Early Publications on the Book of Mormon

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Articles from early newspapers and other publications give rare insights into the way in which the original audience of the Book of Mormon, both believers and critics, viewed the document. A large-scale collection of these documents was not initiated until the 1930s by Francis Kirkham, with encouragement from President George Albert Smith. Kirkham later published his collection in two volumes. His work, while extensive, was not exhaustive. The *19th-Century Publications about the Book of Mormon (1829–1844)*, a project partnered by the Maxwell Institute and the Harold B. Lee Library, builds on Kirkham’s original research and seeks to preserve every extant published text discussing the Book of Mormon. The collection includes more than six hundred publications related to the Book of Mormon—almost one million words of text.
One of the best historical windows for understanding how the Book of Mormon was interpreted and understood by early readers is the literature relating to that book published during the Prophet Joseph Smith’s lifetime. Publications of this period can often enrich our perspective on early Latter-day Saint history. Until fairly recently, however, the task of collecting many of the early publications relating to the Book of Mormon was difficult. During the 1930s Francis W. Kirkham started a collection with articles from New England and Ohio newspapers. As Keith Perkins notes, “At a time when others lacked either the opportunity or the inclination to do so, [Kirkham] set out to gather many early documents related to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—source materials that were still available but in jeopardy of loss or deterioration. He analyzed these sources and compiled them into a work that has had a lasting impact on our understanding of this book of scripture.”¹ This collection was initially published in 1937 under the title Source Material Concerning the Origin of the Book of Mormon.²

Later Kirkham expanded his work to include and describe naturalistic explanations of the Book of Mormon of that period. With the encouragement of Latter-day Saint leaders, these efforts produced several expanded editions of his work that were eventually published in two volumes.³ “Since the early books and newspapers and pamphlets are few and widely scattered,” noted John A. Widtsoe in 1959, “President George Albert Smith invited Dr. Kirkham to extend his research in this field and to assemble for publication under one cover the many attempts to prove the Book of Mormon man-made.”⁴ Church leaders believed such efforts
would have a salutary effect on Latter-day Saints by making them more familiar with the history and events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as well as with the arguments of critics who believed that it was man-made. "Unbelievers in Joseph Smith’s story," wrote John A. Widtsoe, "have not been able to agree on any one explanation. It has even been necessary by some writers to change the explanation they first proposed. This unsuccessful, changing search is of itself an evidence of the truth of the Prophet’s own story." Since many of these publications were rare, even in Kirkham’s day, and not easily accessible, Kirkham’s two-volume collection has been a helpful resource to historians and students of Latter-day Saint history who are interested in the events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Although still valuable, Kirkham’s volumes are not comprehensive or complete. Many important articles relating to the Book of Mormon published in American religious periodicals that were unknown to him at the time have since been identified by researchers. Additionally, Kirkham usually only published extracts from these documents in order to provide a sampling of varying theories about the Book of Mormon. Kirkham’s focus was limited primarily to issues relating to the origin of the Book of Mormon and the theories of critics who attempted to prove it man-made. His research did not focus on other factors, such as how Latter-day Saints understood and related to the Book of Mormon. These limitations underscore the need for a more comprehensive and searchable resource. Thanks to the encouragement and support of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and the assistance of the staff at the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, an important collection of early publications relating to the Book of Mormon between 1829 and 1844 has been gathered and is being made accessible to researchers. This article provides an overview of this collection and a sampling of its contents.

Nineteenth-Century Publications about the Book of Mormon (1829–1844) includes more than 600 publications (close to one million words of text) and is intended to comprise, insofar as possible, everything published in that time span relating to the Book of Mormon. The collection includes works by defenders and detractors. By far the most common category of publications in the collection is articles
published in early newspapers. “Newspapers,” notes Walter A. Norton, “were the first form of public communication, other than community gossip and hearsay, to convey to a surprised citizenry the curious story surrounding the birth of Mormonism in Western New York. In fact, for nearly a century newspapers and magazines were almost unanimous in conveying a disparaging image of Mormonism.” In spite of this challenge, Latter-day Saint writers were able to utilize the print media to spread the message of the restoration more widely. Beginning in 1832, the Church of Jesus Christ began publishing its own periodical, The Evening and the Morning Star. This and later Church-sponsored newspapers such as the Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate and the Times and Seasons enabled the first generation of Latter-day Saints to become better informed about their beliefs, present their history, and provide a forum in which to correct, clarify, and respond to misrepresentations. Other publications include books and pamphlets, published accounts of missionary activities relating to the Book of Mormon, hymns, broadsides, and early reference works.

Reports alluding to the recovery and coming forth of a “Gold Bible” may have been published before that time, perhaps as early as 1827, but if so, they may not have survived. As Norton observes, “Certain newspapers printed in these two regions [New York and Ohio] can be identified by name, but copies of them exist today in no known archival depository. Furthermore, many individual issues are missing from larger collections and apparently are lost forever.”

The earliest known article published on the Book of Mormon appeared in the Palmyra Wayne Sentinel on 26 June 1829. On 16 November 1830, E. D. Howe, the editor of the Painesville Telegraph, recalled, “Some two or three years since, an account was given in the papers, of a book purporting to contain new revelations from Heaven, having been dug out of the ground, in Manchester in Ontario Co. N.Y.” Howe did not indicate where the article was published. Two years before 16 November 1830 would have been November 1828.
Unfortunately copies of the Brookville Enquirer for the period in question have apparently not survived. It is significant, however, that each of these reports, coming both from non-Mormons like Howe and Harding and Mormons like Young and Hyde, consistently place the appearance of such an article in New York or Ohio in late 1827 and shortly after the recovery of the plates in September of that year. Such articles, were they to be located, would be of great interest to historians.

While many publications are no longer extant, diligent and persistent researchers often turn up occasional treasures. One researcher recently located an early article published in the New York Telescope on 20 February 1830, written by C. C. Blatchley. By some means Blatchley had obtained a copy of one of the sixteen-page signatures of the Book of Mormon from Grandin’s Palmyra printing office more than a month before the Book of Mormon was published and took the opportunity to disparage its style and grammar. More significantly, he cited a previously unknown letter he had received from Oliver Cowdery which Blatchley reportedly printed in another publication called the Investigator on 11 December 1829. Blatchley said he had previously written to Joseph Smith, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer, “the believers in said bible of gold plates—which they affirm they have miraculously, or supernaturally beheld.” Not willing to accept their testimony, he “sought for evidences, and such as could not be disputed, of the existence of this bible of golden plates.” He said that Oliver Cowdery had written back to inform him that “the
world must take their words for its existence; and that the book would appear [that] month.”13 Although it comes to us secondhand, this is the earliest published reference to the testimony of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon. Efforts to locate the Investigator and the previously unknown Oliver Cowdery letter have so far failed, but future researchers may be more successful.

Some accounts in these publications shed additional light on the activities of early missionaries. In the revelation given on 25 January 1832, now known as section 75 of the Doctrine and Covenants, Lyman Johnson and Orson Pratt are commanded to “take their journey into the eastern countries” (D&C 75:14). In his personal journal, Pratt gives a summary of their labors but provides few details about their journey or what they taught. Others, however, who encountered these early missionaries provide descriptions of what they said and did. In one account published in Mercer County, Pennsylvania, one observer describes these two missionaries in favorable terms as they stopped for a cottage meeting at his home on their journey to the East. “They appeared to have very little learning, to be sincere in all they said. They had good manners—had been well raised—were decent and unassuming in every thing I saw, or heard them say.” One of them stated that he was “specially commanded to go forth and warn the people to flee from the wrath to come . . . to declare the will of God, and the revelation of John who saw the angel flying through Heaven—An angel brought the Mormonite Bible and laid it before him (the speaker;) he therefore knows these things to be true.”14

While these early publications can be a valuable resource to historians, it is also worth noting the obvious fact that not everything published was necessarily true or accurate. Both Mormon and non-Mormon writers could be deeply partisan. Writers were often hasty in publishing descriptions and reports without verifying their accuracy. In 1841, for example, the Rochester Daily Democrat published a false report of the murder of Martin Harris (Harris would in fact live another thirty-four years and die of natural causes in 1875).15 Negative rumors, reports, and speculations about Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints tended to be taken at face value without serious investigation or critical assessment. “Considering the state of transportation and communication in antebellum America, newspapers were able to ‘get away with’ ambiguous writing, if not palpable falsehoods.”16 Even Howe, not above reporting negative rumors about the Mormons, observed, “To record the thousand tales which are in circulation respecting the book and its propagators, would be an endless task, and probably lead to the promulgation of a hundred times more than was founded in truth.”17 In 1838 Elder Parley P. Pratt surveyed the bewildering chaos of mostly unchallenged rumor and misrepresentation so common in the press:

Fortune telling, money digging, juggling, wicked, cheat, liar, profane, intemperate, quarrelsome, not good character, gold bible company, indolent, lying, notoriously bad, wife whiper, destitute of moral character, visionary, addicted to vicious habits; and add to this catalogue, the ridiculous stories that went the rounds of the religious papers concerning the “Angel Caught;” and the walking on the water story; and the murder story; together with “Adultery,” and the love tale of Mr. Smith’s stealing his wife; and then the all things common; together with doing away with matrimony; and then the Treason against Government; the stirring up of the Slaves against their Masters; the instigating of the Indians to war and bloodshed; together with driving the inhabitants of Jackson County, Missouri, from their houses and lands, and the taking possession of them by force. . . . Perhaps they might have added the story of eating their own children; and of having hairy throats, and but one eye, and that in the middle of their foreheads. . . . We are willing to give our enemies, . . . together with his Satanic majesty; great credit, for inventive and fertile imaginations, as well as for great credulity.18

In a letter published in 1842, J. N. T. Tucker, a cousin of Palmyra printer Pomeroy Tucker, claimed to have worked on the typesetting of the Book of Mormon. While preparing the Book of Mormon for publication he and several coworkers in the printing office attempted to test Joseph Smith’s ability as a translator. “Accordingly, after putting one sheet
in type, we laid it aside, and told [Martin] Harris it was lost, and there would be a serious defec-
tion in the book in consequence, unless another sheet like the original could be produced.” This,
according to Tucker, forced Harris to return to Joseph Smith and ask him to reproduce the miss-
ing text. When he returned several weeks later with a replacement sheet, it differed from the original.
This little joke, Tucker said, “caused no little mer-
riment among those who were acquainted with the circumstance.”

Tucker’s tale, however, appears to have been fab-
ricated. When asked about the incident, John Gil-
bert, who was responsible for setting the type of the Book of Mormon, noted that Tucker did not even
work in the office at the time the alleged incident was to have occurred. “His statement in regard to a
page of the manuscript being spirited away by some of the typos in the office, is totally untrue.” Tucker,
Gilbert remembered, “went to Groton, Ct., got mar-
rried, became a preacher—Baptist I believe—com-
mitted some crime,—was tried and acquitted on
the plea of insanity—he was a ‘bad egg.’”

Unfortunately, there were few safeguards against the circu-
lation of false stories and rumors about Mormonism
once they were printed.

**Early Reactions to the Book of Mormon**

Early literature relating to the Book of Mormon
appeared in a highly partisan atmosphere of reli-
gious polemic common to the time. Early publica-
tions treated the Book of Mormon with contempt
and ridicule even before it came off the press. “For
some time past,” noted the editor of the *Wayne
Sentinel* on 26 June 1829, “much speculation has
existed, concerning a pretended discovery, through
superhuman means, of an ancient record, of a reli-
gious and a divine nature and origin, written in
ancient characters, impossible to be interpreted by
any to whom the special gift has not been imparted
by inspiration. It is generally known and spoken of
as the ‘Golden Bible.’ Most people entertain an idea
that the whole matter is the result of a gross impo-
sition and a grosser superstition.”

The term *Gold Bible* was not intended as one of respect. As Abner
Cole, the editor of the Palmyra tabloid the *Reflector*,
explained, “The appellation of ‘Gold Bible,’ is only
a *cant cognomen*,” a nickname given to the Book
of Mormon by “revilers and unbelievers—by way of
derision.”

During the summer of 1829, the editor of *Paul
Pry’s Weekly Bulletin* lampooned local community
figures in a series of parodies written in biblical
style. On 8 August, he concluded one such parody,
entitled “From the Gold Bible,” with a swipe at the
as-yet-unpublished Book of Mormon, “Behold all
these things, yea many more, are graven on the
massy leaves of the Golden Book, and are now in the custody of Joseph the prophet.” In another one written on 29 August, the editor lambasted local Methodists for alleged improprieties and then concluded, “And now oh ye worshipers of Bad, if ye turn not from the evil of your ways, and do that which is right, ye shall be delivered over to the folly of Smith, and with his exhortations be tormented day and night forever.”

On 26 March 1830, the Wayne Sentinel reported that the Book of Mormon had been published and was available for sale. Early reactions in the press to its publication varied from charges of blasphemy or contempt to amusement. On 2 April 1830, the Rochester Daily Advertiser wrote, “The ‘Book of Mormon’ has been placed in our hands. A viler imposition was never practised. It is an evidence of fraud, blasphemy and credulity, shocking to the Christian and moralist.”

A short time since it was ascertained that a Mr. Clark, a member of the Methodist Episcopal church in Logan county, had in his possession the Book of Mormon. For this glaring outrage he was severely reprimanded, deprived of his station as class leader, and the book demanded of him by his preachers, a Mr. Martin and a Mr. Watt. He (the said Clark) contended that the book was his own property, and unless they bought it, they could not have the same. Accordingly, the necessary sum was raised, and paid for the book. Shortly after the said book was taken into De Witt county, to a Quarterly Conference meeting, there to await its final trial; and it was condemned, and burnt to ashes—the judges themselves being the executioners. And what is still more appalling, Mr. Watt, a preacher, has been heard unblushingly to assert, that if burning the book would not do, they would next burn the Mormons themselves.
Early publications also recount the reactions of travelers and visitors to the Prophet and the Saints. David Marks, a Methodist preacher, visited the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, shortly after the publication of the Book of Mormon. “On reviewing this pretended revelation, I was forcibly struck with the contrast between the introduction of the gospel of Christ, and that of the ‘Book of Mormon.’ The former came down from heaven; the latter is said to have been dug out of the earth.” He dismissed the notion that only certain witnesses could be allowed to see the plates which were subsequently “hid up unto the Lord” and found the Book of Mormon “full of absurdity, and too dull to charm the soul.”

Nancy Towle, an itinerant evangelical preacher from England, visited Kirtland, Ohio, in October 1831. A year later, in 1832, she published a little-known account of her visit to the headquarters of the Saints and the Prophet Joseph Smith. Unimpressed, she described the Prophet as “a good-natured, low-bred, sort of a chap” and looked upon the meetings of the Saints “with the utmost indignation and disgust,” though admitting, “I saw nothing indecorous; nor had I, any apprehension, of any thing of the kind.”

Others found the Book of Mormon no less difficult to believe than the Bible. “After a pretty careful perusal of the Book of Mormon, or the Golden Bible, as it is usually termed,” wrote William Owen, “I am of the opinion that, setting aside the historical proofs of authenticity, the Golden Bible will bear a very good comparison with the Holy Bible. I find nothing in the former inconsistent with the doctrines or opposed to a belief in the latter; on the contrary, the one seems to corroborate the other; and I can discover no good reason why the generality of Christians should scoff, as I have generally found them to do.” The writer, a skeptic of all religious claims, suggested that believers were inconsistent in rejecting the claims of the Book of Mormon if they truly believed in the Bible. “Christians can hardly read the book of Mormon without remarking a striking similarity to their own scriptures, and
the believers in the Old and New Testaments cannot consistently deny the possibility of a single circumstance related to the Mormonite scriptures. . . . For my own part, I should consider satisfactory proofs of the genuineness of the Golden Bible as strong evidence of the divine origin of the Holy Bible, so consistent they are with, and corroborative of, each other.”

Liberal thinkers and atheists faulted Christians for inconsistency in rejecting the Book of Mormon simply because it required faith in the story of its recovery and belief in the testimony of witnesses, while accepting the Bible at face value. “Every part of the Bible,” claimed one proud critic in 1844, “both of the Old and New Testament, has originated in the same way as the Book of Mormon—that is, ‘been found,’ and then commended to the world.” He cited the story of the discovery of the book of the law during the reign of King Josiah and noted “that the writings of no prophet were received as divinely inspired, until after his death and the fulfilment of his prophecy proved him to be a true prophet.”

Hence even biblical writings, like those of the Latter-day Saints, require faith in the testimony of those who produced them. “We are no Mormon, God knows, or, at any rate, we know. We believe their religion is the same as that of all others, founded in delusion, deceit, and falsehood—in books that are found.” He predicted, however, that “the Mormons will ultimately become the predominant sect, and the Book of Mormon be incorporated in the Bible. . . . For every Mormon slain, ten will rise up to collect [Joseph Smith’s] ashes, embalm his memory, and propagate his faith.”

Defending the Book of Mormon

While the earliest publications relating to the Book of Mormon tended to be very negative, Latter-day Saints were quite capable of defending themselves, responding to criticisms, and correcting misrepresentation when necessary. Many of the earliest Latter-day Saint publications were written in response to critics. In 1834, when E. D. Howe published Mormonism Unvailed, the first anti-Mormon book, Latter-day Saint leaders responded indirectly by publishing an account of Joseph Smith’s early history. In 1840, Apostle John Taylor wrote a rebuttal to several anti-Mormon tracts written by

*Boston Investigator*, 17 January 1844.
Reverend Robert Heys and Thomas Livesey who had relied heavily on *Mormonism Unvailed*. In his rebuttal, Elder Taylor noted with some amusement:

One says that Joseph Smith junr. is the author and publisher of the Book of Mormon the other says that Solomon Spaulding is the author of it! One says that it was written by Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, from the mouth of Joseph Smith, junr., as he looked at a stone, with his face in a hat; the other, that it was written, and altered by Sidney Rigdon, from the “Manuscript Found”!! One makes it out that it was written in Harmony township, Susquehannah county, by Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery; the other, that it was written in Conneaut, Ohio, first by Solomon Spaulding, and afterwards altered by Sidney Rigdon, in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania!!! So much, then, for the agreement of the testimony which is brought forth as FACTS concerning the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; and yet these gentlemen are both of them good men; both of them accredited ministers of the Methodist connexion; and both of them have got what they call FACTS, diametrically opposed to each other as light is from darkness. But Mr. Heys has got good testimony to his account, so has Mr. Livesey; and I suppose that because both of the testimonies are good, they must both of them be true—although the one contradicts the other—especially as they were supported and held forth by such pious, holy men. I shall leave Messrs. Heys and Livesey, then, to settle this difficulty between themselves.37

Some early criticisms of the Book of Mormon merely show that critics had never read the book or given it serious consideration. When one critic was asked in 1837 why he rejected it, he explained that he “had read the book of Mormon enough to find . . . the terms, ‘gunpowder, mariner’s compass,’ and several others of recent origin, introduced into a silly story of the exploits of one ‘Nephi.’ . . . There are also references to pistols and other fire arms.”38 In an inexplicable comment, Alexander Campbell faulted the Book of Mormon for mentioning “steam-boats.”39 Referencing the account in 3 Nephi of the destruction at the time of Christ, another critic wondered how the earth could be carried up upon the city of Moronihah (3 Nephi 8:10). “Tell us what this city stood on; the Moon, or which of the planets?”40 More sober critics wondered how Nephi could have a sword of most precious steel41 or be justified in killing a drunken Laban,42 why Lehi might write in Egyptian rather than Hebrew,43 or why the Book of Mormon would attribute Yankee nicknames like Sam or Josh to ancient Israelites.44 Recent research on the Book of Mormon puts these questions in an entirely different light. The subsequent confirmation of such details once thought to be problematic suggests that the Book of Mormon was much more than a product of its environment and lends support to its claim to be a translation of an ancient record.
Dan Jones on the Book of Mormon

Just two years following the murder of Joseph Smith in 1844, the fiery Welsh missionary Dan Jones, in surveying reactions to the Book of Mormon since its first appearance, noted:

Wherever it goes in every country, the ears of the populace are filled to the brim with stories and tales as numerous and varied as their authors, which consequently contradict each other; many of them published and preached by those who have never seen the book; others by those who have dipped into it here and there, purposely to pick faults, and not infrequently one sees quotations from it greatly distorted and twisted. Some describe it as an invented tale; others say it is a new Bible, to supersede the old. Some condemn it for being the most worthless tissue of foolishness they ever saw; others say that it is the most skillful fraud possible. Some find fault with it because it is too similar to the Bible, that its testimony coincides with it, and is therefore unnecessary; but others assert that it is a fraud because it is not similar enough to the Bible. Some condemn the principles it contains because they are immoral, totally evil, and blasphemous; but others of their brothers proclaim to their faces that the principles teach morality, chastity, and holiness, as though it had been purposely composed to trick in that way. . . . Some of the great men of the age have proclaimed that its idiom, its language, and its contents prove its antiquity; and others of the same class, that it bears every mark of a recent forgery. Some cannot make out what use it could be, or how to prove its truth, unless there were some prophecies in it to be fulfilled, from which they could prove its divinity; others quote extensively from the prophecies that are about to be fulfilled, and they condemn it for being too clear: the old prophets did not do thus, they say.


Notes
6. For a brief sketch of Kirkham’s life and contributions, see Perkins, “Francis W. Kirkham,” 52–57.
7. Walter A. Norton, “Comparative Images: Mormonism and Contemporary Religions as Seen by Village Newspapermen in


15. Martin Harris, the Mormon,” Rochester Daily Democrat, 23 June 1841.


21. Wayne Sentinel, 26 June 1829, emphasis in original.

22. “Gold Bible,” The Reflector, 13 January 1830, emphasis in original.


27. Missouri Republican, 9 August 1833, reprinted in Niles’ Weekly Register, 14 September 1833.


29. David Marks, The Life of David Marks, to the 26th Year of His Age. Including the Particulars of His Conversion, Call to the Ministry, and Labours in Itinerant Preaching for Nearly Eleven Years (Limerick: Office of the Morning Star, 1831), 340–42.

30. Nancy Towle, Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle in Europe and America (Charleston: by the author, 1832), 145.

31. Towle, Vicissitudes, 142.

32. Towle, Vicissitudes, 141.

33. Towle, Vicissitudes, 143.

34. Towle, Vicissitudes, 144–45.


40. A Disciple, [Reply to John E. Page], Morning Chronicle, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 29 June 1842.


In his autobiography Elder Parley P. Pratt wrote in spring 1844: “Visiting North Bridge, a short distance from Boston, and having a day’s leisure, I wrote a dialogue entitled ‘Joe Smith and the Devil,’ which was afterwards published in the New York Herald.” In this comical parody of popular sectarian criticism of the Latter-day Saints, the Devil acknowledges the absurdity of the Spalding theory but insists that it is the Prophet’s fault for publishing the Book of Mormon, thereby exposing sin and corruption and threatening all his evil plans. At length, the Devil claims to serve at least one useful purpose: “The fact is, you go in for the wheat, and I for the tares. Both must be harvested; are not we fellow laborers? I can make no use of the wheat, nor you of the tares, even if we had them; we each claim our own, I for the burning, and you for the barn. Come, then, give the poor old Devil his due.”

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