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MISSIONARIES FOR THE DEAD:
THE STORY OF THE GENEALOGICAL MISSIONARIES
OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Jessie L. Embry

The Latter-day Saints’ enthusiasm for the restoration of the
gospel led to many interesting types of missions in the nineteenth
century. Members were “called” not only to preach the gospel, but

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also to go to the gold mines in the 1850s, to gather rags for making paper during the economic crisis of the 1860s, to serve as M.I.A. and Sunday School missionaries, to go to Europe to study art, and to go East for higher education and medical training. Because they believed in salvation for the dead, genealogical work also became an important part of their missionary activities.

But doing genealogical research then was more difficult than it is now. As the records were not available in Utah, the immigrating Saints were encouraged to bring with them genealogical information concerning their friends and relatives, living and dead, who might not have the chance to come to Zion or who might never accept the gospel in this life. Then they would be able to have the necessary ordinance work done for them in the temples. An editorial in the Millennial Star warned those coming from England:

If you neglect the opportunities you now have to secure the information, you will see the time when you will perhaps seek for it, but not be able to find it until you have so far paid the debt of your neglect, that some kind angel from the spirit world will be justified in bringing you the necessary intelligence.

Those who were already in Utah and had not brought their records with them tried to get the necessary information by writing letters or visiting their relatives. Correspondence was not always successful, because relatives who had opposed the Church frequently would not answer the letters. Others did not have the necessary dates, and their ministers were not always willing to check through church records. Consequently, many members of the Church decided to search the records themselves, which often meant returning to their ancestral homelands, many as genealogical missionaries.

Some of their names were included on the official missionary lists of the Church with a special note that they were going to work on their genealogy. Some of the brethren also recorded the names of some additional people who had been set apart to serve on this type of mission. These records show that between 1885 and 1900 at least 178 Saints served as genealogical missionaries. Most of them were middle-aged or older retired men, although some young men and women and even a few couples went. They were mainly from Utah and the majority of them went to England. They were not required to serve for any set length of time. Franklin D. Richards

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went on one genealogical trip for seventeen days while John Adams Wakeham spent over three years gathering his genealogy.3

Genealogical missionaries were also different from others in that there were few if any formal calls made, the members simply volunteered to go.4 They were invited to come to Salt Lake City to be set apart by one of the General Authorities and to be given a missionary card. In addition they were given a clergy discount card which allowed them to travel to Chicago for $6.25.5 As they were set apart, they were instructed not only to search for the names of their ancestors but also to try to preach the gospel to their living relatives. On one occasion, for example, Franklin D. Richards recorded in his journal,

Yesterday I blessed Elder John Luther Dalton of the 5th ward Ogden for a visit and a mission to various states in the Union to visit relatives and search for the genealogy of his ancestors as well as to testify of the work of God unto them . . . and gave him a letter of appointment.6

Several of the missionaries left journals that give us some idea of what a genealogical mission was like. They wrote of visiting relatives, copying family Bibles and other records, and of trying to find out everything that people knew about their ancestors. They also went to the parish churches spending hours searching through the old registers. They searched cemeteries to find the gravestones of their relatives. Many recorded having special spiritual experiences where they felt the Lord had miraculously directed them to the proper sources.

John Adams Wakeham, who was set apart for a genealogy mission in 1891 by John Henry Smith, returned to New England and re-

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3Consideration of material in the Church Archives reveals the following profile of 178 genealogical missionaries from 1885-1900: Age: Under 20 (1); 20-30 (6); 30-40 (7); 40-50 (32); 60-70 (16); 70 and over (6). Sex: Male (135); Female (43). Home Residence: Utah (128); Idaho (7); Arizona (2). Mission to: Great Britain (90); United States and Canada (51); Europe (2). (Missionary Record, Reel 2 [1830-1906], Missionary Department, Church Archives; Franklin D. Richards Journal, Franklin D. Richards Collection, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.) The figures given in some sections of this profile do not total 178 because the records were not complete.

4In response to a letter from Elder M. H. Fitzgerald, Franklin D. Richards, of the Quorum of the Twelve, said that if he wanted to go to Virginia to do his genealogy he should come to Salt Lake City to be set apart. Richards to Fitzgerald, 30 April 1892, Franklin D. Richards Collection, Church Archives.

5Elder Richards told C. M. Hubbard that he would receive this missionary rate for his trip to visit his friends in the East. Richards to C. M. Hubbard, 23 November 1883, Franklin D. Richards Collection, Church Archives.

6Franklin D. Richards Journal, 7 February 1890, Franklin D. Richards Collection, Church Archives.
corded several spiritual experiences during his mission. On one occasion he went to visit a distant relative whom he had never met. He knocked on the door and when a lady answered he said that he was a relative of the Copp family and that he had been directed to her since she was the granddaughter of William H. Copp. He asked if she had any of the history of the family. She questioned him for fifteen minutes and then told him that he had an honest face and she would let him come in. It turned out that she had been trying to gather the genealogy but had not been very successful.

Wakeham's brother suggested that he visit a Dr. John R. Ham in Dover, Maine, who had done some genealogy. Dr. Ham was a member of the New England Historic Genealogical Society and had a library with many books on genealogy. In these Wakeham found the name of his great-great-grandfather and also learned that his great-grandfather was an Indian, confirming a family tradition concerning an Indian ancestor, and also confirming a statement in Wakeham's patriarchal blessing that identified him as a literal descendant of Joseph.

Wakeham did not spend all his time doing genealogy. He stopped to see many friends and spent a great deal of time helping them. He spent two summers, for example, on the farm of A. H. Wenworth. At the end of his mission he expressed gratitude for the help these friends gave him, but he was very disappointed that few of them had the courage to accept the gospel. He returned to Salt Lake City in 1894.7

Another missionary, John Amor, also an English convert, later wrote that he had always been interested in genealogy. As a child, in fact, he had spent much time reading the inscriptions on the tombstones in the churchyards because he had no playmates. After a long search for the right religion, he had joined the Church in 1867 and emigrated to Utah. He and his wife received their endowments in the Endowment House. He later wrote that shortly thereafter, "I began to have dreams concerning work for the dead. Several times a week I dreamed that I had died and had neglected to do work for those who had died and they were very much displeased with me, which caused me much sorrow." He said that the dreams did not cease until he finally started his genealogical work. He gathered as much information as he could from his mother. However, when Apostle Mariner W. Merrill said in the Logan Temple, "You should use every means in your power to gather

7John Adams Wakeham Autobiography, Church Archives.

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your genealogy by writing and inquiry and not rest until all means are exhausted," he decided he had not done enough. He was set apart for a mission in 1896 and was promised that he would go and return in safety and be able to find the records of his ancestors.

Amor left with only five dollars in his pocket and arrived in England with three. Since he was on a special mission, he was allowed to travel without a companion, and in his search for the records he walked 1,400 miles and traveled 600 miles by rail and by water. He recorded several miraculous experiences. In one town he was allowed to check the parish records and instead of charging him the regular fee, the minister gave him fifty cents. Amor converted one member of his family to the gospel, but "the devil entered the wife of the family and said all manner of evil against me." The husband wrote to the mission president to see if the records that Amor had were correct and even tried to take them away from Amor. Because of these problems and because winter was approaching and Amor had no money, the mission president told him he could be released if he wanted to be. He was not sure that he wanted to go home, but, feeling that the president would not have suggested it if it were not the right thing to do, he returned to Utah. 8

One of the most ambitious of all the genealogical missionaries was Franklin D. Richards, who later became the first president of the Genealogical Society. He went on several short genealogical missions to gather information from his relatives in Massachusetts. For example, in 1890 he and his son Charles spent nearly a month visiting friends and relatives and gathering genealogy in the East. After returning to Salt Lake City, he recorded in his journal,

Thanks and praise to God . . . for his good salvation and for the information that I was enabled to obtain in Lanesborough, Pillsfield, Richmond and other places of men whom I never saw before concerning our Dead that I may prepare a proper Record of my work such as will be acceptable when the dead shall be judged out of the Books that shall have been written. 9

Later, as he was arranging these names for temple work, he recorded,

It is quite singular and rather wonderful how much thought, study and care is required to get the temple work ready and be sure of its accuracy when we have to pick it up in such a fragmentary condition as it comes to us. 10

8"Biography of John Amor," Archibald F. Bennett Collection, Church Archives.
9Franklin D. Richards Journal, 15 June 1890.
10Ibid., 8 January 1894.
Many of the journals are so sketchy, it is hard to determine how successful the missionaries were in gathering their genealogy. A letter from Duncan M. McAllister to Wilford Woodruff implies that their efforts were not worth the expense. He said that at least fifty persons were making the trip to Europe each year to get their genealogy, at an annual expense of approximately $25,000. In addition, nearly all other missionaries spent some time doing genealogical research. He calculated that one man with ordinary accounting skills could do more than fifty of these unskilled people.\(^{11}\)

As the leaders of the Church received letters like this they began to realize that individual, unaided efforts to gather genealogy were not always successful and that if the Church wanted the members to complete the temple work for their ancestors they would need some aid. That is one of the reasons why, on 13 November 1894, genealogical and Church leaders gathered in the office of Franklin D. Richards to organize the Genealogical Society of Utah.

The society started out in a small room in the Historian’s Office with a few books and a big dream. Nephi Anderson defined this dream in 1912:

Let me suggest the future of this work. I see the records of the dead . . . gathered from every nation under heaven to one great central library in Zion—the largest and the best equipped for its particular work in the world. Branch libraries may be established in the nations, but in Zion will be the records of last resort and final authority. Trained genealogists will find constant work in all nations having unpublished records. . . . Then, as temples multiply, and the work enlarges to its ultimate proportions, this society . . . will have in its case some elaborate but perfect system of exact registration and checking, so that the work in the temples may be conducted without confusion or duplication.\(^{12}\)

This dream has been fulfilled. The genealogical library is the largest of its kind in the world and there are now over 100 branch libraries. Records are being preserved and brought to Salt Lake City on microfilm and the Temple Index Bureau and the Computer File Index help bring order to temple work. Doing genealogy is comparatively easy for members of the Church today because they have many records in a central place.

\(^{11}\)Duncan M. McAllister to Wilford Woodruff, 16 February 1893, Genealogical Society Correspondence, Church Archives.

\(^{12}\)Nephi Anderson, "Genealogy’s Place in the Plan of Salvation," The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine 3 (January 1912) :21-22.

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