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Perpetuation of a Myth: Mormon Danites in Five Western Novels, 1840–90

Rebecca Foster Cornwall and Leonard J. Arrington

In Caldwell County, Missouri, during the spring and summer of 1838, there had been instances of vandalism, theft, and terrorism against Mormon settlements. Mormons, fearing a repeat of the occurrences in Jackson and Clay counties, from which they had been driven by force and political maneuver in 1833 and 1836, were determined not to lose their properties again. Therefore, over a period of eight to sixteen weeks, a small group of Mormon men met in private homes to plan defensive tactics against "gentiles" and dissenting Mormons.

The initial targets of these Brothers of Gideon, as they called themselves, were Mormon "dissenters"—several leaders who, by violating economic or moral codes, had given "aid and comfort" to the enemy, anti-Mormon mobs.¹ These defecting leaders and their families were intimidated by the Brothers of Gideon into leaving Missouri. A more general purpose for the band then emerged—direct retaliation against the anti-Mormon terrorists.² After recruiting additional members, the band included as many as three hundred of the estimated two thousand Mormon men in Missouri.³ Many Danites, as they came to be called, were simultaneously members of the Mormon wing of the state militia, a fact which confused the identities and purposes of the two groups.⁴ One Danite member even claimed that their plunder was deposited in the cooperative storehouses maintained by Mormon bishops.⁵

Samson Avard, founder of the Danites, was arrested for these illegal activities and brought to a preliminary hearing of charges in

²Ibid. ¹
⁵Ibid., pp. 435–36.
November 1838. There he claimed to have been following orders from the Mormon First Presidency (Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and Sidney Rigdon). Although witnesses sympathetic to the Mormons denied this, other witnesses were hostile, and the First Presidency spent the winter in jail waiting for trials which never came. By testifying against the Church leaders, Avard escaped conviction.

The short-lived existence of the Danite band created controversy both inside and outside the Mormon church. Most of the Danite leaders were speedily excommunicated. Even in the early Danite meetings, contentions had arisen over the volatile and secretive tendencies of its leaders. It was during this period that some Church members began to distrust Sidney Rigdon, who may have supported the band by his incendiary public rhetoric. One constructive result of the Danite affair was that it defined more clearly for the whole Church the religious ethic of forbearance, which later guided Mormon response to Joseph Smith's murder, the forced exodus from Nauvoo, Indian harassments, and the Utah Expedition of 1857.

But it required "the grace of God without measure" (which Joseph Smith called for) to equably bear intolerance, violence, and governmental apathy. Joseph (and later Brigham Young) constantly found it necessary to instill some of this grace into members who were overeager for revenge. It can safely be said that although Church authorities occasionally let off steam in public, in action they were usually restrained, counseling nonprovocation.

Incidents of violence on the Utah frontier were rare considering the expanse of the Mormon settlement and almost immediate interruption of its isolation. Surrounding the most tragic and widely reported incident, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, was an inflammatory circumstance: Utah was in a state of war, preparing for

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| **Gentry, "'Danite Band(descriptor):':" pp. 434–35, 450.** |
| **Ibid., p. 426.** |
| **Ibid., p. 437.** |
invasion by a federal army. Unfortunately, the details of the massacre and the harassment of Johnston’s Army by the Utah Nauvoo Legion and Minute Men (originally formed to protect settlers from Indian attacks) were usually distorted in the national press. Fiction writers were quick to use these incidents, along with tales of the short-lived Danite band. Between 1850 and 1900 these writers created a fictitious horde of “Danites” in dozens of short stories and more than eighty novels, travel books, and pseudomemoirs published in America and Europe. By 1900 at least fifty-six anti-Mormon novels alone had been published in English, incorporating one or more aspects of the Danite myth, beginning with the false assumption that there was a functioning Danite organization in Utah.12

What made the Sons of Dan, alias Destroying Angels, alias Brothers of Gideon, so absorbing a topic for Victorian writers? On what did these writers base their notions? As creators or borrowers of a legend, how did they treat it? In this paper we trace the Danite theme in five of the more palatable and popular novels published between 1840 and 1890.

**Monsieur Violet** (1843)13

The Danites (and indeed the Mormons) made their fictional debut in Frederick Marryat’s *Monsieur Violet: His Travels and Adventures among the Snake Indians...* (London, 1843). This was one of six novels for boys written by Captain Marryat, a British naval hero who later forged an equally illustrious career as an author.14

*Monsieur Violet* purports to be the story of a young French nobleman as told to Marryat. It is a loosely strung narrative of


Some western historians believe that literary images of the Mormons perpetuated not by territorial officials, journalists, or polemicists, but by fiction writers were a potent influence on public sentiment and thus on governmental policy toward the Mormons. For instance, a rash of anti-polygamy “memoirs” published in the early 1850s characterized the Mormons as a superstitious, depraved, and treasonous people. In the year before the Utah Expedition of 1857, four appeared, of which two could be considered bestsellers. Maria Ward’s *Female Life in Utah* became an international favorite, going into six English and five foreign editions. (See Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt’s “The Missouri and Illinois Mormons in Antebellum Fiction,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5 [Spring 1970]: 37–50.) While early Mormons blamed some of their Missouri troubles on fiction writers, they included the whole “concatenation of diabolical rascality... all that are in the magazines, and in the encyclopedias, and all the libelous histories that are published” (D&C 123:5, revelation dated March 1839, during Joseph Smith’s imprisonment in Liberty Jail over the Danite affair).


encounters with plains Indians; the Mormons are seemingly brought in as an afterthought. Joseph Smith is introduced on the pretext of Monsieur Violet’s visiting Nauvoo as a representative of an Indian chief who wishes to unite with the Mormon “kingdom.” This gives Marryat the chance to editorialize for fifty or more pages on the new religion, “the most extraordinary imposition of the nineteenth century” (p. 298).

And editorialize he does. Through Violet, Marryat comments, “Perceiving how anxious I was to learn anything about this new sect, my host introduced me to a very talented gentleman, who had every information connected with their history” (p. 298). This introduction, however, was in printed form and took place after Marryat’s return to England, not during his 1837 visit to St. Louis. No admirer of democracy, Marryat was susceptible to books and theories which discredited frontier culture. The gentleman who supplied Marryat’s fictitious Violet with information about Mormonism could have been any one or a composite of several Protestant ministers and disaffected Mormons who wrote anti-Mormon “histories” between 1834 and 1843. However, Marryat’s wording and thought most closely resemble Henry Caswall’s The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century, a seemingly erudite work (there are footnotes on every page) but one which borrowed extensively from John C. Bennett’s and earlier dissidents’ polemics.¹⁵

According to Marryat, probably borrowing from Caswall, a secret Danite society was formed shortly after Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and others arrived at Far West, Missouri. The society was “bound by an oath and covenant, with the penalty of death . . . to defend the presidency, and each other, unto death, right or wrong. They had their secret signs, by which they knew each other, either by day or night” (pp. 152–53).¹⁶ Marryat, through Violet, mentions the “Salt Sermon” in which Sidney Rigdon reportedly threatened dissenters with being trodden “under the foot of the Church” like washed-out salt, “until their bowels should gush out” (p. 154). With an independent touch, Marryat has Violet describe a beautiful but fortified Nauvoo, the description based on a letter from a superior officer of the U.S. artillery (pp. 161–66).

Marryat precedes this secondhand information with an improvisation which is intended to explain Americans’ susceptibility to

¹³Henry Caswall, The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century (London: Printed for J. G. F. and J. Rivington’s, 1843); John C. Bennett, History of the Saints, or, an Exposè of Joe Smith and Mormonism (Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842). Caswall was an Anglican divine in St. Louis; Bennett was an ex-Nauvoo politico and Mormon defector.
¹⁴Compare Caswall, Prophet of the Nineteenth Century, pp. 155–57.
religious mutations and which becomes the prototype of succeeding fictional Danite settings. Spiritualism, Violet muses, can be expected in the western country of the United States, on the borders of the immense forests and amidst the wild and broken scenery of glens and mountains, where torrents roll with impetuosity through caves and cataracts; where, deprived of the amusements and novelties which would recreate his imagination, the farmer allows his mind to be oppressed with strange fancies, and . . . is a slave to the wild phantasmatogoria of his brain. (Pp. 135–36.)

In a final flight of strange fancy and colorful diction, Marryat refers to the Mormons as "warlike fanatics" (p. 166). Because of their intent to "annihilate all other sects, . . . we may therefore, see the time when this gathering host of religious fanatics will make this country [America] shake to its centre. A western empire is certain" (pp. 164–65).

Voila! Religious polemic breeds historical inaccuracy which generates literary myth. Few would continue to read Caswall or Bennett, but many would read Marryat for a long time to come, including fledgling authors who would reject his antirepublicanism but remember his art.

**THE WILD HUNTRESS (1861)**

*The Wild Huntress* (3 vols., London, 1861) was one of many romances by Captain Mayne Reid, an Irishman who trapped and soldiered in America as a young man and returned to England to become an author of adventure stories. His popularity is indicated by the inventory of Mudie's circulating library for 1848–69 showing titles of authors kept in stock: 41 volumes by James Fenimore Cooper; 32 by Sir Walter Scott; 24 by Marryat; 23 by Charles Dickens; 20 by Reid; 15 by William Makepeace Thackeray; and 11 by Robert Ballantyne.18

_Huntress_ was not a relative favorite among Reid's fans, although written at the height of his career and sold in impressive enough numbers. The plot and structure were borrowed from his own past works. Reid knew his readers' taste for authentic detail mixed with violence and camouflaged sexual fantasy, but he had supplied these needs so often by the time he wrote _Huntress_ that his storytelling had become almost slick. Still, _Huntress_ demonstrates why Reid's

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18For biography and criticism of Reid, see Joan Steele, *Captain Mayne Reid* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, a Division of G. K. Hall and Co., 1978). Sara Keith’s tabulation of Mudie’s library holdings is on p. 112.
works were so popular. Their republicanism thrilled British boys and American readers. Their heroes represented a number of races and social classes; villains in *Huntress* include a white Mormon (a Danite chief), a red outcast, and a black mammy. The glory of Reid’s work was his power of description. The Reid canon as assessed by the *Spectator* was that, in spite of his weak characterizations and muddled plots, he was able to “create atmosphere—he could make the reader conscious of residence under a new sky.”

*Huntress* opens with a matchless description of a Tennessee hunter’s cabin and clearing. Into this clearing wanders a British gentleman, who falls in love at first sight with the hunter’s blonde, poetry-reciting daughter. Next, from the cabin steals the tempestuous half-breed huntress of the book’s title to meet her backwoods lover. Finally, enter greasy Josh Stebbins, the Mormon blackmailer. Compared to Stebbins, even Holt, the gullible, surly hunter, seems decent, despite the fact that he betrays a daughter to the Mormons to avoid prosecution for an alleged past murder. After the introduction of characters, the melodrama quickly deteriorates into a chase across the Great Plains to rescue Holt’s daughter from dishonor, but even this silliness is subservient to dangerous encounters with Indians told “with the finish of an artist.”

How did Reid work Danites into the Tennessee wilderness? Josh Stebbins is a Mormon missionary. He seeks converts and wives for the Mormon prophet and recruits for the band of “Destroying Angels” with which he is confederate—men whose “strong arms and stout hearts” qualify them to defend their faith with violence and bloodshed. Stebbins flatters the dour old hunter Holt, telling him that he would make a good Danite: “You’re just the man to be one of them; and I have no doubt you’d be made one, as soon as you joined us” (3:237).

Because Reid relished contrast and foil, one can predict that his Danites will be lurid. The hero describes a band of these avengers who guard a Mormon wagon train: “Six more villainous-looking individuals I had never beheld. There was no sign of the angelic, neither in their eyes nor features—not a trace; but, on the contrary, each might have passed for an impersonation of the opposite character—a very ‘devil incarnate!’” (3:327).

Their baseness happily illuminates the chivalric soul of our British hero, whose heart is so pure that his desires do not include avenging

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19Ibid., p. 49.
20According to Steele, Edgar Allan Poe uses this phrase in describing Reid (ibid., p. 20).
evil, but only preserving innocence. The "executive myrmidons of the Mormon faith" at last prove their impotence against the valor and cunning of our heroes. Josh Stebbins falls with a purple hole in his forehead, while his men retreat like buffalo through the gorge—but not until they've offered formidable opposition (3:334–35).

How much personal knowledge did Reid possess about the Mormons? Early in Huntress his narrator states: "Accident had made me acquainted with the Mormon religion; not with its tenets—for it has none—but with the moral idiosyncrasy of its most eminent [eminent?] 'apostles.'" No personal expertise is necessary, he claims; to understand Mormonism "in all its cruel significance," one need only read "its history and its chronicles" (1:308). At that time these chronicles were limited to Marryat and the anti-Mormon "histories" Marryat had appropriated.

Before Reid's return to England in 1848, he had opportunities for vicarious if not firsthand acquaintance with the Mormons, for he had lived and traveled on the Mississippi River. He spent the year 1839–40 working and teaching near the docks of New Orleans, the disembarking port for Mormon immigrants to Nauvoo. During the next three years, he joined trapping and exploring expeditions which originated in St. Louis, even then a trade and travel center to which Nauvoo was oriented. The naturalist James Audubon, one expedition leader, is said to have taken a liking to him and to have taught him western horticulture and, no doubt, lore.21 Missouri newspapers were of course interested in the Mormons, reporting on them regularly, or with rare exception, in a tone akin to that of Bennett and Caswall.

It is difficult to explain why in Huntress Reid abandoned his customary magnanimity in characterizing not just a few Danites but Mormons in general as "vulgar" and "brutal," their leaders as "conspirators, charlatans, hypocrites, and imposters, if you will . . . [having] neither faith, dogma, nor doctrine" (1:312). His absorption in rhetoric went beyond the requirements of drama. Always in financial trouble, Reid perhaps turned to this footnote in his experience as a vehicle for "saleable exoticism."22 What he wrote was not entirely true, but if the rumors that the Mormons were practicing polygamy were true (and in 1852 they proved to be), then, Reid felt, the Mormons were a threat to traditional decency and thus fair game for a

21Ibid., pp. 18–19.
22Steele describes the dreamlike quality of Reid's fiction as offering "a great deal of instinctual gratification of a sadomasochistic nature" and "satisfaction of a euphoric state depicted in . . . shades of black and white containing hidden appeals to their [readers'] deepest psychological nature" (Ibid., pp. 129–30).

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writer of moral tales, whose business was to superficially uphold decency while actually offering a legitimate release from it. Moreover, Reid was not prone to discriminate between fact and fiction in his stories any more than in his life. Edgar Allan Poe, whom Reid met in New York City through a mutual friend, accused him of every day fibbing "on a surprising scale," calling him "a colossal but most picturesque liar."

FIRST FAMILIES OF THE SIERRAS (1876)

During and immediately after the Civil War there was a hiatus in anti-Mormon literature. In 1870, however, Albert Aiken and John Beadle resurrected the Danites, and by 1875 a new generation of writers and reformers were at work, carrying the theme of the evils of Mormonism through at least thirty-four novels in two decades. One of the most popular and perhaps the finest of all the Danite novels was First Families of the Sierras, published in Chicago in 1876 and again in 1881 under a new title, Danites in the High Sierras. Its author, Cincinnatus Hiner Miller, had posed in London under the assumed name Joaquin as an American cowboy-poet in chapskins and sombrero. He liked to compare his poetry to Byron's. In New York, critics snubbed his poems, but his novel was adapted into a hit play which went through several revivals.

At fifteen, too young to be critical, Miller had started his education as a miner and cook in the Oregon and California camps. He seems never to have gained the critical spirit. He lived his life virtually unedited, romanticizing the mining camp on paper and letting others smooth over his poetry. The result is not unpleasant.

Miller treats the Danites, as he does all his characters, without malice (or, for that matter, accuracy). He considers Danites to be synonymous with all the followers of the Prophet Joseph: "As a rule those who followed the prophet, as well as those who murdered him, were wild, ignorant men, from the mountains of Tennessee, the wilds of Virginia and their own Missouri" (p. 63). Beginning with a most gentlemanly reference to the historical conflict between the Mormons

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23Ibid., p. 20.
24Joaquin Miller, First Families of the Sierras (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg and Co., 1876).
25By the authors' count.
and the Pikes ("Pike's Peakers" or transplanted Missouri rednecks), Miller sets up the Mormons in his novel as an artifice for suspense:

The prophet of God, as these men professed, had been slain. Unlike the Christians, they proposed to slay in revenge. I fancy you might trace this on till you came to the awful tragedy of Mountain Meadows. Putting the two tragedies together, side by side, and passing them on to the impartial judgement of some pagan, I am not certain that he would not pronounce in favor of the Mormon. (Pp. 64-65.)

The reader does not encounter a real Danite anywhere in the story. But a pretty young woman (whose brothers, it is rumored, helped to kill Joseph Smith) comes to the Forks in the Sierras.

The woman's fate entwines with those of the townspeople, mostly miners bred on hard religion and low life. They are the "first fam'lies," later joined by hatchet-faced men "not from Missouri" who, with their "idecated" (educated) ways, put terror into the old timers (p. 205). But more terrible still are the Danites, who have no faces. They are goblins who strike at night in vengeance for wrongdoing. They are the adder in the path, cunning beyond the comprehension of simple men whose sins boil down to ignorance, drunkenness, and whoring. "In a land where few men feared death . . . these Danites alone were crafty, venomous and subtle; and so it was that the fear of them was no common fear" (p. 155).

Miller acquired much of his knowledge about the Mormons from newspapers, but because he knew Ina Coolbrith (whose family was Mormon),27 he was not overly influenced by negative reports. Furthermore, his personal morality strayed far enough from Victorianism that the Mormon practice of polygamy, which earned instant animosity from other sources, could not have offended his sensibilities very much. This lack of animosity towards the Mormons is evident in his mild and deliberate handling of the Danite theme. With typical ambivalence, according to an editor of the Deseret Evening News, Miller in 1889 seemed remorseful for misrepresenting the Mormons, although he continued to boast that he had been responsible for popularizing the Danites in literature.28

27 Ina Coolbrith (1842–1928) was the daughter of Don Carlos Smith, brother of Joseph Smith. In 1852 (after her father's death) her mother, Agnes Coolbrith Smith, took Ina (who was real name was Josephina, after her uncle Joseph) and her sister to San Bernardino, later Los Angeles. Ina, who adopted her mother's maiden name, kept in touch with her cousin, Joseph F. Smith, but was basically reared as a non-Mormon. (See Leonard J. Arrington, "Divinely Tall and Most Divinely Fair": Josephina Donna Smith—Ina Coolbrith,"' Utah Libraries 13 [Spring 1970]: 8-14.) Ina Coolbrith, an American poetess, was poet laureate of California in 1915. She, along with Bret Harte, edited the Overland Monthly (1868).

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THE DYNAMITER (1883)

The novel and stage versions of *Danites in the High Sierras* mark the height of the literary portrayal of the Danites. Unfortunately, the stereotype had by this time come into full currency; hence many inferior and biased imitations of Miller's works were being written. Support for anti-polygamy laws enacted in the 1880s must have been aroused partly by the twenty-one book-length works of anti-Mormon fiction published in that decade by American and British houses. Many of these works play upon the myth of the Danites. Of the twenty-one, two are moderately competent and only one of these is still read today. This is *The Dynamiter*, which satirizes the whole genre of anti-Mormon fiction and is therefore valuable as a capsulization of the myth.

*Dynamiter* is a tangle of contrived plot and attitudes. It might help to note at the outset how it was created: Robert Louis Stevenson was temporarily blinded and bedridden from one of his many bouts with consumption. His wife, Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson, nursed him constantly, perhaps tyrannically, as shown by the fact that in desperation Robert persuaded her to leave him and take a walk each day. While outdoors, she was to concoct a tale to tell him on her return. Some months afterwards, short of money, they worked these tales into a novel. This helps explain the shifts in tone and skill, although it is unfair to attribute, as some did, only the livid passages to Fanny.

The novel parodies just about everything Victorian: middle-class decency, feminine innocence, masculine chivalry, German revolutionaries, British fear of revolutionaries, and literary stereotypes of the spunky old dowager, the avenging Mormon, and the voo-dooing West Indian. In brief, three young Londoners, down and out but barred from menial jobs by bourgeois pride, decide to go detecting. Each is independently duped into dangerous subterfuge by the same beautiful anarchist. One of these young gentlemen, Mr. Challoner, meets her on a train—or rather, she accosts and beguiles him into a wild chase involving secret messages and futile rendezvous. Then she disappears. Realizing that he has been hoodwinked, the young man returns to London, happens on a wonderful rental opportunity, and settles into a bland existence, until one day his house is blown up.

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30The decade 1875-85 brought the height of anti-Mormon publishing. We have counted twenty-four full-length books; this does not include plays, short stories, poetry, articles, and journalistic works.
32Ibid., p. 305.

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Whom should he capture fleeing from the explosion but the beautiful girl, who at last confesses her story in a long flashback to her childhood in Utah. Her parents, it seems, misled into Mormonism, had reared her a Saint. In her young maidenhood, haunted by the prospect of a polygamous marriage, she fled Zion, only to be pursued by the very Danite who had just dynamited Challoner’s house, which by coincidence is owned by the girl’s aunt.

The Stevensons drew upon stock images of the Mormons for their portrayal of the Danite “Destroying Angel” and his territory. Marryat’s frontier had long since been moved to the “still unknown regions of the West” (p. 23), in particular Utah. Here is a vast and melancholy desert through which strangers guide themselves “by the skeletons of men and animals” and where “neither beast nor bird disturb[s] the solitude” (p. 23). The elders of Zion are “hair-oiled” and “chin-bearded,” the women of their harems mentally stunted (p. 30). The heroine, on the other hand, has a smile of touching sweetness, eyes deeply violet, and honest eloquence of soul. Her life consists of “glad simplicity . . . not a thought to coquetry or to material cares,” until the Mormon elders demand from her father “some signal mark of piety” (p. 34). Of course her father refuses, and during his midnight attempt to smuggle his family out of the valley he is hunted down by Brigham Young’s henchmen, never to be seen again. The poor daughter flees to the States and finally across the ocean, followed by the Mormon Eye.

The dynamiter, however, turns out to be like no other Danite we have seen before. The Stevensons had great fun with him. Both knew better about the Mormons—Fanny had lived in two desert defiles (Austin, Texas, and Virginia City, Nevada) with her first husband, Sam Osbourne. Robert had spent a year in which he frequented bookstores and became acquainted with western literary society. As much as manipulating a stock theme, they were satirizing anti-polygamy novels, public response to them, and British respectability to boot, which comes across in the story as inane self-justification. The dynamiter himself maintains his alias as a chemist only until he too can escape Brigham Young. Self-rationalization is the joke behind all three adventures.

It is probably inaccurate to say that the joke was made at the expense of the stereotype. Here was the humorous, enlightened use of a literary image which had been treated very soberly, often ignorantly,
in newspapers, magazines, and third-rate novels of the day. Two types of individuals perpetuated the Danite myth: writers and politi-
cos who catered to the mass preference for exaggeration and hysteria, and the literati who laughed at the mass preference but nevertheless courted it, although in a saner and more skillful manner. With few straightforward sympathetic treatments of the Mormons and virtually none that reached the mass audience, nothing counteracted the total effect of bad press. But the Stevensons must be credited with an at-
temt to kill the literary Danite, with the hope that he could never again be used with harmful effect.

A STUDY IN SCARLET (1886)

In 1886, when Arthur Conan Doyle needed a macabre backdrop for a detective story, he readily and misguidedly found it in Danite country. At the time he wrote A Study in Scarlet, Doyle, alone of the six authors considered here, had no firsthand knowledge of Mormon-
ism but derived his notions entirely from written sources.

One inspiration for Study was The Dynamiter, the Stevensons' bestseller of three years earlier from which Doyle borrowed his hero-
ine's name and situation and the anarchist motif. But Doyle him-
self had grown up on such myths and did not need the Stevensons.
As a child he had read everything by Mayne Reid at least once. With an appetite "voracious and indiscriminate," he had devoured new-
papers and magazines since his teenage years. The British yellow
press at the time was urging hanging for Mormon missionaries, who were widely believed to be kidnapping English servant-girls. Doyle
would have encountered articles about the Mormons not only in the mass press but also in better journals, which reported on the subject with a frequency equivalent to Atlantic, Harper's, and Saturday Review, each printing Mormon pieces at least twice a year.

It is possible to identify even more immediate sources for A Study in Scarlet. Doyle wrote the story from March to the middle of

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35 Arthur Conan Doyle, A Study in Scarlet (New York: A. L. Burt, [1900]).


38 For one example, see London Quarterly Review 2 (1884): 115–22.

39 By the authors’ count.
April 1886. In the International Review of February 1882, a copy of which was found in Doyle’s papers, an unfriendly report on the Mormons appeared which contained a description of the Great Basin markedly similar to Doyle’s in Study.40 On 30 March 1886, a report appeared in the London Times on the latest government efforts to rid Utah of polygamy. Entitled “The Last Struggle of the Mormons,” this article too was sensational in tone and suggested conditions in Utah—suppression of dissent, threat of violence—for which the Danites had elsewhere come to serve as a convenient unifying symbol.41

Study is interestingly (some say badly) plotted, with two entirely different settings. The narrator, Dr. Watson, begins his tale in contemporary London in an imaginary neighborhood described so vividly that tourists still seek it. This framework is distinguished by the debut of Sherlock Holmes, whose brilliantly flawed personality, surely one of the most satisfying character developments in English literature, provides the sole vindication of Study’s continued appeal. To Holmes’s delight, a murder takes place; by page ninety it is solved. The remaining sixty pages are devoted to the confession (a story which takes us to Utah) and some wrapping up.

Even early readers of Study found the Danite flashback to be, as Pearsall says, “melodrama of the most off-putting kind.”42 But Doyle was always fascinated with the unearthly, and at the time he badly needed money. So he borrowed an alkali basin of desolation and silence where “there was no bird in the still-blue heaven” but where the “coyote skulks, . . . the buzzard flaps heavily through the air, and the clumsy grizzily bear lumbers through the dark ravines” (p. 101). Into this dreary district snakes a caravan of “grave, iron-faced men” with meek, pale-faced women (p. 109): the Mormons. Their children toddle beside the wagons. Along the trail the Mormons discover an old, long, thin man and a starving little girl (p. 111).

Among these Mormons,

to express an unorthodox opinion was a dangerous matter. The victims of persecution [in Missouri] had now turned persecutors . . . of the most terrible description. Not the inquisition of Seville, nor German Vehmgericht, nor the secret societies of Italy, were ever able to put a more formidable machinery in motion than that which cast a cloud over the Territory of Utah. (Pp. 127–28.)

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40Higham, Adventures of Conan Doyle, p. 74.
41Ibid.
42Pearsall, Conan Doyle, p. 30.
Illustration from *A Study in Scarlet*
The invisibility of the Danites makes life there doubly terrifying: a dissenter’s family never knows who struck or when, since a victim never lives to tell. When the supply of women runs short in the Mormon harems, immigrant camps are rifled. “To this day, in the lonely ranches of the West, the name of the Danite Band, or the Avenging Angels, is a sinister and ill-omened one” (p. 129).

Obviously the myth had ossified by the time Doyle took it up. Undaunted, he preserved it for future generations of mystery and Western writers who, like himself, were willing to capitalize on a ready-made plot. In 1922, upon Doyle’s impending visit to Salt Lake City, an Englishman wrote to him complaining that Study in Scarlet gave the impression that murder was a common practice among the Mormons. Doyle apologized for having written “in my early days, a rather sensational and over-colored picture of the Danite episodes, a passing stain in the early history of Utah.” He hoped that the truth would be noted “by a certain section of the British press.”

CONCLUSION

In overview, how did these six authors treat the Danite theme? Frederick Marryat introduced it to fiction when he plugged into Monsieur Violet almost verbatim passages from contemporary anti-Mormon chronicles. Out of this beginning Mayne Reid created an individualized Danite of audacity, courage, deceit, lustfulness, vindictiveness, slimy vulgarity, murderousness, and devilishly sardonic wit. He stretched Marryat’s already stretched truth by identifying as Danites, if not all Mormons, at least the best Mormons—those with the strongest arms and hearts. From this time on, the image of the Danite was synonymous with that of the Mormon. Joaquin Miller knew as much about the Mountain Meadows Massacre as was available in 1875, enabling him to write more credibly about the Danites and to speculate in his novel as to why the spectre was so persistent in the minds and imaginations of poor, sinful Pikes. In spite of this sensitivity, largely through the success of stage versions of First Fam’lies, Miller can be credited with fixing the stereotype of the Danite in the popular mind. In the Stevensons’ burlesque may be seen the main elements of Danite literature: the stereotypes of ruthlessly obedient henchmen and broken-spirited women, a morbidly naturalistic setting, and a sinister view of Mormon authoritarianism. In the matured

myth, the Mormons—carnal, hard-lipped men who keep harems of mentally-stunted women—patrol the silent, melancholy reaches of the West where no man ‘‘but an occasional fair-haired maiden’’ defies Brigham Young and lives to tell the story. Conan Doyle made no innovations in this tradition; he simply overbaked it.

Where did these six authors acquire their ideas about Danites and Mormons? Five of the six had travelled in regions of Mormon influence—the central Mississippi, the Great Basin, and California—where they had gained a personal knowledge of hearsay about the Mormons, if not about Mormonism itself. The Stevensons seem actually to have reacted against stances commonly taken in the press, structuring their stories in opposition to some prevalent attitudes. Even the writings of Marryat and Reid were less virulent in tone than the class of anti-Mormon subfiction being printed, and their bias can be ascribed to their first conditioning to Mormonism in the 1840s in Missouri, the region and period of most intense anti-Mormon feelings and actions. Extent of exposure to the real product did not consistently correspond with how realistically any of the six portrayed Mormonism. Other considerations, such as artistic and philosophical intent, played a more important role than historical fact did in treatments of the Danites.

Aside from personal travels and the media, fiction writers inherited their notions about Danites from each other. Being borrowers and lenders, they quickly developed a convention from which they rarely strayed. Once established, the myth endured with only minor adaptations.

These authors seem to share, too, an inborn taste for the kind of sensationalism that explains Victorian absorption in Mormonism. More serious students who happened upon Utah in person or print were impressed with the Mormons’ agrarian and social accomplishments wrought so quickly in isolation. But our authors did not dwell on innovations or achievements; Mormonism appealed to them for its peculiarities, notably polygamy. The evil fact of polygamy made credible almost any fiction about Mormonism. To minds so inclined, an isolated crime such as the Mountain Meadows Massacre unsaid a hundred denials of a Danite conspiracy.

Accompanying this negative predisposition to Mormonism were the novelists’ affinity for “phantasmagorias” of all kinds seen through contrast, exaggeration, simplification, and generalization. A few misrepresentations about the Mormons could easily become “torrents” rolling with impetuosity through the “caves and cataracts” of Marryat’s or the Stevensons’ or Miller’s imaginations. Conan Doyle
invoked this explanation when asked to retract Study. It was best to leave the matter alone, he said; besides, things were always depicted more luridly in fiction than in history. 44

Finally, use of the Danite theme arose out of simple opportunism. Fiction writers, moralists at heart, could not be expected any more than journalists to overlook such a topic. More to the point, these authors wrote their "Mormon" books during financially difficult phases of their careers. A lucrative market existed for Mormon stories, which appealed both to the reform-minded and the curious, the pious and the prurient. Fiction writers would not lean toward financially unprofitable, authentic studies on the order of Remy's Journey to Great-Salt-Lake City; 45 they turned to more sensational and marketable approaches. Victorian novelists dwelt on myths about the Mormons because the facts were simply too mundane.

44Ibid.