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The Gathering of the Australian Saints in the 1850s

Marjorie Newton

The gathering of the Australian Saints in the 1850s offers a fruitful field for comparison with the work of historians on the emigration of the British Saints in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. While the British Mormon emigration to America must be viewed in context as part of a larger population movement, making it difficult to isolate motives, the Australian Mormon emigration was against the larger population movement. The doctrine of the gathering made The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints unique in colonial Australia, as the missionaries recruited converts to help build their Zion in North America and led a miniemigration out of the Australian colonies in a period when the tide was flowing into the country. Although the number of Australian converts was extremely small in comparison with those from Britain, detailed examination of the known Australian converts makes possible a "microcosm" approach which helps illumine the larger picture.

Australia in the 1850s was not a unified nation but a group of British colonies scattered around the perimeter of the island continent—an island the same size as the continental United States. Each colony was governed by British law and peopled overwhelmingly by British settlers. Consequently each had a culture and tradition almost completely British. Mormonism first reached Australia not from America, but from Britain, as a by-product of the mission of the Twelve to England in 1840–41. There were several Mormon immigrants in Australia in the 1840s besides William Barrett and Andrew Anderson, the two best known. Despite their efforts, the Australian mission was not formally opened until the arrival of the first American elders, John Murdock and Charles W. Wandell, on 31 October 1851.

The 1850s saw the greatest success in the Australian Mission in the nineteenth century. Between 1853 and 1859, eight small companies of Saints sailed for California from various ports in New South Wales and Victoria. Although only 452 Saints are known to have emigrated from Australia during the 1850s, they were choice stock—among them

Marjorie Newton lives in New South Wales. Most of the material in this article is drawn from her University of Sydney master’s thesis, “Southern Cross Saints: The Mormon Church in Australia.”
Joseph Ridges, who was to build the original Tabernacle organ, and Charles Stapley, whose great-grandson, Elder Delbert L. Stapley of the Council of the Twelve, was to return to Australia a century later to organize the first stake of the Church in the land where his forebears were converted to the gospel.

The whole question of the effects of the Mormon gathering on the missions of the Church appears to have been misunderstood by many historians who frequently refer to the great weakening it caused in the overseas missions in the nineteenth century. However, the question of whether the gathering weakened the branches of the Australasian or any other mission in the nineteenth century is quite irrelevant. There was never any intention of establishing permanent units of the Church overseas before the beginning of the twentieth century, except perhaps in Polynesia. The gathering was, as most historians recognize, as essential and basic a doctrine as repentance and baptism. Church leaders regarded it as a commandment and duty for all converts. The missionaries were sent with explicit instructions to preach, baptize, and teach their converts to flee out of Babylon to Zion, a place of physical and spiritual safety. Brigham Young made it plain that the commandment also applied to the Australian converts:

On the subject of the gathering, you are aware that the spirit and word to scattered Israel is, “come home to the valleys of the mountains, as fast as circumstances will permit.” Of course the Saints in New South Wales, and countries adjacent will wend their way here, at every feasible opportunity.

That the Australian Mission and its branches were never intended to be permanent, growing units of the Church is clear from Brigham Young’s instructions to Augustus Farnham, Australian mission president:

You will, however, organize and regulate matters in the most judicious manner for the continuance of the work, but gather out the Saints and bring them with you as far as you shall be able to do so, leaving a sufficient number to continue the work. We find it best to gather out all the Saints as fast as it can be done consistently, leaving only labouring elders in the field.

Because of its emphasis on a specific place and a physical city of Zion, the Mormon gathering became open to misinterpretation by the “Gentiles,” especially when the practice of polygamy became known. The charge that, from motives of lust, the Mormon missionaries traveled abroad or to the eastern United States recruiting young women for their Utah harems was commonplace, even in Australia. A second—and far more credible—thesis looked at the motives, not of the missionaries, but of the Mormon converts and asserted that they “gathered” with an eye to economic advantage rather than from purely religious motives. This theory is still very much alive, and an examination of the Australian
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gathering from this point of view may also throw light on the Mormon gathering as a whole.

British historian Phillip A. M. Taylor has examined in considerable detail the motives of the Mormon emigrants. Taylor lists four theories or explanations of the Mormon gathering. The first, or what Taylor calls the “official” version, is that the Saints were “gathering” rather than simply emigrating, that is, they were being obedient to what they regarded as a commandment from the Lord, and that spiritual or religious motives prevailed. The opposite point of view, which appeared very early, is that people became “converted” to Mormonism in order to take advantage of Mormon immigration assistance and the cheap land available to them in America. A third theory is that there may have been a mixture of motives, but that in any case the Mormon emigration was governed by conditions within the Church in America, including the amount of financial assistance available. A final theory is that, after the initial Mormon emigration, the Mormon converts in America infected friends and relatives at home with the desire to emigrate—the “contagion” theory. As Taylor is quick to recognize, these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. While admitting that it is impossible to accurately ascertain the motives of the nineteenth-century converts, Taylor obviously feels that strands of all these motives—personal and family, economic, political, and religious—were mingled in most of the Mormon emigrants. Taylor also shows that Mormon immigration propaganda made an economic as well as religious appeal, with leaders often implying and occasionally explicitly stating that European Saints would find better economic conditions in America, while also giving realistic warnings of the hardships that must be endured.

Studies of the surviving Australian branch membership records have shown that, contrary to the popular stereotype, there were actually more male than female converts in Australia in the nineteenth century. As in Britain, the majority of the converts were from the working class, although in Australia, with its greater opportunities for upward social mobility, there were more middle class members than in Britain. Of the working-class component, most were, as in Britain, from the “respectable” working classes, many being tradesmen rather than general laborers. Unlike the mainly urban and native-born converts in the British Mission, the majority of Australian converts before 1869 were from rural areas, and of the adult members in the Australian Mission in the nineteenth century only 24 percent were native born. The greater proportion—almost 70 percent (96 percent for the decade of the 1850s)—had been born in the British Isles and had migrated to Australia. Only two LDS converts have been positively identified as exconvicts.

It is estimated that between 45 and 55 percent of the nineteenth-century Australian converts “gathered,” a somewhat lower percentage
than for Britain if Taylor’s estimate of the British numbers is correct, or
a similar percentage if the figures estimated by Richard L. Evans and
William Mulder are correct. The Australian gathering reached a peak
of 62 percent during the decade of the 1850s.

The table below lists the Australian companies that sailed for
California in the 1850s. From missionary journals, letters to presiding
authorities, arrival notices in the Deseret News, etc., we know the
numbers in the various companies and the names of most of the
emigrants.

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While figures for the Australian Mormon emigration cannot be
superimposed on the graph Phillip A. M. Taylor devised for British
emigration, owing to the small numbers, the shape of a separate graph of
the Australian emigration shows an extraordinary resemblance to the
British graph (see figures 1 and 2 on page seventy-one).

There was no immediate correlation between economic conditions
in the various Australian colonies and those in Great Britain in that
period. For instance, the Cotton Famine in Lancashire in the early 1860s
did not affect employment in Australia in the same period, though there
were depressions in New South Wales in 1858 and in the 1860s, largely
caused by drought. The Australian graph effectively confirms Taylor’s
finding that periods of depression in Britain did not uniformly lift the rate
of British Mormon emigration to Utah. In other words, the converts were
not simply seeking an escape from grinding poverty at home. On the
other hand, a comparison of the two graphs does suggest that the same
forces were affecting both the British and Australian converts, and the
common denominator was the Church in Utah. Taylor speculates about
the effect of Church assistance on the peaks and lows of emigration, but
Australian lows appear for the same periods, and there was no Church
assistance to Australian converts whatsoever after an initial
unauthorized attempt in 1854. It seems a logical conclusion that the
fluctuations in the migration were caused more by events in Utah than by
any other factor. Taylor has accounted for this, and the same factors apply
Fig. 1. Mormon emigration from Great Britain, 1853-59

Fig. 2. Mormon emigration from Australia, 1853-59
equally well to the Australian situation. The uncertain state of matters in Utah following the “Utah War” and the consequent dearth of missionaries in both Australia and Great Britain were major causes of the reduction in the flow of emigrants.

Taylor has pointed out that many Church leaders urged the economic as well as spiritual rewards the Saints would reap by gathering to Zion. Writing from Australia, Charles Wandell did not scruple to hold out frankly economic inducements to encourage the British Saints to gather directly to America instead of traveling to the Australian goldfields in the hope of getting a “fit-out” for Zion. In a long letter to the *Millennial Star*, he pointed out that while labor was better paid in Australia than in England, it was not so well paid in Australia as in America. Above all, he wrote, “America gives away her lands for the merest trifle, here the Government monopolizes the land for speculative purposes.”

There is no trace of economic inducement to gather in the teachings of the other early missionaries to the Australian converts. Augustus Farnham preached repeatedly on the gathering. His sermons stress the need for obedience to the counsel of the First Presidency and the imminence of terrible judgments on the Australian colonies and the consequent wisdom of removing to Zion as soon as possible. His counselor, William Hyde, echoes Farnham, adding to the reasons for emigrating the necessity of receiving the temple ordinances. Farnham also speaks of the need to gather to attend the temple: “We would again entreat the Saints to use every possible effort in their power to flee the confines of Babylon. . . . For if ye gather not with the Saints and are not administered to in the holy ordinances of the House of God . . . you cannot attain unto that blessing, honour, glory and exaltation that awaits such as are thus privileged.”

As in England, gathering entailed considerable financial hardship for most of the Australian Saints. The voyage from Sydney or Melbourne to San Francisco or San Pedro was much longer and more expensive than from Liverpool to New York or New Orleans, and fares for Australian Saints were correspondingly higher. For the first (1854) voyage of the *Julia Ann*, the adult fare was twenty-four pounds sterling. Two years later, passage on the *Jenny Ford* cost the Australian Saints twenty-three pounds, ten shillings, for steerage or thirty-five pounds in the cabin.

On a purely mathematical calculation, the fares from Sydney to California would total approximately 102 pounds for Taylor’s average family. To this must be added the cost of a wagon and team and supplies for the journey across the Sierra Nevada and the desert to Utah. Thus the total cost from Sydney to Salt Lake City for an average family in the mid-1850s would have been at the very least three times the cost for the average British family, which Taylor calculates at about sixty pounds.
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Wages in Australia were, of course, much higher than in Great Britain, but they were not three times higher. Mormon convert John Perkins, for example, earned two pounds, five shillings per week as a storeman in Sydney in 1854. While wages had risen during the early years of the gold rushes, prices and rent rose also, so that saving money in Australia was no easier because of the higher wages. In addition, by mid-1854 a recession had led to an average cut of one-third in the wages of masons and other building workers, at the very period when Mormon emigration was at its peak in Australia.

The problem of the poverty of the Saints was not confined to Britain, and it soon became obvious to the missionaries in Australia that many would need assistance before they could emigrate. Charles Wandell talked of establishing the Perpetual Emigrating Fund in Australia, but little came of it. At his departure in April 1853, he donated about thirty pounds’ worth of books to be sold and the proceeds applied to the PEF, but only one person on the Envelope appears to have received assistance.

Early in April 1854, the Ninth General Epistle of the First Presidency was received in Sydney. “Let books be opened, and donations received by the Presidents of all the various missions of the Latter-day Saints upon the whole earth, to help the Perpetual Emigrating Fund, and the Saints come home,” wrote the Presidency. President Farnham (apparently mistakenly) took this as authority to announce to the annual conference in Sydney in April 1854 that books for the PEF would be opened at his office “for the purpose of receiving donations to the said Fund.” Although this announcement was not made until two weeks after Hyde’s company sailed on the Julia Ann, Farnham apparently already had the scheme functioning in some form before they left and had paid 240 pounds towards the passage of the poorer Saints. As Hyde recorded that the charter fee for the vessel was 425 pounds, it appears that somewhat over half the first Julia Ann company received assistance.

The First Presidency was concerned when reports of President Farnham’s actions reached them. They were convinced that economic conditions in Australia were so good that Church assistance for gathering was unnecessary, and Farnham was mildly rebuked for his initiative. There is no record that Farnham argued the case for assistance for the Australian Saints with any of the authorities in Salt Lake City. But with or without the assistance of the PEF, the Australian Saints still had to gather. “We are determined to the utmost of our power to push the Saints to Zion,” he wrote. Through the columns of the mission paper, Zion’s Watchman, he counseled the Saints in his extensive mission:
Lay aside every degree of extravagance. Let your wants be few and simple, and only such as are necessary; let everything be managed with economy and prudence, laying aside all you can for gathering; if you are faithful and diligent in doing your part the Lord will do His, and you will be gathered.26

Some of the Saints paid their fares by installments, handing over small amounts to Farnham until the required sum was reached.27 Others from Sydney and Melbourne made their way to the goldfields, hoping to raise the needed funds on the diggings. Although the Church leaders, both in America and Australia, officially frowned on this procedure, Farnham visited the Victoria goldfields and counseled the men of the Castlemaine Branch to organize themselves into a company to consolidate their mining efforts. This was done, and an elaborate set of rules and bylaws was drawn up.28 Although some dropped out, several members of the company reached their financial goal and sailed for Zion. Farnham also continued an unofficial assistance scheme, begging the more well-to-do members to help the poorer, with mixed success.29

The fact that the missionaries after Wandell (who, after all, was writing to the British Saints) did not hold out economic inducements to persuade the Australian Saints to gather probably reflects the better economic position of the Australian Saints relative to the English Saints but in no way minimizes the expense of the journey. If most were already better off than they were in England, and upwardly mobile, there would have been little point in trying to convince them that life in a raw frontier environment in Utah would offer them more earthly comforts and success than they now had. It seems more than likely that the great majority of the Australian Saints did genuinely gather because they felt it was a commandment and because they desired to be with the body of the Church, rather than for personal betterment.

Even so, it would have been a considerable sacrifice. It must be remembered that, for almost all the Australian Saints, gathering to Zion involved a second emigration. Those who gathered in the 1850s had been in Australia for periods varying from two years (for example, the Ridges and Syphus families) to twenty years (as the Stapleys and Bryants in the Hunter River Valley) at the time of their second emigration. The cost of this double emigration would certainly have offset any benefits to be obtained from the cheaper land in America.

While the double emigration must have caused even more financial setback than the gathering entailed for the English Saints, it is possible that mentally and psychologically “gathering” may have been easier for the Australian Saints. Most had left family and lifetime friends in Britain, and many, particularly the fairly recent immigrants, would not yet have had deep roots in Australia.

The Australian companies were organized along similar lines to the British ones. Special conferences were called for the departing Saints
and a president and two counselors appointed for the company. In some cases the president was a returning missionary (as William Hyde on the first voyage of the *Julia Ann*) and at other times a local member, even when there were returning American elders on board. For example, John Penfold, from the Hunter region, was president of the second *Julia Ann* company despite the presence of American missionaries James Graham and John Eldredge on board. Schoolteachers were appointed for the children and school conducted each weekday. On the *Jenny Ford*, Joseph Ridges was appointed choirmaster and conducted singing practices regularly. On all voyages, the Saints assembled night and morning to pray and sing hymns, and regular Sunday services were held, with prayer meetings and testimony meetings on weeknights.

As in Britain, tributes were paid to the organization and discipline of the Mormon companies. Captain Davis and the owner, Mr. B. F. Pond, who sailed with the first *Julia Ann* company, each certified that “they never saw business more correctly and expeditiously transacted, than was the business of that company.” They also stated that they “never saw a company that were so easy to be governed by the voice of one man as that company of Saints were.” Pond wrote to President Farnham from San Francisco that he would be pleased to charter the ship for further companies.30

The only deaths recorded during the emigration of the Australian Saints were those of Esther Allan, age forty-one, who died on the first voyage of the *Julia Ann* from complications following childbirth, and the infant child of James and Ann Humphries of the *Tarquinia* company. As well, two women and three children were lost in the wreck of the *Julia Ann* in 1855.

During the 1850s, few of the Australian Saints traveled directly to Utah after arriving in California. Most managed to accumulate only the fare from Australia to the west coast of America and once there had to begin again to save for the remainder of the journey. Many of the Australian Saints remained in San Bernardino for considerable periods. James and Mary Ann Warby and their children, for instance, who traveled on the first voyage of the *Julia Ann*, stayed in San Bernardino for two years before finally completing the journey to Utah.31 Others worked in San Francisco or other parts of California to earn the money for the second leg of the journey. The Nye family, who arrived on the *Milwaukie* in 1859, spent three months in San Francisco before moving to Stockton, where the four elder sons of the family worked on Comstock’s ranch for more than a year until they could buy a four-horse team and wagon, eventually arriving in the Salt Lake Valley some twenty-two months after leaving Melbourne.32 James Humphries, from Adelaide, spent eight months in Hawaii after the *Tarquinia* was
condemned before saving enough to travel on to California, where he worked in various places, including San Bernardino, until he eventually reached Salt Lake City three years and eight months after leaving Adelaide. Henry and Elizabeth Gale took almost five years to get from San Bernardino to Utah.

The largest company of Australian Saints, numbering 121, sailed on the Jenny Ford in May 1856. Although several smaller companies left over the next ten or fifteen years, by the mid-1870s the practice of forming companies had been discontinued, and individual Australian families made their own arrangements to travel to Zion. From about 1890, the First Presidency began to look at the prospects of establishing a worldwide church, with permanent overseas missions and branches. Missionaries were urged to encourage their converts to remain in their native lands and build up the Church there.

So the Mormon "gathering" ended, but the problem of the motivation of the nineteenth-century emigrating Saints remains. As previously stated, emigration from Australia to America was against general population movements. During the 1850s, the population of Australia as a whole trebled; the population of one colony, Victoria, increased sevenfold during this decade. The only comparable movement in the whole history of Australia was a brief exodus during the California gold rush of 1849. The financial burden of the Australian gathering has been outlined above, as well as the recognition by the mission presidents that economic inducements were not applicable to the Australian Saints in the 1850s and 1860s. It seems an inescapable conclusion that the Australian Saints, at least, gathered for religious reasons. Certainly surviving contemporary statements stress the religious motivation and lend strength to Mulder's assertion that soon after baptism Mormon converts experienced a "baptism of desire" as the spirit of gathering touched them. So it was in Australia. A letter written to her mother by mother-of-six Martha Humphreys, baptized while living on the Allyn River in the 1850s, epitomizes the attitudes of the Australian converts:

and now my dear Mother, I will answer that question you put me, of when, are we going.... We leave Australia with all its woes, and bitterness, for the Land of Zion next April... perhaps you will say, I am building on worldly hopes, that never will be realized, not so, Mother... knowing what I know, I tell you, if I knew for a positive certainty, that when we get there, persecutions, such as have been the portion of the saints before, awaited us, I would still insist upon going, what are a few short years in this present State, compared with Life Eternal....

Would, Mother, that a daughter's prayers could persuade you to take the same step as I have done... to-morrow week will be a month since I obeyed the Saviour's command and truly, most truly, can I say my life is entirely changed, I may compare my past life, to a wilderness of weeds with hardly a flower strewed among them now how different, the weeds have vanished, and flowers Spring up in their place. Mother,
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why cannot you take the same Step. I tell you, Mormonism is truth, and the only truth. . . .

I should like Mother before we leave this Colony, to See you, better than words can express . . . my little girls often tell me they ought to See their Grandmother before they go away . . . my girls have reckoned how long it is to April, they want to go to Zion nearly as much as I do. I do not know how we shall get ready in the time, nor whether we will be able to get enough clothing, but so as we get enough to pay our passage that is all I care for, for clothes we must do the best we can, and when we get there my Husband and big boys can work. . . .

. . . believe me, my dear Mother,
Your affectionate daughter,
Martha Maria Humphreys.38

Martha Maria Humphreys never reached Zion as she so dearly desired to do. She and her nine-year-old daughter Mary were drowned in the wreck of the Julia Ann two hundred miles west of Tahiti on 3 October 1855. “It is perfectly possible—even if the conclusion is distasteful to many moderns—that more than a few rose above the purely material conditions of their day,” concluded Phillip A. M. Taylor.39 The evidence of the Australian gathering confirms that the British Mormon gathering was something more than an economic movement.

NOTES

2The date usually quoted, 30 October 1851, is incorrect. Murdock failed to allow for the effects of the International Date Line when making daily entries in his journal.
5See the “Seventh General Epistle of the First Presidency,” Millennial Star 14 (17 July 1852): 325; and “First Epistle of Orson Pratt,” Zion’s Watchman, 3 August 1854, 90.
6Brigham Young to Augustus Farnham, 31 October 1853, in Zion’s Watchman, 6 May 1854, 90.
7Brigham Young to Augustus Farnham, 31 January 1855, Manuscript History of the Australian Mission, Library–Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives), emphasis added.
8Taylor, “Why Did British Mormons Emigrate?” 249–70; and Taylor, Expectations Westward, 151–53.
10Taylor, “Why Did British Mormons Emigrate?” 245; Taylor, Expectations Westward, 144; Richard L. Evans, A Century of “Mormonism” in Great Britain: A Brief Summary of the Activities of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the United Kingdom, with Emphasis on Its Introduction One Hundred Years Ago (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1937), Appendix; Mulder, “Mormonism’s ‘Gathering,’” 163 n. 44.
See, for example, *Zion’s Watchman*, 4 March 1854, 86; and *Zion’s Watchman*, 11 October 1854, 154.


William Hyde, Journal, 15 February 1854, LDS Church Archives.


John Perkins, Diary, 4 January 1854, LDS Church Archives.


Minutes of Annual Conference held in Sydney, 23, 25, and 27 March 1853. Manuscript History of the Australian Mission, LDS Church Archives.

*Bzion’s Watchman*, 17 December 1853, 55.

*Bzion’s Watchman*, 6 May 1854, 93.

Ibid.

Brigham Young to Augustus Farnham, 19 August 1854, in *Zion’s Watchman*, 15 February 1855, 217.

*Bzion’s Watchman*, 4 March 1854, 86.

*Bzion’s Watchman*, 14 October 1854, 154.

John Perkins, Diary, 19 August 1854, LDS Church Archives.

Alonzo Colton, Journal, 16 October 1854, LDS Church Archives.

Farnham, Journal, 4, 8, and 18 May 1856, LDS Church Archives.

*Bzion’s Watchman*, 14 October 1854, 158.


Family Record of Ephraim Hesmer Nye, MS, Western History Collection, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo.


Mulder, "Mormonism’s ‘Gathering.’" 250.

Martha Maria Humphreys to her mother, 8 December 1853, Manuscript Collection, Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia. The letter is incorrectly catalogued under the date of 8 December 1857. Quoted by permission of the Mitchell Library.

Taylor, "Why Did British Mormons Emigrate?" 270.