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Dickens and the Mormons

RICHARD J. DUNN*

In "Bound for the Great Salt Lake," *The Uncommercial Traveller* essay for July 4, 1863, Charles Dickens admitted that "to the rout and overthrow of all [his] expectations" Mormon emigrants merited praise instead of the censure he had been prepared to give them.¹ To the study of mid-Victorian religious and social attitudes and particularly to the study of Dickens' increasing religious toleration, this largely neglected essay presents fresh insights. It also gives a colorful account of the sailing of the *Amazon* from London in June, 1863—an important event in the history of Mormon emigration. Previously, Dickens unquestionably had adopted much of the prevailing distrust and contempt with which his contemporaries regarded Mormons. But in his later years, as he grew more tolerant of other religious minorities, he observed Mormons personally and radically changed his opinion of them. To explain this reversal in his opinion and to realize how his final view differed from the typical attitude of his age, it is necessary to trace his opinions of the Mormons before 1863 and also to survey briefly the Mormons' position in midcentury England.

Dickens first mentioned the Mormons in *American Notes*, published in 1842. After describing an insane woman (not a Mormon) who heard voices, he went on to suggest that just as she had been committed to an asylum so might it be a good idea "to shut up a few false prophets of these latter times," starting with "a Mormonist or two."² Nowhere in *American Notes* did he indicate that he had known personally any Mormons in either America or England, but he did declare that England "is not unknown to Mr. Joseph Smith, the apostle of

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¹*The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces* (Philadelphia: The Nottingham Society, n.d.), p. 219. Further references to this essay are from this edition and are included in the text.

²*A Child's History of England and American Notes* (Philadelphia: The Nottingham Society, n.d.), p. 75. Further references are from this edition and are included in the text.

Mormonism, or to his benighted disciples." He further remarked that he had "beheld [Mormon] religious scenes in some of our populous towns which can hardly be surpassed by an American camp meeting" (pp. 247-248). He may well have witnessed Mormon missionaries preaching in the London streets, where they had begun their work in 1840. But his comparison between Mormon religious scenes and American camp meetings reveals his ignorance of Mormon practices, for, as he was to learn from his visit to the *Amazon* in 1863, their services, unlike camp meetings, were quiet and orderly.

Neither Dickens' published works nor his letters during the remainder of the 1840's contain any references to the Mormons, for probably he was not aware how rapidly, since first coming to England in 1837, they had been increasing their numbers. The spread of the new religion during the 1840's was phenomenal: in 1840 they established the *Millennial Star* as their official newspaper; in the same year they began emigration to the United States; in 1841 they presented Queen Victoria with a copy of the first British edition of the Book of Mormon; and by the end of the decade they had extended their missions throughout the British Isles.³

Dickens' first brief references to the Mormons were no doubt based largely upon what he had read and heard about them. Anti-Mormon propaganda had been present in England from as early as April, 1838, and by 1840 the ministers of southern England had unsuccessfully petitioned the Archbishop of Canterbury to seek parliamentary prohibition of Mormon preaching.⁴ Joseph Smith, commenting from Missouri during the time of great persecution in 1839, worried because "the enemy of righteousness was no less busy with the Saints in England. . . . Temptation followed temptation, and being young in the cause, the Saints suffered themselves to be buffeted by their adversary."⁵ A modern Mormon writer believes that, although more fair generally than the American papers, the British press often "acceded to misinformed public opinion or bowed to the will of opposing factional interests, whose accusations have at times been in the nature of willfully dis-

³Richard L. Evans, *A Century of "Mormonism" in Great Britain* (Salt Lake City, 1937), p. 132 ff.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵*Joseph Smith, History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, 1948), III, 276.

honest and grossly untrue fabrications."⁶ In 1859 John Stuart Mill condemned "the language of downright persecution which breaks out from the press of this country whenever it feels called on to notice the remarkable phenomenon of Mormonism."⁷ Not only did such journalism probably influence Dickens in the 1840's, but also he later endorsed it editorially.

By 1851 there were over fifty thousand Latter-day Saints in England and Scotland, a number large enough to cause the historian Bancroft to remark that "at this period the British Isles were justly termed the stronghold of Mormonism."⁸ John W. Dodds observed that because they were composed of "solid citizenry" and because their conduct was exemplary, the British Mormons differed from the wilder Followers of Joanna Southcott and the Irvingites, with whom they were often erroneously linked in public opinion.⁹ Dodds' is, of course, the retrospective view; few Victorians distinguished the Mormons from the numerous more fanatical religious orders. Overt hostility toward Mormons was never as severe as that in the United States, and so religious persecution was not the primary motive for the emigration of tens of thousands of British Mormons. Nor, despite the fact that a majority were from the agricultural and laboring classes who had suffered greatly during the hungry 1840's, was expected improvement of economic and social position the most important cause that led an average of twelve thousand Mormons a year to leave England during the 1850's.¹⁰ The Perpetual Emigration Fund, founded in 1851 and later termed "the only successful privately organized emigration system of the period,"¹¹ succeeded because the main motive for emigration was spiritual.

A brief survey of the most common midcentury British objections to Mormonism reveals the attitudes that Dickens at first shared. As did the Americans, most British critics centered their attacks on the practice of polygamy. Both fascinated and repulsed by the idea of polygamy, the English exaggerated its extent, but critics comforted themselves with the theory

⁶Evans, *Great Britain*, p. 202.

⁷John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Currin V. Shields (Indianapolis, 1956), p. 111.

⁸Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Utah* (San Francisco, 1889), p. 407.

⁹John W. Dodds, *The Age of Paradox* (London, 1953), p. 29.

¹⁰Evans, *Great Britain*, p. 245.

¹¹W. S. Shepperson, *British Emigration to North America* (Oxford, 1957), p. 143.

that by inbreeding the Mormons were hastening their own end. Polygamy was not the only grounds for the English attacks, however. A March, 1854, *London Quarterly Review* article expressed many of the typical Victorian objections. The anonymous critic believed that Mormons possess a profane notion of faith, permit the "personal profligacy of the Prophet and his coadjutors," and practice a religion of "sensuality and blasphemy." He went on to demand, "And is it into a system like this that our English matrons and virgins are to be enticed?"¹² Concern for matrons and virgins seems secondary, however, to the critic's fear of Mormons as avowed materialists "who utterly ridicule the notion of a spiritual as distinct from a material existence."¹³ Here he revealed, in a larger than merely religious context, a dominant attitude of the age. A property conscious England, officially unwilling to admit the successful existence of sects much nearer its religious hierarchy than the Mormons, naturally eyed Mormon materialistic progress with suspicion. Specifically, the English questioned the practicality and diligence with which the Mormons had built a modern city in the deserts of Utah, for no other religious order of the time and none of the earlier Utopian visionaries had prospered so efficiently. Also, the critics must have envied the Mormons' effective tithing system. To see a new religious order thriving in practical matters of emigration, city building, and of trade in the deserts of America naturally made the Englishman self-conscious of his established church, which was struggling both with internal division and with Nonconformist and Catholic demands. Because of mid-Victorian defensive pride in religious and social orthodoxy, it is not surprising that in much of the anti-Mormon writing, materialism was nearly as inflammatory a subject as polygamy. Dickens too, as we shall later see, was interested in the Mormons' material progress, but unlike the majority of his contemporaries he praised Mormon practicality and industry, separating this praise from his criticism of Mormon religious practices.

By 1861, the year Sir Richard Burton published *The City of the Saints*, a record of his trip to Salt Lake City the year before, he could cite thirty-three book-length discussions of

¹²"Mormonism and the Mormons," *London Quarterly Review*, Vol. 2 (1854), pp. 115-122.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 115.

Mormonism, but he yet found "a prodigious general ignorance of the 'Mormon Rule'; the mass of the public has heard of the Saints, but even well educated men hold theirs to be a kind of socialistic or communist concern."¹⁴ The occasional articles concerning Mormons that had been published in Dickens' *Household Words* during the 1850's substantiate Burton's observation, but, differing from most of their contemporaries, Dickens' contributors were consistently complimentary toward the Mormons' practical accomplishments.

As an editor who exercised strict control over the articles in his journals, Dickens certainly would not have permitted the appearance of any anti-Mormon propaganda with which he did not personally agree. Thus, although there is no mention of the Mormons in Dickens' own writing between *American Notes* and *The Uncommercial Traveller*, the articles in *Household Words* and in the early volumes of *All the Year Round* may be accepted as reflecting his views. For the first of the articles, "In the Name of the Prophet—Smith!" appearing in *Household Words* in 1851, we know from Dickens' letters that he suggested the title and directed changes in content. The author, James Hannay, attacked Mormon "fanaticism—singing hymns to nigger tunes,"¹⁵ and this attitude certainly must have pleased Dickens, who, as shown by his numerous attacks on Dissenters, distrusted fanaticism in any form. Also, Dickens approved as Hannay charged the Mormons with "the absurdity of seeing visions in the age of railways."¹⁶ Praising their "work; hard, useful, wealth-creating labour," Hannay separated praise for practical achievement from condemnation of religious belief; he defined Mormonism as a combination of two of Joseph Smith's personal qualities—"immense practical industry, and pitiable superstitious delusion." It is here, and in Hannay's remark, "What the Mormons do, seems to be excellent; what they say is mostly nonsense,"¹⁷ that Dickens had his most direct editorial influence. In the letter concerning this article he admonished his sub-editor to have Hannay delete "anything about such a man [as Smith] believing in himself—which he has no right to do and which would by inference justi-

¹⁴Sir Richard Burton, *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*, ed. Fawn M. Brodie (New York, 1963), p. 226.

¹⁵Vol. 3 (1851), p. 385.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

fy about anything."¹⁸ Obviously Dickens was wary of permitting the slightest suggestion that there was any spiritual truth in the Mormon religion, a faith about which neither he nor the majority of his readers were well informed. What is remarkable about this 1851 article is its endorsement of Mormon practicality. It was this aspect of the Latter-day Saints which Dickens himself praised when twelve years later he overcame his prejudice.

In 1854, *Household Words* contained a short notice of the *Deseret News*, the Salt Lake City paper, and Dickens' journal again praised Mormon industry, this time supporting Burton's later observation that most people viewed the Mormons as communistic. Qualifying praise of their industry with censure of the Mormons' "wild, ignorant, superstition," the article credited them with having conceived "the embryo of a nation founded on industry, and upon a theorem of communism which has occupied the attention of philosophers from Plato downwards."¹⁹ Less complimentary, an 1861 *All the Year Round* article concluded that Salt Lake City "stands as a singular monument of the latest brand of religious fanaticism," for "despite the advances of education and science, men remain more inclined to follow impulse than reason, and more willing to accept an absurdity offered than to think for themselves."²⁰ This comment, although not by Dickens himself, may have easily won editorial approval, for throughout his fiction he had portrayed with little sympathy zealots who did not think for themselves. More important than the reaction Dickens may have had to this article is its charge that the Mormons failed to profit from education and science. This implied that, by effectively utilizing education and science, orthodoxy could do much to curb Mormon conversion and emigration. Burton, writing in the same year as an *All the Year Round* contributor, had argued a similar position. He noted that "when Home Missions shall have done their duty in educating and evangelising the unhappy pariahs of town and country, the sons of the land which boasts herself to be the foremost among the nations, will blush no more to hear that the Mormons or Latter-day

¹⁸*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter (London, 1938), Vol. 2, p. 325.

¹⁹"The Deseret News," *Household Words*, Vol. 8 (1854), p. 255.

²⁰"Great Salt Lake," *All the Year Round*, Vol. 5 (1861), p. 511.

Saints are mostly English."²¹ Such reasoning inevitably recalls Dickens' own consistent belief that, before turning to "telescopic philanthropy" and foreign missions, the British should begin their efforts at home.

Although popular opinion had a large role in determining Dickens' early attitude toward the Mormons, his personal opinion of other religious minorities must also be considered. His major objections to the Nonconformists focused on his hatred of their narrow and self-absorbed lives, their austere Sabbaths, and their hypocrisy and cant.²² Possessing a firm belief in Christianity's humanistic application, Dickens in a letter of 1856 described his idea of the "all-sufficiency" of the New Testament; "If I am ever . . . mistaken on this subject, it is because I discountenance all obtrusive professions of and trading in religion, as one of the main causes of why real Christianity has been retarded in this world."²³ Distrust of "obtrusive professions of and trading in religion" provoked many of his attacks on Dissenters. Also, it no doubt colored his early opinions of Mormonism, which, as revealed by the several sources cited, differed very little from his distrust of the Dissenters. Except for the approval of Mormon practicality, Dickens shared his age's prejudices and extended his disgust with Nonconformists to the Mormons. But before 1863 it appears he did not consider the Mormons a subject worthy of personal consideration in either his journals or his fiction. Never did he regard the Latter-day Saints a problem demanding opposition such as the *London Quarterly's* 1854 plea, "Would to God that our remarks might deter some of our farmers and mechanics from committing themselves and especially their *wives and daughters* to the 'tender mercies' of this shocking compound of infidelity, heathenism, immorality, and cant!"²⁴

Against the background of Victorian anti-Mormon prejudice and particularly against the background of Dickens' own prejudice, his "Bound for the Great Salt Lake" reflects remarkable

²¹Burton, *City of the Saints*, p. 495. Mill took a different position in *On Liberty* with the argument that the best course against the Mormons would be for the English to send missionaries to Utah.

²²Arthur A. Adrian, "Dickens and the Brick-and-Mortar Sects," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Vol. 10 (1955), pp. 191-197.

²³*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 2, p. 818.

²⁴"Mormonism and the Mormons, p. 115.

toleration. His changed opinion should be seen in the larger context of his modified attitude toward religious rationalism, Dissenters, and Jews. Just two weeks before visiting the Mormon emigrants, in commenting on Colenso and Jowett, Dickens granted "Nothing is discovered without God's intention and assistance, and I suppose every new knowledge of His works that is conceded to man to be distinctly a revelation by which men are to guide themselves."²⁵ During the same summer that he visited the Mormons, he admitted that despite his intolerant portrayal of Jews in early novels, particularly in *Oliver Twist*, he retained the highest respect for the Jewish people,²⁶ and in *Our Mutual Friend*, the book he began the following year, he presented sympathetically both a Nonconformist minister and a Jewish businessman. In the case of the Mormons, Dickens' personal encounter with them in June, 1863, coinciding with his increased toleration toward Jews and Nonconformists, was influential in changing his opinion.

His choice of a Mormon emigrant ship as a subject for an *Uncommercial Traveller* essay in the summer of 1863 could hardly have been accidental. Not only must he have been curious about the Mormons, but also the *Amazon's* sailing must have been an event of at least minor public interest. The *Amazon* was the first Mormon ship ever to depart from London; the majority of previous emigrants had embarked from Liverpool. The *Millennial Star* for June 20, 1863, provided an account of the sailing that corresponds almost exactly with Dickens' article, which appeared two weeks later in *All the Year Round*. According to the *Star*:

The splendid packet ship *Amazon*, Captain H. K. Hovey, also sailed from London on the 4th instant, with a company of 895 souls of the Saints on board. . . . The company passed the Government Emigration Officers on the third [the day of Dickens' visit], who eulogized their order, harmony and general appearance, after which President Cannon . . . held a meeting, organized the Company and gave appropriate instructions.²⁷

There is no evidence that Dickens saw the article in the *Millennial Star*, but Dickens described the ship's loading, the gov-

²⁵*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 3, p. 352.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 357. See also Harry Stone, "Dickens and the Jews," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 2 (1959), pp. 223-253.

²⁷*The Millennial Star*, Vol. 25 (1863), p. 395.

ernment inspection, the organization of the company, and a religious service. He repeatedly praised the Mormons' conduct, orderliness, good appearance, and, particularly, their "aptitude for organisation." He but briefly mentioned the polygamy issue by noting that despite the presence of some single women "obviously going out in quest of husbands" he firmly believed none of them had "any distinct notions of a plurality of husbands" (p. 224). Similarly, when interviewing a Wiltshire emigrant, he avoided direct criticism of Mormon religious practices. Not so hasty to condemn Joseph Smith as he had been in his 1851 letter, Dickens "(delicately approaching [the question of] Joe Smith)" asked, "'You are of the Mormon religion, of course?'" Receiving a straightforward, "'I'm a Mormon,'" he concluded the interview and did not again even delicately approach questions of Mormon belief (p. 221). Instead, he focused his praise on the practical nature of the emigrants' preparations, and the tone of his reaction corresponds exactly with what the *Millennial Star* reported about visitors to the *Amazon*:

The interest manifested by strangers and the officials whose duty called them to be contiguous to the ship, evinced how much excitement the novelty of a ship-load of Saints, leaving London produced. During the meeting which accompanied the organization, the officers of the ship, the cabin passengers, and the visitors on board listened with marked attention; while the unanimity of feeling manifested by the Saints . . . evidently made a deep impression on them, displaying as it did, a something so different from all their conceptions of us as a people.²⁸

Dickens admitted that his own favorable opinion was contrary to all his expectations and in a footnote to collected editions of *The Uncommercial Traveller* indicated that he was not alone in his opinion, for nine years earlier a committee of the House of Commons had approved the Mormon agents' administration of their ships "with every provision for comfort, decorum, and internal peace." (p. 226).

Another interesting, and certainly coincidental, resemblance between Dickens' article and the *Star* arose when a month after the publication of "Bound for the Great Salt Lake" the *Star* printed a letter from the leaders of the *Amazon* company.

²⁸*Ibid.*

Near the end of his article Dickens remarked that he had learned of a dispatch received from the Captain, "highly praising the behaviour of these Emigrants, and the perfect order and propriety of all their social arrangements" (p. 225). In their letter, the *Amazon* emigrants complimented the Captain who, obviously because he was pleased with his passengers, had "made every requisite exertion to ensure the health, comfort, and safety of the Company."²⁹

The year before Dickens encountered the Mormons, Milnes had written of the difficulty "for an Englishman to approach any American institutions without some disturbing associations and instinctive prejudices."³⁰ A tint of this prejudice colors the last paragraph of "Bound for the Great Salt Lake," for Dickens stated, "What is in store for the poor people on the shores of the Great Salt Lake, what happy delusions they are labouring under now, or what miserable blindness their eyes may be opened them, I do not pretend to say." But following this comment he immediately admitted and largely overcame his prejudice with the statement that although he boarded the ship specifically "to bear testimony against them if they deserved it, as I fully believed they would; to my great astonishment they did not deserve it. . . . I went over the Amazon's side, feeling it impossible to deny that, so far, some remarkable influence had produced a remarkable result, which better known influences have often missed" (p. 226). This just admission of the "rout and overthrow" of his expectations of the Mormons must be regarded as a milestone in Victorian social and religious toleration. Dickens' was the exceptional view, one far more perceptive than that of the *Times*, which on June 5, 1863, had briefly noted the *Amazon's* departure and in the same column commented hostilely on another Mormon sailing from Cardiff earlier in the week. To the *Times*, "all these were believers in the Mormon imposture, and they are taken out to their adopted El Dorado under the protection and guidance of several of their so-called 'Elders.'" Contrasting this reaction was Dickens' *Uncommercial Traveller* essay, a document important because it provides further evidence of Dickens' increased toleration and because it represents an atypical Victorian attitude.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 541.

³⁰"Burton's City of the Saints," *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 115 (1862), p. 95.