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Mormonism and the Making of a British Zion

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Matthew Lyman Rasmussen. *Mormonism and the Making of a British Zion*.

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Reviewed by Ronald E. Bartholomew

Considering the large corpus of published research on the historical origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Great Britain, it is significant that Rasmussen begins his work with this statement: “Today, a comprehensive history of British Mormonism continues to elude the corpus” (10). Instead of providing us with that comprehensive history, he asserts the need to return to the most studied geographic area in Great Britain: Lancashire, home to Liverpool, Manchester, Preston, and surrounding areas of LDS Church History fame and lore. His justification? “Basing a study of British Mormonism on the English North West does not extend from Mormonism’s impact on Lancashire, but from Lancashire’s outstanding impact on Mormonism” (3–4). At first glance, I was disappointed at what appeared to be a redo of something that arguably had already been overdone; however, I was quickly convinced of the need for this book by Rasmussen’s literary talent, research skill and methodology, and excellent presentation.

The reader will find several things about this book attractive. First, Rasmussen is a gifted writer whose English prose is enviable at least and awe-inspiring at best. As a recipient of a bachelor of arts in English from the University of Utah, he has found his canvas in this book and has utilized his skill as a literary artist. Second, his research methodology is equally inspiring. He utilizes a comprehensive set of source material, drawing heavily upon the *Millennial Star*, local newspapers from the time periods in question, primary source materials like the journals of members and missionaries, as well as extensively drawing from the LDS Church Archives and little-used oral histories recorded and preserved by others. At every turn, it is clear Rasmussen is bringing to the reader every available resource imaginable to expertly craft his story.

Furthermore, anyone interested in scholarship regarding the Church in Great Britain, from its beginnings in 1837 to present, will be delighted

by and perhaps engrossed in this book. What at first glance appears to deal only with specifics relative to Lancashire is actually a book dealing with the history of the Church in Britain using specifics from Lancashire as a case study.

His thesis is simple: while much emphasis in the past has been given to the conversion and subsequent emigration of thousands of British Saints to an American Zion and the contributions they made there, “comparatively little attention is given to Mormonism’s equally remarkable perpetuation [in Britain], a gap in the historiography this book seeks to remedy, . . . reveal[ing] that the endurance of Mormonism in Britain has been enabled by doctrinal adaptation” (17).

Rasmussen posits five reasons for the successful perpetuation of the Church in Britain, noting that the history of the Church in Britain, when compared to other locations, is atypical: “Much of the history of global Mormonism is characterized by a simple pattern: an initial advance, a subsequent retreat (giving various countries in South America, Asia, and Scandinavia as examples), and an eventual regrouping and reassertion. . . . Given its longevity, the British church is the most notable exception to this pattern” (191).

First, in chapter 2, he argues that while “the gathering of converts in the nineteenth century was in fulfillment of the church’s institutional agenda, . . . twentieth-century emigration was in direct opposition to it. Thus the years 1892–1911 comprise a crucial transitional period when church leaders divested Mormonism of its westward orientation, permitted its millenarian expectations to wane, and encouraged its development as a British denomination” (187). He contends that a “dramatic shift in Mormonism’s eschatological ethos” allowed for not only the development of a “more positive worldview” (187), but also allowed the Church to discard its negative “Britain as Babylon” paradigm in favor of “Britain as Zion.” This doctrinal adaptation was the first piece necessary for the perpetuation of a domestic presence in Britain.

Second, as discussed in chapters 3 and 4, he points to missionary work as “central to the survival of British Mormonism” (188). As a mis-siologist, I found his careful analysis of missionary work in Lancashire, beginning with the apostolic mission of Heber C. Kimball and following through to near present, nothing short of brilliant. I also agree with his assessment for future work in this area: “Further comparison of the origins and methods of nineteenth-century missionaries with their modern, twentieth- and twenty-first-century counterparts would illuminate the underlying and evolving motivations that continue to sustain Mormon proselytizing in Britain” (189).

Third, in chapter 5, he examines the history of anti-Mormonism in Britain and concludes that “the abundance of opposition the British saints had to endure could be regarded as one of the keys to Mormonism’s regional endurance” (188). The reader will find the breadth and scope of his careful treatment to be near-encyclopedic.

Fourth, in chapter 7, Rasmussen uncovers, for the first time, the role sacred space has played in the perpetuation of British Mormonism. He accurately asserts that “the identification and examination of places of worship is one of the least-researched aspects of British Mormon history” (155). He conducts his analysis by dividing the history into the four phases regarding places of worship in Britain, asserting that “the chapel building program . . . may be the single most important development within British Mormon history” because it “sent a clear message to both the British members and the wider public. Each group needed convincing that Mormonism was no longer equated with Utah” (184–85). Rodney Fullwood, a convert from Liverpool, reminisced about one of the primary effects this had on the membership involved: “[the chapel building program] must have contributed to some people thinking, ‘Well maybe we don’t have to emigrate.’ . . . Because when you invest in something with your own labor, you tend to value it. It becomes a part of you” (182).

Rasmussen gives a fifth and final criterion for a stable, self-perpetuating British Zion: “The main challenge to the stability of British Mormonism in the twenty-first century will not concern its proven capacity to attract converts. . . . Until British Mormonism genuinely and comprehensively becomes multigenerational, its future will never be assured. . . . Having built a British Zion, . . . the temple, where family and faith are melded spiritually and permanently, will be at the center of this pursuit” (189–90). Beginning with the prophetic descriptions Heber C. Kimball and Joseph Smith proffered, making Lancashire “sacred space,” he asserts: “From the Vauxhall Chapel (borrowed sacred space) to the Preston Temple (sacred space provided by the institutional church), the creation of a spiritual heartland or center place [is] vital to the endurance of British Mormonism and [will secure] the foundations upon which modern church leaders clearly anticipate future growth” (185).

Ronald E. Bartholomew received his PhD in sociology of education from the University of Buckingham in London, England. He is currently serving as an instructor at the Institute of Religion at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah. He has published scholarly articles in academic journals in the United States and Europe and has written several chapters in various published volumes.