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“Strains Which Will Not Soon Be Allowed to Die . . . ”: “The Stranger” and Carthage Jail

Michael Hicks

Four years after his death, James Montgomery (1771–1854), beloved as “The Christian Poet” of the nineteenth century, was celebrated in a leading Methodist journal: “His poetry has stood the test of searching criticism, and he has left some strains which will not soon be allowed to die in silence.”¹ Montgomery himself had been more soberminded and pragmatic in estimating the worth of his own verse. When asked by an attorney which of his poems would survive, he replied, “None, sir,” then added, “unless it be a few of my hymns.”² It would have certainly surprised this Moravian bard to see the fate of one of his more obscure devotional poems, one he probably never meant to be sung. His small work beginning “A poor wayfaring man of grief . . .” travelled to America, was set to a Methodist Episcopal tune, altered in the frontier folk hymn tradition, and finally immortalized by its performance at the Carthage, Illinois, jail. Because of the events surrounding that performance, Latter-day Saints will doubtless preserve and enshrine this poem in song long after Montgomery’s other works have faded.

Himself twice imprisoned (for his politics), James Montgomery wrote in December 1826 the beginnings of a poem he would title “The Stranger and His Friend.” Two months later, he described the occasion of its composition in a letter to a lady friend’s brother:

Except the first verse (composed in the dark in the coach on the morning that I set out from Sheffield to York), the sketch was written with pencil on a scrap of blank paper which I found in my pocket while I was travelling alone in a chaise from Whitby to Scarborough, on that tempestuous Saturday, ten days before Christmas. These stanzas, so inspired by “vapours, clouds, and storms,” on the wild and melancholy

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I am grateful to Dean C. Jessee for suggesting several sources which were of help in preparing this article.

¹*Methodist Quarterly Review* 40 (January 1858): 165.

²Caroline Leonard Goodenough, *High Lights on Hymnists and Their Hymns* (Rochester, Mass.: Published by author, 1931), p. 144.



James Montgomery

Reprinted from *The Poetical Works of James Montgomery*, 4 vols. (Boston: Timothy Bedlington, 1825), vol. 1, frontispiece.

moors along that lofty coast, were afterwards painfully, yet pleasantly, elaborated in my walks during the short stay which I made at Scarborough; and I shall never forget the accomplishment of the fourth verse [which begins, "'Twas night; the floods were out . . . '"], on the height of Oliver's mountain, on a gloomy, threatening afternoon, which naturally made me anticipate the horrors of such a night as is there described.³

Once he had finished the poem, Montgomery, as was his custom, sent copies to friends for their comments. Encouraged by their response, he published the poem sometime in the following months of 1827.⁴ Within a decade the poem was available throughout Britain and America in various editions of his collected works. Ironically, the poet never included the poem among his hymn texts. He intended "The Stranger and His Friend" to stand alone as a devotional narrative.

Montgomery's hymns and poems enjoyed a vogue among all Christian denominations because of their simple portrayal of traditional values in usually clear images and handy rhymes. Hence, his poetry was often reprinted in Christian periodicals and anthologized in verse collections and yearbooks of miscellany such as the *Forget Me Not*.⁵ Although the Latter-day Saints in the 1830s and 1840s were endeavoring to create a Mormon poetry—often by adapting well-known secular lyrics—they too were attracted to Montgomery's work. Indeed, Montgomery became the single most frequently published non-Mormon poet in the newspapers of Nauvoo.⁶

Among the sectarian newspapers that occasionally published Montgomery's poems was the Methodist Episcopal organ of New York, *The Christian Advocate*. A prominent contributor to that paper, and for many years its assistant editor, was a British emigrant churchman and amateur musician, George Coles (1792–1858). In 1835, probably while he was living in Poughkeepsie, New York, Reverend Coles composed a modest, straightforward tune which he named for one of the venerable congregations in New York City, a church where he occasionally guest-preached: "Duane Street." This tune was but one of the dozens he composed, but it is the only one

³James Montgomery to George Rowntree, 28 February 1827, in John Holland and James Everett, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery*, 7 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855–56), 4:191–92.

⁴Montgomery, as was customary, usually published his poems in newspapers or other journals before they were collected into books.

⁵*Forget Me Not: A Christmas and New Year's Present*, ed. Frederic Shaberl (London: R. Ackermann and Co., 1829). At least one of Montgomery's poems, "The Press," made its way into Nauvoo through this source (see *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 1 November 1843).

⁶See, for example, "The Crucifixion" (*Wasp*, 20 August 1842); "Friendship, Love, and Truth" (*Times and Seasons*, 6:927); and "The Grave" (*Nauvoo Neighbor*, 23 August 1843).

that seems to have caught on and that still survives in contemporary hymnody.⁷ The tune has set many texts: “Jesus, Thou from Whom All,”⁸ “Looking unto Jesus,” “Robe of Righteousness,” and “The Hiding-Place”⁹ are but a few. Although it is not clear whether Coles originally had Montgomery’s poem in mind as a text for his tune, “Duane Street” became associated with “The Stranger and His Friend” from its earliest days. The joining of Coles’s music with Montgomery’s words resulted in a song known as “The Stranger,”¹⁰ a ballad which found its way into the American singing school tradition. “The Stranger” became the basis for the song sung by John Taylor at Carthage Jail and eventually transcribed into LDS hymnals as “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief.”

The frontier singing schools of the nineteenth century, which helped the song evolve into its present form, differed sharply from their earlier counterparts. The first singing schools had been founded by eighteenth-century American Protestants who, concerned about slovenly congregational singing habits, wanted to foster the technique of “regular singing” and discourage the “old way of singing.” (Regular singing followed the printed versions of tunes, while the old way toyed with their rhythm, embellished their pitch structures, and freely inflected the tunes according to oral traditions.) The singing schools were meant to curb the oral traditions into more precise and rigid forms bound to the printed page. Schools usually met one or two nights a week for several weeks. During that time, the local congregational chorister taught the rudiments of music-reading and proper vocal technique and rehearsed the choir of students in part-songs, usually hymns, anthems, and fuguing pieces. At the culmination of the school the students gave a public concert.

⁷According to Katherine Smith Diehl, *Hymn Tunes, an Index* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1966), who surveys seventy-eight widely used hymnals of recent years, the tune “Duane Street” appears in only one (see n. 8). “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” both in its text and in its tune, is unique to the LDS hymnal among those indexed in Diehl’s work. It appears as Hymn 153 in the current LDS hymnal.

Although “Duane Street,” his most popular tune, remains rather obscure, Reverend Coles was quite prominent in his day as a lecturer, journalist, and author of several books, including the popular *Heroines of Methodism*, which went through many editions in the second half of the century, and three autobiographical works. A brief summary of Coles’s life and career can be found in Samuel A. Seaman, *Annals of New York Methodism, 1766–1890* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892), pp. 251–52. See also the obituary in *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1858* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1858), pp. 148–49. There is no available account of the composition of “Duane Street.” (Coles’s *Incidents of My Later Years*, which might shed some light, is regrettably missing from its only known location, the Library of Congress.) In *My Youthful Days* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1852), Coles constantly quotes Montgomery, whom he refers to as “my favorite bard” (p. 65).

⁸*Songs of Praise* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926).

⁹*The Baptist Hymn and Tune Book* (Philadelphia: The Bible and Publication Society, 1873), nos. 412, 434, and 527.

¹⁰The Coles–Montgomery song was called “The Stranger,” according to *Original Sacred Harp (Denson Revision)* (Cullman, Ala.: Sacred Harp Publishing Company, 1971), p. 164. I have found no “published” versions of the song under that name. Nearly every publication refers to the Coles–Montgomery song simply as “Duane Street.” Isaac Woodbury’s *Lute of Zion* (1853) names it “Poor Wayfaring Man.”

However, by the late eighteenth century these church-sponsored singing schools were giving way to freelance schools run by itinerant singers, often troubadours who tended to stay closer to the old way of singing. By the early nineteenth century these itinerant singing schools were on the wane in their homeland, New England and the eastern states, but were flourishing in the South and on the frontier. They reached their zenith around midcentury, by which time singing schools had probably become the chief means of disseminating new sacred and devotional songs to frontier religious groups.

While the singing-school masters were roaming through western Illinois, a few of Mormon Nauvoo's leading musicians were attempting to "extend and elevate musical science" in their city.¹¹ Gustavus Hills, professor of music at the University of Nauvoo, sponsored the foundation of a new musical lyceum four days before Christmas, 1841. The lyceum took as its texts Lowell Mason's "Manual of Instruction" and *Porter's Cyclopaedia of Music*, written under Mason's direction.¹² Both of these texts, as well as Mason's *Sacred Harp*, which was later sold at the *Times and Seasons* office,¹³ were part of the Boston Musical Academy's campaign against "unscientific" methods of music instruction and folk-entrenched musical repertoire. But the Musical Lyceum at Nauvoo undoubtedly had an uphill climb ahead. The tunes sung by the Nauvoo Choir reveal that the folk-hymn tradition and singing-school repertoire spurned by Mason's Boston Academy were very much alive in Nauvoo.¹⁴ And the Prophet Joseph Smith, "who organized the first choir in the church . . . was a constant attendant at their singing schools," reports Joseph Young.¹⁵

Popular folk-hymn tune books like B. F. White's *Sacred Harp* (1844), besides bringing together songs for congregational singing, often contained sections "consisting principally of pieces used in singing schools and societies." It was in this section of White's *Sacred Harp* collection that "The Stranger" first saw print, under the title of the tune "Duane Street." As was customary, the melody appeared in the tenor line, framed by a treble harmonization above and a foundational bass line below. On the following page is the tune as it appeared in the *Sacred Harp* (but without its shaped-note notation):

¹¹*Times and Seasons*, 3:666.

¹²Ibid.

¹³See the long-running back-page ads in the *Nauvoo Neighbor* in 1843.

¹⁴See, for example, the Nauvoo Choir and Band concert program published in the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 26 February 1845. The folk-hymn tunes are "Jerusalem," "Denmark," and "Heavenly Vision."

¹⁵Joseph Young, *History of the Organization of the Seventies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Steam Printing Establishment, 1878), p. 15.

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DUANE STREET. L. M. D

Treble by J. T. White.

A musical score for the hymn 'Duane Street'. It consists of two systems of three staves each. The top staff of each system is the vocal line in treble clef, and the bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: 'A poor wayfaring man of grief Hath often pass'd me on my way; Who sued so humbly for re - lief, That I could nev - er answer nay

A musical score for the hymn 'Duane Street', continuing from the previous system. It consists of two systems of three staves each. The top staff of each system is the vocal line in treble clef, and the bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: 'I had not power to ask his name, Whither he went or whence he came. Yet there was something in his eye That won my love, I knew not why

From the Sacred Harp

This tune strongly suggests yet differs from the tune sung by John Taylor at Carthage and throughout his life:



A poor, way - far - ing man of grief Hath often crossed me on my way;



Who sued so humbly for re - lief, That I could never answer "Nay."



I had not power to ask his name, Whither he went, or whence he came;



Yet there was something in his eye That won my love, I knew not why.

Though their keys are a half-step apart (A–A flat) and their meters are different, the similarities in pitch and phrase structure are certainly strong enough to identify "Duane Street" with "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief" as it appears in the LDS hymnal. The differences may be accounted for in several ways. As with all folk music, the printed versions of these frontier hymns were often only general guides for performance, rough patterns with which great liberties were taken. Even significant differences in meter such as exist between "Duane Street" (4/4) and "Poor Wayfaring Man" (6/8) were not uncommon in song variants. "All Is Well," for example, which appears also in White's *Sacred Harp* in 4/4 appeared just two years earlier in the anonymous *Revival Melodies* in 6/8.¹⁶ (The same tune, appearing presently in LDS hymnals as "Come, Come Ye Saints," even mixes 3/4 and 4/4.) To this day among Sacred Harp circles, the modern descendants of the singing schools and harbingers of the old way of singing, no printed musical text is considered the arbiter of singing practice.

¹⁶See David W. Music, "A New Source for the Tune 'All is Well,'" *The Hymn* 29 (April 1978): 76–82.

Although I have found no direct evidence that John Taylor learned the song in a singing school, there is reason to conclude he probably learned the song by ear. First, then as now, the great majority of the folk-song repertoire of which “The Stranger” was a part was transmitted orally. Second, White’s *Sacred Harp* was not published until late in June 1844, after the June jailing at Carthage. It is conceivable that a loose-leaf printing of the song could have made its way into Nauvoo earlier than that; but, again, with folk music the printed version usually appears after the oral version. Faithful reliance on the printed page is a recent phenomenon in most sacred and devotional singing (despite the efforts of our Protestant progenitors), and among authentic folksingers it remains a rare phenomenon.

In any case, what John Taylor sang at Carthage Jail was no doubt sung from memory on that occasion. Songs, like rumors, have a way of changing in the transmission; the whole history of music confirms this. One can only speculate on the embellishments and variations he himself may have contributed to the song he learned in Nauvoo. But, perhaps not surprisingly, in view of the influx of British culture at Nauvoo, the flowing triadic melody of “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief” seems to have a distinctly British flavor, peculiarly reminiscent of English and Irish folk and show tunes.

We may never know exactly how the altered Coles tune set with Montgomery’s poem entered the Mormon musical scene at Nauvoo. Certain details of its performance at Carthage, however, need clarification—as the secondary literature reveals. Some or all of these points of detail, frequently a little clouded by misunderstanding, appear in every secondary recounting of the Carthage singing episode I have encountered:¹⁷

1. The song was “popular” in Nauvoo.
2. The song was initially sung at the request of either the prisoners en masse or Joseph Smith himself.
3. The song was sung to “cheer up” the prisoners.
4. John Taylor sang “all fourteen verses.”
5. When he had finished singing, John Taylor was asked by Joseph (or Hyrum) to sing the song again.

¹⁷Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 81; Ivan J. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1982), p. 613; Pearson H. Corbett, *Hyrum Smith—Patriarch* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), p. 417; Frances M. Gibbons, *Joseph Smith, Martyr, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), p. 346; Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), p. 414; E. Cecil McGavin, *Nauvoo the Beautiful* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1946), pp. 130, 136; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), p. 315; M. R. Werner, *Brigham Young* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), pp. 177–78; and Ray B. West, Jr., *Kingdom of the Saints: The Story of Brigham Young and the Mormons* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), pp. 141–42.

A careful reading of John Taylor's own published account of the episode and other relevant documents clears up some of these points and gives a fairly sharp picture of what happened.

Was the song, in fact, "popular" in Nauvoo? Determining the popularity of any song or piece of music is always vexing to the musicologist. With so-called *serious* music there are some clues: one may examine concert programs, newspaper reviews, publication statistics, and so on. With folk music there are no such indices of use. "The Stranger" does not appear in verse, nor is it mentioned by any of its known titles in newspaper accounts of musical events in Nauvoo. Neither can I find any evidence the song was published anywhere prior to the Carthage jailing. These facts do not prove that the song was not popular, but they cannot confirm it was.

If we look for evidence in Taylor's account, we find only the barest implication that the song was well known: John Taylor knew it and sang it twice, both times, apparently, by request, as I will show later. The men at Carthage Jail that afternoon may have been more or less representative of the tastes of the Nauvoo public at that time. But John Taylor relates simply that he sang "a song, that had lately been introduced into Nauvoo."¹⁸ In light of the known evidence, all we can safely say is that the song was fairly new at Nauvoo, very popular at Carthage Jail on 27 June 1844, and that it grew in popularity in the coming years.

Did John Taylor intend the song to *cheer* the others? Not exactly. The song, as he explains it, was more or less an expression of their common anxieties. As songs at their best always do, this ballad distilled the sensations of the moment into a simple tale with an infectious tune:

We all of us felt unusually dull and languid, with a remarkable depression of spirits. In consonance with those feelings I sang a song, that had lately been introduced into Nauvoo, entitled, 'A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief', etc.

The song is pathetic, and the tune quite plaintive, and was very much in accordance with our feelings at the time for our spirits were all depressed, dull and gloomy and surcharged with indefinite ominous forebodings.¹⁹

It may also be that the prisoners strongly identified with that verse most relevant to their situation:

¹⁸Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1970), 7:101. Hereafter cited as *History of the Church*.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

In prison I saw him next, condemned
 To meet a traitor's doom at morn;
 The tide of lying tongues I stemmed,
 And honored him 'mid shame and scorn.
 My friendship's utmost zeal to try,
 He asked if I for him would die;
 The flesh was weak; my blood ran chill;
 But the free spirit cried, "I will!"

Indeed, according to the amalgamated *History of the Church* account of that afternoon, Willard Richards used language and sentiments similar to that expressed in this stanza:

"If you are condemned to be hung for treason, I will be hung in your stead, and you should go free." Joseph said, "You cannot." The doctor replied, "I will."²⁰

The others present that afternoon certainly had demonstrated, in deed if not in word, the same willingness and "utmost zeal." If the song cheered them at all, it was in its promise of eventual revelation and reward as tokens for their sacrifice.

The notion that John Taylor sang "all fourteen verses" arises from the peculiar quatrain versification given in the *History of the Church*.²¹ The song and the Montgomery poem both consist of seven eight-line stanzas. Pyper, and Cornwall echoing him, both err in stating that the original poem was published in four eight-line stanzas.²² (They were probably thinking of its appearance in the *LDS Psalmsody*, where it did have only four verses.) But their error raises the worthwhile question of how many verses John Taylor might actually have sung. The original *Sacred Harp* printing (1844) gives only the first verse. One of its direct descendants, the *Hesperian Harp* (1848), gives five verses. An 1883 version also has four verses.²³ It was apparently not uncommon for singers to drop some of the inner verses as long as the climactic final verse could round off the text. John Taylor, singing from memory a song probably learned by ear, may well have sung less on that occasion than the complete text printed in the current LDS hymnal.

However many verses he sang, the chronology of their performance remains unclear. Willard Richards mentions the song only once—after the 3:15 P.M. notation in his diary. The attack on the jail, of course, according to John Taylor's bullet-stopped watch, took place at

²⁰Ibid., 6:616.

²¹Ibid., 6:614–15.

²²J. Spencer Cornwall, *Stories of Our Mormon Hymns* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1961), p. 172.

²³J. P. McCaskey, ed., *Franklin Square Song Collection*, 8 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1881–85), 3:42.

about 5:27 P.M. Wilford Woodruff, supervising in the compilation of the *History of the Church* in 1856, proposed that John Taylor as the only living survivor write a definitive account. In a letter written to John Taylor in the summer of that year, Wilford Woodruff specifically asked him to clear up the particulars of when the repetition was sung.

You sang 'A poor wayfaring Man of Grief' at quarter past 3 p.m. of the 27th; was it Joseph or Hyrum who requested you to repeat it? I have always understood that you no sooner finished singing it the second time than the firing commenced; if so there must have been a considerable interval between the two exercises. What were the facts?²⁴

John Taylor, in his final account, relates only that the space between the two singings was "a lapse of some time."²⁵ So the song appears to have been repeated not immediately after the first time through, as is sometimes suggested, but rather at some unspecified time within the slightly more than two hours that followed before the shooting began.

It is surely not the intrinsic worth of the song that assures its durability among Latter-day Saints, but rather its connection with the Prophet's death. It has gained its reputation as a song endeared to Joseph and requested by him in his last hours. The evidence, however, weighs against this belief.

There are, of course, essentially two sources for first-hand information on the singing incident at Carthage: the two survivors of the attack, Willard Richards and John Taylor. Willard Richards, in his diary of that afternoon, records simply, "Taylor sang 'poor wayfaring man of grief'."²⁶ When the diary was being prepared for publication in the mid-1850s, the statement was added that Joseph requested a repeat of the song. It was known that the song had been repeated, and legend was already ascribing the request it be sung again to Joseph Smith.

John Taylor endeavored to set the record straight in a commemorative discourse on the tenth anniversary of the Martyrdom. His own recollection, as the principle figure in the whole affair, was that *Hyrum* had requested the song both times: "I remember Bro Hyrum requested me to sing a poor way faring man of grief which I done he requested it the 2nd time."²⁷ Two years after this discourse, John Taylor prepared his extensive written recollection of the incidents at

²⁴Wilford Woodruff to John Taylor, 30 June 1856. Manuscript is in possession of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; hereafter cited as Church Archives.

²⁵*History of the Church*, 7:101.

²⁶Willard Richards Diary, 27 June 1844, Church Archives.

²⁷John Taylor, Discourse of 27 June 1854, transcript in Church Archives.

Carthage. There he fails to mention Hyrum's initial request but gives further details on his second request:

After a lapse of some time, Brother Hyrum requested me again to sing that song. I replied, 'Brother Hyrum, I do not feel like singing;' when he remarked, 'Oh, never mind; commence singing, and you will get the spirit of it.' At his request I did so.²⁸

It would not have been uncharacteristic of Joseph to ask for a song. Indeed, writes Benjamin F. Johnson, Joseph was fond of various informal entertainments, "but to call for the Singing of one or more of his Favorite Son[g]s was More frequent."²⁹ In the case of "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief," however, there is no evidence Joseph did so, much less that this song was his "favorite hymn" or any other such appellation as occasionally attaches itself to it.³⁰

Even so, Mormons need not diminish the song's place in their hearts. By whatever name it is known, "The Stranger" still occupies a crucial moment in one of the most solemn hours in Mormon history. Its tune brings to modern tastes the flavor of a rich and bygone devotional tradition. More importantly, its poetic text remains one of the finest expositions of the principles Jesus expounded, and to which Montgomery referred in his superscription to "The Stranger and His Friend":

"Ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

²⁸*History of the Church*, 7:101–2.

²⁹B. F. Johnson to George Gibbs, published in Dean R. Zimmermann, *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1976), p. 19.

³⁰See McGavin, *Nauvoo the Beautiful*, pp. 130, 136.