strong, evil-disposed way on matters of this world and the next, as he sat on his bench.” Hawthorne erred, for this “rude” man was the brilliant and learned debater who was to score many triumphs impossible to a man of “vulgar nature,” triumphs such as the humiliation of Dr. J. D. Newman in their

¹*Prophets and Patriarchs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1902), p. 205. For a biographical sketch of Pratt see Andrew Jensen, *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*. Vol. I (1901).

²*Our Old Home and English Notebooks*, Vol. VIII in *Hawthorne’s Works*, ed. George Parsons Lathrop (Boston, 1863; 1891), II, 387.

famous three-day debate on polygamy, a defeat that Newman never forgot.

But Brother Pratt, who probably had little patience with novels and novelists and thus seems to make no reference to Hawthorne in his writings, merely explained to Consul Hawthorne that "He had been residing in Liverpool about six months; and his business with me was to ask for a letter of introduction that should gain him admittance to the British Museum, he intending a visit to London." Pratt offered Hawthorne references to "respectable people for his character," but Hawthorne simply directed him to his secretary "as the proper person for his purpose."

That was it! With this brief journal entry Hawthorne dismissed the "Mormonite," passing an opportunity to hear Pratt's message, or to explore the deep riches of this intensely interesting character. Certainly Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, or even Sir Richard F. Burton would not have allowed such an opportunity to pass without some satirical or anthropological probing into the famous preacher's history and character.

But, just as Hawthorne's David Swan slept through the almost-realized events of wealth, romance, and death, so one of the world's foremost men of letters passed an opportunity to engage in more than a perfunctory exchange with one of America's foremost evangelists. As Hawthorne wrote in "David Swan," ". . . we hear not the airy footsteps of the strange things that almost happen."³

³As Orson Pratt's concern in England was the progression of the saints and missionary work, he also failed to mention meeting Hawthorne in any of the letters or journals in the Church Historian's Office. Ed.