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Ronald W. Walker

"The Gospel is spreading," jubilantly wrote the Mormon Apostle Heber C. Kimball from England in 1840, and "the devils are roaring." Elder Kimball, along with six missionary associates, first landed in England from America in July 1837. Their proselyting efforts produced what seemed to them a remarkable success. In less than a year, they added approximately 1,500 to the handful of members they had found in the British Isles.

A second wave of Mormon missionaries led by Brigham Young and the Church’s Quorum of Twelve Apostles disembarked in 1840. Their efforts were even more productive. Another seven or eight thousand souls were quickly joined to British Mormonism, and by the end of the decade the Church was claiming fifty thousand English conversions.

While such a harvest made Mormonism only a minor British sect, to the fledgling Utah Church these additions were of major importance. A visitor strolling down a Salt Lake street in 1870 would have found the clipped British accent rivaling the flat-toned Yankee drawl. A third of the inhabitants of Salt Lake County were British born.

Why had Victoria’s subjects found this imported religion from America so compelling? The answer lay partly with the cradling social conditions of the time. Too, the reason for Mormon success was the result of the qualities of the religion itself. Mormonism as it was first preached in Great Britain was a youthful and vibrant faith that spoke in the British industrial and preindustrial vernacular. Its message fit perfectly (some would say providentially) with the social and religious upheaval of the time.

When the Mormon Apostles first landed, the winds of change seemed to be blowing from every direction. The English population had

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doubled since the beginning of the century. The Industrial Revolution in turn uprooted the nation’s countryside, and by 1851 England became the first large, modern state with one-half of its population living within cities. The results of the demographic and industrial revolutions were immense. The Lord Chancellor might still sit upon a symbolic woolsack, but the nation’s wealth increasingly centered in the new mill towns of the Midlands and north. There, in the congested squalor of his new environment, the English laborer found the certainties of his old life-style were lost. No longer was his behavior reinforced by the scrutiny of village acquaintances. As a result, the mill owner and banker began to challenge the squire and parson as arbiters of the laborer’s conduct and convention.

There appeared new patterns with every turn of the kaleidoscope. George Stephenson’s Stockton and Darlington Railroad, Sir Robert Peel’s London Metropolitan Police, Thomas Attwood’s Birmingham Political Union, Edwin Chadwick’s Sanitary Commission, and Robert Owen’s Consolidated Trades Union were each symbols in their own way of early nineteenth-century transition. Together they spoke of revolutions in transportation, public safety, pressure politics, public health, and trade unionism that would continue to sweep the nation throughout the century and beyond.

Thus at the moment Mormon missionaries began their proselyting tours, England was experiencing the uncertainty of change and innovation. The Great Parliamentary Reform of 1832 had only whetted the reforming appetites of the middle and laboring classes. The Anti-Corn Law agitation of John Bright and Richard Cobden sought to deliver a more substantial blow to the agrarian aristocracy, while the working-class Chartists—diffuse, unstable, and loosely led by the mercurial Fergus O’Connor—sought a genuine English democracy. These two great reform movements, joined by at least another dozen other agitations, convulsed England with crusades, pamphlets, circuit riding reformers, mass meetings, and hortatory journals. Moreover, the spirit of reform was furthered in the late 1830s and early 1840s by unseasonable weather and a sputtering national economy. Genuine distress demanded amelioration.

In response Parliament quickened its pace of reform. During the thirties and forties, the nation abolished colonial slavery, commenced the public support of elementary education, began to improve the conditions of child labor, abandoned the Speenhamland dole system of poor relief for Benthamite work houses, reformed the Anglican Establishment, and eventually surrendered to the demands of the free trade advocates by repealing the Corn Laws. Great Britain seemed convulsed with agitation and transition. Within this movement and change, there lay opportunity for men preaching the gospel message, freshly reestablished by Joseph Smith on the American frontier.
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Victorian religion played an even more substantial role in preparing the way for British Mormonism. "Probably in no other century, except the seventeenth and perhaps the twelfth," George Kitson Clark has written of the times, "did the claims of religion occupy so large a part in the nation’s life." Of course Christianity had long extended its influence upon English civilization; from Lambeth Palace to the parish parsonage, it had permeated society. But during the nineteenth century, especially among the nation’s ascending middle class, religion became "vital." It breathed energy, instilled conscience, imposed standards, and challenged the harsh developments of the age. Not all Englishmen fell under its spell. Nevertheless "active religion" set the tone of Victorian society, with a majority of England’s most influential citizens at least outwardly yielding to its claims.

The Wesleyan revival had earlier expressed this new spirit. It warmly criticized the Anglican Establishment’s worldliness, its mismanagement of temporalities, its simony, nepotism, and the holding of clerical livings in plurality. John Wesley, its leader, demanded a religion that touched the English laborer, and within the working class he found a field ready for harvest. When he died in 1791, perhaps 135,000 Englishmen formally called themselves "Methodists," with another million being attracted to the movement’s precepts.7

A personal and vital religion lay at the heart of the Wesleyan revival. The unregenerate must probe his soul for impurities and cast them off in the redemption of Christ. He must be reborn. Sacrifice, enthusiasm, and service became the signs of inward grace. Concretely these virtues took the form of Bible study, Sabbath observance, sobriety, temperance, and the quest for family solidarity. Such inclinations were translated, in turn, into over one hundred philanthropic societies. There were Bible, Sabbatarian, Sunday School, temperance, missionary, educational, and antislavery societies—and many more besides. The ferment was broad-based and omnipresent.8

Most of England’s major denominations were influenced by the new religious spirit and participated in its organizational crusades. Concurrent with the Methodist success, such Anglican churchmen as Henry Venn vigorously preached the new evangelicalism, although with a greater loyalty to church government and tradition than Wesley. Venn not only led efforts to evangelize the industrial north, but later, with university men Isaac Milner and Charles Simeon, helped to make Cambridge an intellectual center for the Low Church view. Equally significant were the Clapham Saints led by William Wilberforce, Zachary Stephen, and John Venn. Along with their ally, Hannah Moore, the Claphamites were primarily interested in promoting practical religion and elevating “manners.”9
Some of the Dissenting sects also joined the rising evangelicalism. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists had long cherished religious individualism and personal salvation, and while they generally avoided the emotional extremes of Methodism, the power of romantic religion reignited their old vigor. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Congregational and Baptist church settings rose over 300 percent and 400 percent respectively. In the new northern factory towns, where their growth was particularly strong, Dissenting chapels in the early decades of the century outnumbered Anglican churches by 3,454 to 2,535.  

British Mormonism drew upon all these religious sources, although laboring and left-wing religion were particularly important. Wesleyan Methodism earlier had aroused the working masses. But its political and religious conservatism, partially the result of the growing prosperity and respectability of its members, lessened its attraction among laborers. Several new denominations consequently arose teaching an unvarnished, emotional, biblical religion. The Kilhamites or New Connection Methodists seceded from Wesleyanism a few years prior to the turn of the eighteenth century. The Bible Christians formed their groups in southern England two decades later. But the Primitive Methodists and their leader, Hugh Bourne, particularly seemed to foreshadow Mormonism. The Primitive Methodists preached early Christianity with an emphasis upon biblical literalism, employed a lay ministry, and found conversions in the new industrial towns as they took the gospel directly to the people. “Our chapels,” Bourne later wrote, “were the coal pit banks, or any other place; and in our conversation way, we preached the Gospel to all, good or bad, rough or smooth.”  

While the seceding Wesleyan denominations preceded the Mormons by several decades, the Christian churches which clung to Chartism were contemporaries. Such lay preachers as Benjamin Rushton and William Thornton sought to instill a religious element in what was essentially a political movement. They denounced traditional Christianity’s insouciance for the untutored, sought a return to fundamental morality, and preached such regenerative practices as temperance and teetotalism. Like other radical sects, they worshipped wherever two or three of the faithful might be met—in homes, public halls, or schools. They also frequently abandoned traditional theology for social and political protest. Clearly this was a religion of the people—informal and unpretentious in style yet responsive to laboring needs and issues.  

Owenism was another part of this early religious environment. Robert Owen, the New Lanark industrialist, social reformer, and agnostic, successively advocated factory paternalism, Parliamentary regulation of the mills, trade unionism, cooperative socialism, and,
ultimately, free thought spiritualism. He proclaimed a secular millenniunm for the laboring poor, preached the need for a revision of marriage and social relationships, and held out the hope of an American Zion at New Harmony, Indiana. Despite its secular protestations, Owenism flowed from the chiliasm of the post-1832 Reform excitement. Its methods were evangelical, and it drew as certainly upon the decline of Wesleyan Methodism among the working masses as did the schismatic Methodist sectarians. 13

It was then from this matrix that the Latter-day Saints in Great Britain grew. The American missionaries, for example, drew heavily upon the new factory towns for conversions. At a time when half of the English population lived in villages of fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, LDS emigration records reveal that nine out of ten converts making their way to the United States possessed urban nativity. Forty percent came from cities of fifty thousand inhabitants or more. Such industrial districts as London, the west Midlands, south Wales, Lancashire, West Riding, and central Scotland contributed heavily to Mormon conversions and subsequently to emigration. 14

If the typical British convert was urban, he also was drawn from the lower social levels. The William Clayton diary “leaves the impression that [the members of the Manchester Branch] were mostly of the working class; many lived in boarding houses, some were transient and some were illiterate.” 15 Jennetta Richards, the wife of mission stalwart Willard Richards, received the opprobrium of the British Saints by donning a stylish veil and muff. Later she learned to “dress down” for her fellow Saints. 16 Brigham Young observed similar laboring class attitudes and standards. “I have gone to bed many a time,” Young later recalled of his missionary days when he had lodged in the home of an English convert, “and when I have turned down the bed I would find the sheet patched from end to end, so that I would wonder which was the original sheet. . . . The rich and noble, as a general thing, have turned a deaf ear to the voice of the Elders of Israel.” 17 Church shipping records confirm his observation. During the early 1840s, the occupational roles of the emigrants indicated only slightly more than 20 percent could be roughly judged as middle class. Thereafter the ratio steadily declined until by the 1860s it was less than 10 percent. 18 It was mainly “the poor and the ignorant,” as Young described them, who found themselves gathered into the Mormon gospel net. 19

Other information concerning the British convert is impressionistic but nevertheless suggestive. If the membership of the Manchester Branch were representative, most were in their twenties or thirties and unmarried. Consequently their freedom to accept a new religion and even a new citizenship were unrestrained by ties of marriage and a settled life. 20 Moreover, Owen Chadwick’s survey of Victorian religion found
many Latter-day Saints to have been weaned from "splinter-Methodists or splinter-Baptists."\(^{21}\) While a thoroughgoing study of the religious origins of British Mormons has yet to be undertaken, it is apparent that if Mormonism did not draw upon working-class denominationalism, it was at least being propelled by similar currents.

The American missionaries preached an uncomplicated message of primitive Christianity restored. "We opened the door to that nation in great simplicity," Elder Kimball recalled. "The Lord appointed me to that work because I was willing to be the simplest."\(^{22}\) The intellectual E. L. T. Harrison agreed that early British Mormonism was unadorned. "Mormonism was then simply a Bible religion," he recalled, "preaching a revival of the apostolic spirit, and gifts; a religion of the broadest charity, sublime in sentiment and philosophical thought."\(^{23}\) When the 1840 missionaries landed, they found the English Saints had discarded their Wesleyan hymnals. "They wanted new ones," they reported, "for the Bible religion, and all is new to them." Parley P. Pratt's widely circulated tract, \textit{A Voice of Warning}, clearly stated the LDS argument. Primitive Christianity "differs widely from all modern systems of religion, both in its offices, ordinances, powers, and privileges, insomuch that no man need ever mistake the one for the other." Furthermore, Pratt held:

> Were we to take a view of the churches, from the days that Inspiration ceased, until now, we should see nothing like the kingdom [established by Christ]. . . . But instead of apostles and prophets, we would see false teachers whom men had heaped to themselves, and instead of the gifts of the Spirit, we should see the wisdom of men; and instead of the Holy Ghost, many false spirits; instead of the ordinances of God, commandments of man; instead of knowledge, opinion; guess work, instead of Revelation; division, instead of union; doubt, instead of faith; despair, instead of hope; hatred, instead of charity; a physician, instead of the laying on of hands for the healing of the sick; fables, instead of truth; evil for good, good for evil; darkness for light, light for darkness; and in a word, anti-christ instead of Christ; the powers of earth, having made war with saints, and overcome them, until the words of God should be fulfilled.\(^{25}\)

Primitive Christianity as practiced by the Mormons was not an abstract and lifeless religion. It touched, vitalized, and transformed lives. Even before Heber C. Kimball and his companions preached their first English sermon at Preston in 1837, they were assaulted by legions of "evil spirits with full-formed bodies." Kimball believed himself and his cohorts were rescued by guardian angels.\(^{26}\) Similarly, later in London three angels saved Kimball, George A. Smith, and Wilford Woodruff from Satanic distress.\(^{27}\) Such experiences seemed everywhere. Forty years after the event, Eli Kelsey's ministry of miraculous healing in Scotland remained a Utah topic of conversation.\(^{28}\) In turn the \textit{Millennial Star}, the church organ in England, recorded over a score of devils cast out
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of a woman in Leamington Spa,\textsuperscript{29} the deaf and blind restored at Littlemore,\textsuperscript{30} a night vision of the Apostle James at Bolton,\textsuperscript{31} and miraculous healings and evil spirits in Southampton.\textsuperscript{32} "The man that did not then believe in being ‘thoroughly spiritualized,’ ” Elder Harrison later wrote, “was the Apostate of those times!”\textsuperscript{33}

Notions of approaching apocalypse furthered the new religion’s appeal. “Chiliasm has always accompanied revolutionary outbursts,” Karl Mannheim has observed, “and given them their spirit.”\textsuperscript{34} English working-class religion fit the pattern. Joanna Southcott, the prototype for numerous subsequent enthusiasts, excited tens of thousands of followers with her millennial prophecies in 1801–4, again in 1814, and posthumously throughout the century in many derivative movements.\textsuperscript{35} Thus when Orson Hyde issued in 1837 his A Timely Warning to the People of England, Mormonism’s first missionary broadside to be printed in England, it touched a responsive chord. “God will soon begin to manifest his sore displeasure to this generation,” Hyde warned.

Wo! be unto all the wicked ones of the earth; for the fire of God’s jealousy will consume them, root and branch, except they speedily repent.

Earthquakes, strange things and fearful sights, together with the waves of the sea heaving themselves beyond their bounds, will cause men’s hearts to fail them for fear.

As John was sent before the face of the Lord to prepare the way for his first coming, even so has the Lord now sent forth his servants for the last time, to labour in his vineyard at the eleventh hour, to prepare the way for his second coming.\textsuperscript{36}

Like their seventeenth-century Puritan forefathers and their Owenite contemporaries, the Mormons preached a millennialism with an American twist. Before the conflagration, the repentant would gather to the American west to build a godly and egalitarian community. Between 1840 and 1890 some 55,000 British converts accordingly journeyed to the United States. These constituted only a fraction of the total British migration, which during the decade of 1845–54 alone dispatched three million settlers to America.\textsuperscript{37} The British press explained the Saints’ growth as part of the broad trend of emigration. Mormonism’s “promise to lead [English laborers] out from their Egypt of task-work and subjection,” typically intoned the Birmingham Daily Press, “has made them rally round [the new religion] as around a new Moses sent from God.”\textsuperscript{38}

There was of course an element of truth to the observation about Mormonism’s pecuniary lure. The English laborer, inured by the hungry 1840s, must have viewed the LDS American Zion as an opportunity and promise. The Mormon missionaries, who believed that religion should temporally bless as well as religiously sanctify, would not have had it otherwise. Such beliefs clearly found a willing response. Symptomatic of
what was to follow, the first British convert, the youthful George D. Watt, enthusiastically spoke of migrating to America within two weeks of his baptism, despite the missionaries’ reticence on the topic.39 Yet the attraction of a new life in America was not the only thing impelling the recently converted. Watt’s stirring came after reading prophetic passages in the Saints’ Book of Mormon, a religious impulse that P. A. M. Taylor’s thoughtful study of the Saints’ emigration seems to confirm. Taylor noted that the pulsations of Mormon migration often deviated from general English patterns. Since the latter usually flowed at high tide during periods of economic distress and receded during prosperity, other factors besides simple economic advantage must have been at work with the Mormons.40

To their Bible Primitivism, display of spiritual gifts, millenarianism, and communitarianism, the Mormon preachers buttressed their cause with other appealing doctrines. They virtually embraced Universalism, but tempered it with an intricate assortment of rewards based upon grace and works. In addition to his Bible, every elder carried a Book of Mormon, a religious history of pre-Columbian America. The scripture may have been unique to the Mormons, but its teachings were not. It equated true religion with Christology, reconfirmed the Old Testament cycle of prosperity conditioned upon righteousness, and taught a fundamental morality and charity. In turn the temperance of the Saints—in practice more moderation than abstinence—opened temperance halls for their use. English teetotalers found the Saints eminently effective in their cause.41

The Church’s ministerial system also possessed appeal. American preachers by no means were unique to the English scene. Lorenzo Dow’s revivalism had already aided the Primitive Methodists. Charles Grandison Finney had rallied English Congregationalists and Wesleyans. Lesser ministers regularly plied the Atlantic Ocean. Moreover the Mormon system of itinerancy fit prevailing patterns. Chartist mechanics, anti-Corn Law agitators, trade union artisans, as well as sectarian preachers traversed the Victorian countryside.42 No doubt the penury and lack of pretension of the Mormon itinerants endeared them to their working-class congregations. When Elder Kimball first arrived in England “destitute of the comforts of life,” he wore a donated camlet cloak that would cross the ocean six more times (twice with Kimball and on four other occasions as part of another missionary’s wardrobe).43 Likewise, upon landing in 1840, Brigham Young carried only six shillings, used his family’s little trundle-bed quilt for an overcoat, wore a tattered cap of home manufacture, and possessed a pair of pantaloons so wanting in respectability that the Liverpool ladies pooled their means to secure an immediate replacement.44
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Clearly the Saints' lay and unpretentious ministry worked to their advantage. The American missionaries might take the lead, but duly ordained English converts carried the ministerial load. This allowed Mormonism to shed whatever image it might have possessed as a foreign intruder. Indeed it facilitated the conversion of former preachers. Protestant ministers such as Thomas Kington and James Palmer might secure Mormon membership and Mormon priesthood on the same day and continue without interruption their errand for the Lord.45

Claims of an authorized priesthood gave the Mormon preacher special confidence. Joseph Smith, the founding Prophet, testified that Christ's disciples, John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John, had confirmed upon him and his followers divine authority. The Church thus combined popular religion with the voice of authority, a mix that proved enormously energizing. As a result the Saints' lay ministers boldly stalked the land, speaking confidently and authoritatively. Parley Pratt addressed Queen Victoria in a written tract and informed her of approaching revolutions.46 Twenty-year-old youths, similarly authorized, fearlessly delivered the warning voice in unfamiliar and friendless neighborhoods.

All this made England a fruitful field. "We find the people of this land, much more ready to receive the gospel, than those of America," wrote Young and Richards to their Church leaders. "for their priests have taught them but little, much of that is so foolish as to be detached at a glance."47 Mormonism in fact became one of the few denominations to prosper in the working-class environment. Converts saw their new religion as a sharp contrast from the dour and cold formality of the Anglican and Nonconformist performances, with their stereotyped prayers, formalized sermons, purchased pews, and unhappy views of mankind's depravity. The Saints prospered in the 1840s in part because of inferior competition.48

Of course the success and image of British Mormonism changed. Like Chartism, Mormonism began to peak in Great Britain with the return of prosperity in the late 1840s. The official announcement of plural marriage in 1852, the simultaneous preaching of speculative doctrines, and the unfavorable publicity resulting especially from the 1857 "Utah War" in America made the decline precipitous.49 As late as 1859, the Saints claimed to have seven to eight hundred congregations in Great Britain, supported by four thousand lay ministers.50 But this at best was an Indian summer before an unyielding season of distress. During the last third of the century, congregations and membership melted before the twin forces of migration and apostasy, and baptisms never approached their earlier rates.

The early British convert made his mark in Utah. Some proved to be chaff. Nostalgically recalling British-Mormon working-class religion
and carrying as part of their cultural baggage the tradition of British dissent, some rebelled against Brigham Young’s theocratic Zion and traveled into heretical byways, such as William S. Godbe’s “New Movement” in the late 1860s and early 1870s.51

Most, however, proved desirable sheaves. Reflecting their nativity, they typically avoided agricultural pioneering and instead settled in Salt Lake City and in surrounding communities.52 There, they exerted a non-proportional influence on such activities as commerce and culture. Such immigrants as William Nixon, Henry Dinwoody, Francis Armstrong, William Jennings, John Chislett, and William S. Godbe, and the Walker brothers became leading merchants, while Deseret’s lectures and debating clubs, literary and artistic societies, choruses and musical bands, early magazines and newspapers, and little theaters were often dominated by British-born talent. Even more far-reaching for the development and progress of the restored Church, the Britisher brought to America his strong religious stirrings. Some, like George Q. Cannon, Charles W. Penrose, George Teasdale, and John R. Winder, became influential General Authorities. Others, including not a few transplanted British women, influenced local congregations. Occupying pulpits and Sunday School rostrums, they implanted Victorianism on both the current and rising Utah generation. If the British setting had proven hospitable to Mormonism, it also came to shape the values and practices of the maturing Church.

NOTES


2By Kimball’s reckoning, he was gone from his American home in Kirtland, Ohio, “eleven months and two days.” His stay in England was more abbreviated, “being on that land eight months and two days” (see Journal of Discourses 6:65. Kimball stated that there were already a few Saints in England upon his arrival (see ibid. 9:180). Kimball’s various estimates of baptisms stemming from his first mission reached as high as 2,500 (see ibid. 4:108; 6:65).


4Department of the Interior, Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census, 1870, The Statistics of the Population of the United States, 373. In this year the Salt Lake County population was 18,337 with 5,826 of British nativity. Another 118 came from Canada.


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The parallels between Owenism and Mormonism have not escaped contemporary scholarship. See Thompson, Making of the English Working Class, 801–2 and J. F. C. Harrison, Quest for the New Moral World: Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 93, 137.


Allen and Alexander, Manchester Mormons, 15, 22.


Allen and Alexander, Manchester Mormons, 22; compare with data found in Appendix A.


Journal of Discourses 3:113; see also 6:65.

Leader, 6 September 1873.

Times and Seasons 1 (June 1840): 122, emphasis added.

Parley P. Pratt, A Voice of Warning, and Instruction to All People, or an Introduction to the Faith and Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ, of Latter Day Saints (Manchester: W. Shackleton and Son, 1841), 97, 110–11. The book had been circulated through the English mission even prior to its first British edition in 1841.


The Journal of Discourses 3:229; 8:258.


Heber J. Grant, Journal, 15 March 1887, 153, Historical Department, Library-Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

Millennial Star 9 (1 August 1847): 231–34.

Ibid. 6 (1 July 1845): 28–29.


Leader, 6 September 1873.


As cited in Taylor, Expectations Westward, 32.

Kimball to Saints, Journal of Discourses 7:16–17. Watt came to Kimball so enthused about the prospect of settling in America that reportedly his face shone "like that of an angel." The missionary encouraged him: "I told him to prophesy on, for I knew it was of God" (ibid. 10:245). See also ibid. 14:97.


Ibid. 7:229; 14:80–81.


Brigham Young and Willard Richards to the First Presidency of the Church, 5 September 1840, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives.


Ezra T. Benson said the reversal started with the 1856 Mormon Reformation, *Journal of Discourses* 6:178. At about this time Ezra T. Benson related that the British Saints were subject to widespread mobbings at the places of their public worship, ibid. 6:178–79.


Taylor, *Expectations Westward*, 244.