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Thoughts on the 150th Anniversary of the Church in the British Isles

Elder Marion D. Hanks

I have had a serious and ill-disguised affection for Britain for many years. Whether that comes because my ancestors were born in Hartley Bridge, Gloucester, England, and Hills Head, Lanarkshire and Fifeshire, Scotland, or from the wonderful blessing of having lived personally in the land for a time, I cannot say. I do not know whether it is heredity or environment. My feeling is that it is a blend of these elements, a blend which confirms me an anglophile for sure, and one incapable of not feeling deep and great emotion when I think warmly and fondly of my ties with the old countries.

What I will do in these moments is reminisce a bit and seek to share briefly with you just a little of what England means to me and calls to memory when I think of her and what she has done, and the influence and impact in my life and to my family, my Church, my community, my country, in the course of her own elegant history,

Her lovely language and her colorful vernacular,
her regional and social-class dialects,
her great literature, and
her parks and greens and squares and roundabouts
and buses and taxis,
and trains;
her theater, her humor;
The verdure and the rugged grandeur of the south coasts,
the heather of Scotland,
the rock walls,
the castles,
the bogs and the beauty.
Americans should be aware of Britain's illustrious history,
her legacy to us concerning the rights of men,
and the common law,
and the inns of court,
and her system of justice,
And her very special people!

Marion D. Hanks is a member of the Presidency of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This talk was originally presented at "The Church in the British Isles, 1837-1987," a symposium held at Brigham Young University, 16 January 1987.

Our ties with Britain are and should be strong. For many years, for centuries, the Union Jack announced her formidable presence across the earth. Britannia ruled the waves; her colonies and her influence reached across the world. Colonialism contributed to civilizing and socializing many lands. We know mostly its flaws and failings and tragedies these days through the movie portrayals, but there is more to be said, and much that is said teaches us to be a little more thoughtful before we criticize or condemn.

LANGUAGE

The language and the vernacular and the dialects of Britain are exciting and stimulating to me. I could not listen to Peter Bates pray tonight, or to any British person speak, without a real sense of identification. I used to love to walk down Exhibition Road in London holding Richard's hand. He was less than two when we arrived, and he grew greatly during those early years, sharing not much of his father, but some, as we walked down the road to South Kensington and sometimes even over to Harrod's. I tried to share my amazement and the appropriate sense of personal limitation that I felt as we passed through those seas of faces of all hues and varieties. You never could tell what to expect. From an African or Indian face sometimes came the mellifluous outpouring of Oxfordian English. Astonishing! Or perhaps it issued from the roundsman delivering milk with his horse-drawn or electric-powered cart from which came our daily portion, he never comprehending how one house could dispose of the quantities of milk he brought. He did not understand the consumption capacity of a houseful of missionaries and children. We listened with fascination as a cab driver spoke the special language of the London street. The message from the Cockney workmen came to be decipherable after a while, but not easily. There were people from across the earth, and from Liverpool and the north of England, and Wales and Scotland—oh, those Scots!

The first words our missionary son heard at the door after his initial approach in Scotland were, "I dinna ken." The lady did not understand, and neither did he what she was saying. In my office I keep a delightful little engraved glass from Glasgow, the words speaking to me the language of my pioneer grandmother who lived nearly to the age of one hundred. She spent her last decade in my mother's home. Grandmother spoke of Hills Head and Paisley, her girlhood and joining the Church, and being invited never again to be in her mother's and father's home while she was a Mormon. On the little glass in my office are these beautiful engraved words: "Lang may your lum reek." "Long may your chimney smoke" is the message of good cheer and good wishes for warmth and food and future well being.

Even when one begins to hear the language of Britain more clearly, the words are not always the same, as, for instance, a few words I read in a newspaper article by Thomas Cheatham entitled “Why Can’t the British Speak English?”

You can’t get gas for the car in England, the garbageman never comes and it’s impossible to find a restaurant with dessert on the menu.

For gas, garbageman and dessert, read “petrol,” “dustman” and “sweets.”

Babies wear nappies, not diapers, sleep in cots, not cribs, and put on jumpers, not sweaters, before they go to the common or green (park) to play. You bath, not bathe, a baby in Britain.

Cheatham goes on to point out other differences between English and American usage: “You don’t vacuum your apartment, you Hoover the flat. With luck, the building will have a lift (elevator), a porter (janitor) and roundsmen (deliverymen) who bring goods in their lorries (trucks).” And so forth and so forth.

LITERATURE

For the first year of my college life, several nights a week, I chipped ice and served fountain drinks, and on occasion acted as bouncer, and cleaned up and walked home at one in the morning from the downtown dance place where many of my fellow classmates in the English department at the University of Utah had been dancing with their girls (and mine). During these eventful evenings, I would endeavor each night to memorize fifty lines of Shakespeare to satisfy the expectations of Dr. Sherman Neff in that upper-division English class I had naively entered. Sherman Neff, then in advanced years, had studied at Harvard with the great George Lyman Kittredge. He was one of the memorable teachers of English literature, and he could not recite the lines without uncontrollable exultation, or sometimes tears. I still seek repose on occasion repeating to myself the magnificent soliloquy from *Henry IV*:

How many thousand of my poorest subjects
 Are at this hour asleep! O sleep, O gentle sleep!
 Nature’s soft nurse, how have I frightened thee,
 That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down,
 And steep my senses in forgetfulness?
 Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,
 Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,
 And hush’d with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,
 Than in the perfum’d chambers of the great,
 Under the canopies of costly state,
 And lull’d with sound of sweetest melody?

(pt. 2, act 3, sc. 1, lines 4–14)

That magnificent piece ends with better known lines:

Canst thou, O partial sleep, give then repose
 To the wet [sea-boy] in an hour so rude,
 And in the calmest and most stillest night,
 With all appliances and means to boot,
 Deny it to a king? Then happy low, lie down!
 Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown!

(*Henry IV*, pt. 2, act 3, sc. 1, lines 26–31)

Missionaries arriving in London in our time were exposed, in their orientation period, not only to current local mores and missionary methods, but to something of Britain's history, and especially her marvelous heritage of literature. In their initial indoctrination sessions in our mission home, they heard in a brief hour or so, many of them for the first time, the magnificence of Shakespeare, listening to the voices of great British actors reading the lines, a copy of which they held in their own hands, from such magnificent moments as King Henry the Fifth's powerful address to his troops the night before the Battle of Crispin, St. Crispin's Day.

That moving moment ends in the British camp. The king is approached by Salisbury who tells him the French armies are about ready to charge. The king answers: "All things are ready, if our minds be so" (*Henry V*, act 4, sc. 3, line 71).

I cannot believe that any human, young or old, even ill disposed to Shakespeare by some insensitive teacher, could resist for long the power of King Henry's charge to his troops before Harfleur. You must know something of it. It begins:

Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more;
 Or close the wall up with our English dead!

(*Henry V*, act 3, sc. 1, lines 1–2)

But more than the wars commend the Bard. I still chuckle through the night with Falstaff and repeat with Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*:

Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous
 That there shall be no more cakes and ale?

(act 2, sc. 3, lines 114–16)

And I still sorrow over missed opportunities and remember loved friends with some little known lines from Brutus spoken on the field of battle as he salutes his dead friend Cassius, who has taken his life mistakenly believing the battle lost to Antony and Octavius. Brutus looks upon his friend and says:

Friends, I owe moe tears
 To this dead man than you shall see me pay.
 I shall find time, Cassius; I shall find time.

(*Julius Caesar*, act 5, sc. 3, lines 101–3)

During an occasional political race I quote the Bard: “There’s small choice ’twixt rotten apples” (*The Taming of the Shrew*, act 1, sc. 1, line 26).

I would fondly wish my own and all other people’s children could be so fortunate as to have such fare, and Byron and Milton and Tennyson, upon which to correct the imbalance, the less nutritious material we sometimes permit inside our heads through our ears and our eyes.

HUMOR

The humor of the British is legendary. One or two wry remembered examples must do. The staid London *Times* never acknowledged making an error, or that there was a possibility she could do so. The paper printed an obituary one day which the reputed decedent read and disputed. He called the *Times* to register his complaint. “Oh yes,” said the person at the *Times*, “and from where are you calling?”

During the year of the celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of America’s Declaration of Independence, Maxine and I walked through an exhibit at Greenwich saluting the heroes of the revolutionary incident from the British standpoint. On display—though it was not very funny then, the effect of it two hundred years later certainly is—was a letter from one Captain W. G. Evelynn, of the Fourth Foot Regiment of the British Army, describing his colonial American foes to his wife:

They are the most absolute cowards on the face of the earth, yet they are just now worked up to such a degree of enthusiasm and madness that they are easily persuaded that they must be invincible.

You get the feeling that those “absolute cowards” were making it a little tough for the Fourth Foot Regiment. You have to wonder what effect America’s repeated celebrations—for the Declaration of Independence, the Statue of Liberty, and the Constitution—have on the British now. With their challenging problems, the British probably don’t need to be reminded time and again of the historic humiliation two centuries ago.

But I was taken and touched and not surprised by the good humor of Ivor Richard, Britain’s chief delegate to the United Nations, who observed in one sentence both the British feeling and the facts of history:

You are celebrating—and we are tolerating—certain events which happened two hundred years ago which, I hasten to add, we now recognize as probably irreversible.

For two hundred years we have behaved like fond family with Britain, and for that long have been occasionally gently twitting her. One reported encounter at Versailles in 1797 involved the ambassadors from France and Britain, and Benjamin Franklin from the United States. The British ambassador raised his glass in a toast to King George III,

who, he said, like the sun cast the beneficent and warming glow of his splendid countenance across the earth. The French ambassador toasted Louis XVI, who, he said, like the moon, cast the beneficent and blessed light of his countenance across the world. Benjamin Franklin slowly stood and toasted George Washington, who, he said, like Joshua of old, commanded the sun and the moon to stand still, and they did.

BRITAIN'S LEGACY

Our legacy from this land? We salute Britain with love and thank God and our motherland for what she bequeathed us in her common law (had I gained nothing more than that from those years of toil in law school, it would be a marvelous blessing), her Magna Carta, and the work and writings of her great jurists and lawyers. The common law is judges' law, law that came from court cases as opposed, basically, to the Roman law, the civil law which was canonized and came in statutory form. The common law grew, and that was our heritage. It became our basic law.

We salute Britain for her incalculable contribution to the Church, and for the foundations of personal heritage upon which many of us stand. We salute her for what she means now and here to us and our own family, who learned as little children to appreciate and respect and love another country and another people beyond their own native shores.

It is to be remembered that the American colonists were citizens of Britain, most of them only gradually and over years entertaining thoughts of separation. Wise men in England sought earnestly to avoid losing the colonies. But an arbitrary king, a parliament that would not listen, and Providence ruled otherwise, and the foundations of freedom were laid.

Mellen Chamberlain relates in his book *John Adams, the Statesman of the American Revolution* a conversation he had with a Yankee soldier sixty-seven years after the battle of Concord and Lexington:

Q: My histories tell me that you men of the revolution took up arms against intolerable oppressions.

A: What were they, oppressions? I didn't feel them.

Q: What, were you not oppressed by the Stamp Act?

A: I never saw one of those stamps . . . I am certain I never paid a penny for one of them.

Q: Well, what then about the Tea Tax?

A: Tea Tax? I never drank the stuff; the boys threw it all overboard.

Q: Then I suppose you have been reading Harrington or Sidney and Locke about the eternal principle of liberty.

A: Never heard of them. We read only the Bible, the Catechism, Watt's Psalms and Hymns, and the Almanack.

Q: Well then what was the matter? And what did you mean in going to the fight?

A: Young man, what we meant in going for the redcoats was this: we had always governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn't mean we should.

I went once to Williamsburg, Virginia, with Richard L. Evans and Cannon Young, the great Church architect, with whom I was associated in the leadership of Temple Square. We were pursuing ideas for the Visitors' Center then in contemplation and now standing in the northwest corner of that great ten acres. In Williamsburg a film was used to illustrate the intense conflict in the hearts of loyal colonists who loved their homeland but who valued freedom more. Let me give you the briefest sketch of that film, which I presume and hope is still being shown.

I saw my beloved friend Richard Evans weep openly only twice over many years, once at the funeral of one of my choice missionaries who had grown up in the ward with Brother Evans's sons. He came home a hero in a coffin from a tragic war. Elder Evans and I spoke at his funeral. We wept together as his missionary companions carried the coffin of our beloved young brother into that overflowing chapel. Richard also wept at the conclusion of the film at Williamsburg.

The film began with a wonderful young plantation owner, perhaps in his late thirties or early forties. He was with his elderly patrician mother at the graveside of his father, buried in the designated grounds on their Virginia plantation. He was bidding his mother farewell as she departed for England. They are Tories, English.

The evolution of this young man from patriotic Englishman to free American was so tastefully and marvelously done that I could not forget. Step by step, incident by incident, indignity upon indignity, the feeling grew that America must be a free nation. Scenes in the House of Burgesses, in the taverns, in public meetings, radiated the rising tempo. The concluding scene occurs outside the beautiful House of Burgesses in Williamsburg where the young father, at a recess before the final vote was taken that would commit Virginia to the cause of freedom with the other colonies, approaches his son on the greensward. The father puts his arm around the shoulders of his boy and explains to him the meaning of the vote he is about to cast in the Virginia legislature and the consequences for his son that would surely attend it. "It is your future I am voting," he says, "and I want you to tell me how you want me to cast that vote."

The lad, early in his teens, replies, "Father, I have already cast my vote." At that moment a rough voice shouts, "Fall in," and the lad picks up a rude musket and moves into the ranks of boys and men marching off to meet the redcoats of the British Crown. An Englishman had become an American as a colonial lad marched off to fight and die for the right to be free.

Several years ago a British scholar addressed the students of Brigham Young University at a forum assembly. President Holland, sharing our love for Britain, was kind enough to provide a copy of that talk for me. Here is an excerpt:

Freedom is indivisible and the enemies of freedom are universal. Just as the Pilgrim fathers came to America to live their free life, and your Mormon converts until recently came to Salt Lake City to live their free life, let us remember that the history of the English-speaking peoples is still interwoven, that our liberties are yours and yours are ours, and that only by recalling our great histories and what we have jointly done for the freedom of mankind will our two peoples combine to defend liberty in the future. Compared with this great charge, our differences are as minimal as those that exist among close relatives in the best-run families. Britain is neither down nor out.

Differences, yes, but minimal, yes. And for both the United States and England remains the heritage and the support. A line from one of the venerated men in our educational history, Nicholas Murray Butler, speaks to my heart:

It has never been and is not now possible for me to land in England or to be on English, or rather, British, soil without a feeling of exultation. It must be the ancestral blood which manifests itself in instinct and emotion, but England and Scotland are in my case the old homeland where everything seems familiar and upon which everything that happened in the world for hundreds of years seems chiefly to be built.

And then a line or two from Shakespeare that reach my heart about England:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea.

(*Richard II*, act 2, sc. 1, lines 40–46)

Can some of you hear Selvoy Boyer warmly declaring his love for the “great green island,” waving his bent finger at the congregation? With him we say with Browning in “Home Thoughts from Abroad”:

Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brush-wood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!

I have to share, and with it say a multitude of things I am not going to say, the contents of a note I wrote at a meeting at Romford, England, 16 December 1962:

Brother Mosdell sustained the officers. Brother Vousden spoke of tithing, the budget, the building, the fast offering, and the “stiffnecked” people who resist the Lord. Brother Edmunds spoke and Brother Ferrari and then a bobby, a British police officer, a handsome, rugged convert. He told the story of “a godly woman, a wonderful woman dying in the hospital, so much pain in her face. She repeated the 23rd Psalm. As she finished, the pain passed and she said, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth,’ and then she died. There was a boy there, not as old as Joseph Smith was. He wondered as the woman died but did nothing more. He did not cry. He did not pray. That boy now wishes that he had. I am that boy, and the godly woman was my mother. A few months ago the missionaries knocked on our door. The Lord blessed me and made known to me the truth. I know that God lives and this is His Church. I know that my Redeemer lives.”

Thank God for Britain, and faith, and vision, and courage almost incredible to me: a convert grandmother who in her late teens was told by her father that her name would never again be spoken in the household and who emigrated and then waited thirty or forty years to go back on a short-term mission, not knowing whether she would be accepted. No answer had come to her importunings. Her father stood at the corner of the fence, his white hair blowing in the breeze, her stern father. She walked that last block, her heart in her throat, her palpitations leaving her hardly able to speak. He opened his arms and said, “Ellen, my Ellen,” and they were reconciled. She stayed and taught her family and came home to live another forty years in her adopted land.

We love Britain for a lot of reasons. I am grateful for the thinking and the reading and the feeling I have been privileged to enjoy in anticipation of this tender moment. The shortness of the journey and the closeness of the ties we have with our past was illustrated for me as I read a brief history of the Church in Kent County, England, prepared by the local people there. The following entry is recorded:

On the 19th of July 1855 President William H. Kimball wrote to the editor of the *Millennial Star* a letter in which he mentioned meeting, at the end of June, Elder Broderick, the Travelling Elders and Priesthood of the Kent Conference in a new meeting room built expressly for the Saints in Faversham. He also mentioned sending Elders to labour in the neighbourhood of Tunbridge Wells. Later in the year he was reporting that the Priesthood were in good spirits.

In 1962 as president of the British Mission I sent good missionaries into Tunbridge Wells to labor in the area and to organize a branch. The last I learned, the priesthood were in good spirits. May there “always be an England.” In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.