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The Decline in Convert Baptisms and Member Emigration from the British Mission after 1870

Bruce A. Van Orden

For most of the nineteenth century the British Mission was the largest mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Between 1837, when Joseph Smith authorized Heber C. Kimball to lead the first LDS missionary entourage to Britain, and 1870, more people were baptized in the British Mission than in any other mission of the Church, and more Latter-day Saints emigrated to Utah from the British Isles than from any other place in the world. During the thirty-three years from 1837 through 1869, 95,232 people were baptized in the British Mission, an average of 2,886 per year. After Mormon emigration to America began in 1840, an average of 935 Saints left the British Isles every year in Church-sponsored parties. By 1870, a total of 28,063 people had come to America this way, and numerous others had come on their own in smaller groups. There were by this time 73,747 members of the Church in the nine stakes of Utah and southeast Idaho. Most were British immigrants or their offspring, a group that obviously provided considerable strength to the Church, comprising in most localities a majority of the adult Saints.1

Given the remarkable conversions during the missions of the Apostles to Great Britain in 1839 and 1840, it was natural that the Church should direct much of its missionary effort there in the years that followed. Generally, the work in this most fruitful of mission fields was directed by members of the Quorum of the Twelve, such as Wilford Woodruff (1845–46), Orson Hyde (1846–47), Orson Pratt (1848–51 and 1856–57), Franklin D. Richards (1851–52, 1854–56, and 1867–68), Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich (1860–62), George Q. Cannon (1862–64), Daniel H. Wells (1864–65, not a member of the Twelve, but a member of the First Presidency), and Brigham Young, Jr. (1865–67). Beginning in the 1850s, the responsibilities of the British Mission president, whose headquarters were in Liverpool, included supervision of the entire European Mission. In this capacity, he usually spent several

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weeks each year visiting missionaries and members in Scandinavia, Holland, Switzerland, and some of the German republics.

Though the mission continued to compare favorably in both baptisms and emigration with other missions of the Church for the remainder of the nineteenth century, the greatest years were over for the British Mission by 1870. Church membership in the British Isles had begun to decline steadily after a peak of more than thirty thousand in the early 1850s. By 1863, Saints in Britain numbered only 13,851; in 1871, membership was down to 7,206; by 1874, it had decreased to 5,423. Naturally, much of this decline was caused by heavy emigration as almost a thousand Saints per year (992 average) left Britain for the United States during the 1860s. Between 1870 and 1875, however, emigration dropped to an average of only 697 per year, even though the journey had become much easier with travel by steamship and railroad. Though not less expensive in this new way, the journey from Liverpool to Utah required less than a month, compared to the several months it had taken by windships and oxt eams.

Contributing to the decrease in emigration was a decrease in the rate of convert baptisms. While the average number of missionaries remained essentially constant (thirty per year during the 1860s and thirty-one per year during 1870–73), the average number of baptisms fell from 1,611 per year during the 1860s to 577 per year during 1870–75. Both baptism and emigration rates showed slight increases from 1876 to 1880, but after this the general decline continued for the rest of the century.

It might appear on a superficial examination that this decline in missionary success in Great Britain was related to events occurring in Utah during the same period. Conflicts between Mormons and gentiles in Utah and between Mormons and the federal government had been intensifying throughout the 1860s and 1870s. The year 1870 marked the beginning of the U.S. government’s “antipolygamy crusade,” an endeavor that damaged the reputation of the Church and decreased its political and economic strength. This “crusade,” a term that seems to have arisen partly from the attitudes of Utah Territorial Justice James B. McKean, was given momentum by a series of events that occurred between 1870 and 1875. McKean, appointed in 1870, was an intensely religious Methodist with moral scruples against polygamy; he was also a member of the radical wing of the Republican Party, a group that was bent on reforming the South as well as the Mormons in Utah. Also in 1870, gentiles in Utah, together with Mormon nonconformists, established the Liberal Party in an attempt to counterbalance the political power of the Church. That same year, some twenty-five zealously anti-Mormon men formed the Gentile League, which maintained lobbyists in Washington to influence territorial appointments and direct legislation against polygamy.
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In 1871, McKean decided to attack Brigham Young directly, and he had the Mormon leader arrested on charges of adultery and lasciviousness. Because of certain judicial errors on McKean’s part, these charges were dropped six months later without President Young’s ever coming to trial, but attacks against the Church continued to mount. Congress, under pressure from President Ulysses S. Grant, worked in 1873 to pass various pieces of antipolygamy legislation. Thanks to the efforts of Utah Territorial Delegate George Q. Cannon, however, by 1874 only the Poland Bill had passed, a law limiting the jurisdiction of Mormon-dominated courts and abolishing the offices of territorial marshall and attorney general in Utah. Continuing the crusade, federal officials in 1875 pushed forward several court cases, including the Ann Eliza Webb divorce from Brigham Young, the George Reynolds polygamy “test case,” and the prosecution of John D. Lee for his part in the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

As time passed, the Church fell further and further into disrepute with the federal government and the American public. Ultimately the government, through successively harsher legislation during the 1870s and 1880s, was successful in sapping virtually all of the Church’s economic strength. In 1890 the Church publicly discontinued its policy of plural marriage, and the crusade came to an end.

This conflict between gentiles and Mormons did not go unnoticed in the British Mission. Events in Utah and Washington that affected the Church were eagerly followed by missionaries and Saints in Britain in the pages of the biweekly Milennial Star. Each development in the antipolygamy crusade was not only reported but explained, and from the Mormon point of view, eloquently elaborated upon, by assistant editors of the Star such as John Jaques, George Reynolds, James G. Bleak, John C. Graham, and L. John Nuttall. All of these men had been Church leaders and exponents of the faith in Zion, and none of them ever attempted to hide the polygamy controversy from the British Saints in order to protect their faith, desire to emigrate to Zion, or Church membership. Rather, these journalists presented lengthy, carefully considered articles on the doctrine of plural marriage. These men, whose loyalty to the kingdom of God had already been tested many times, strenuously defended the Church against its accusers, including gentiles in Utah, government officials, and American and British journalists. Even the President of the United States was not spared criticism by these men defending their church.

Always there was a spirit of optimism in the Milennial Star about the prospects of eventual victory over Mormonism’s foes. “At the present time a great effort is being made in America to overthrow the work of God,” observed John Jaques in an editorial. “It may be very trying to some of the Saints,” he continued, “but He will overrule it for
the good of those who have the welfare of His work at heart, as He has done so many times in the past, and His work will advance the faster towards the accomplishment of its appointed destiny." In spite of this outward confidence, however, the leaders of the British Mission were obviously anxious about events in Utah. Eagerly they awaited American newspapers and telegraphic dispatches from Salt Lake City that kept them apprised of current events. In September 1871, when Judge McKean threatened the arrest of Brigham Young (a threat he carried out in October), leaders of the Church telegraphed the British Mission president, Apostle Albert Carrington, and summoned him to Utah at once. George Reynolds, who was left in charge of the mission, wrote to George Teasdale in Utah that the British press speculated that Brigham Young would be taken by government officials and hanged. "Our newspapers here are pretty much filled with the 'End of Mormonism,'" he observed. George F. Gibbs, who arrived in England just as Carrington was leaving for Utah, wrote home, "As soon as reports are flashed across the line unfavorable to the 'Mormons,' it is in the mouth of everybody and the press circulate it and make comments that polygamy is receiving its death blow at the hands of officials." The missionaries naturally had to deal with the antipolygamy bias of the British citizenry. John Woodhouse, a forty-four-year-old native British missionary who was married to three women, reported that Mission President Joseph F. Smith had instructed the missionaries regarding polygamy:

not to thrust it forward, prominently, nor to go out of the way to preach it, but when information was sought on that principle to give it freely. And when the principle was attacked to defend it to the best of our ability and the wisdom given us. In my experience and travels, I found plenty of both kinds.8

Even though missionaries in various conferences of the British Mission would have experienced some concern for their leaders and fellow Saints in Utah during the antipolygamy crusade, there is no evidence that they themselves lost their faith or zeal for the work. Most missionaries were married; some of them practiced plural marriage and had numerous children. A majority of British missionaries were over forty years old and were mature in the faith. They rarely complained that the trouble over polygamy in Utah was a negative influence on missionary work or on preparation of members for emigration. It cannot be concluded, then, that the decline in numbers of converts and emigrants in the British Mission after 1870 was primarily linked to polygamy or the antipolygamy crusade.

Other events in Utah during this period also caused some stir in the British Mission. First was the resignation of seventy-two-year-old
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Brigham Young in April 1873 as Trustee-in-Trust for the Church and president of the Deseret National Bank and of ZCMI in order to devote his energies more fully to counseling the Saints and traveling through the settlements. The press in both the eastern United States and Great Britain proclaimed that the Mormon leader had resigned his position as President of the Church and that he was soon to leave Salt Lake City for retirement in Arizona. Some journalists postulated that this action would lead to the long-sought solution to the "Mormon problem." S. S. Jones, assistant editor of the *Millennial Star*, made this response to the situation:

As the news of President Young's abdication and retirement to private life was heralded forth by the press, placarded on the streets, and made a topic of general conversation, we did not think it at all necessary to issue any extra edition of the *Star* to quiet the minds of the Latter-day Saints in relation to these stirring rumors, knowing that they have become accustomed to exaggerated reports and false alarms, and like troops who have once stood fire, are not so easily excited or thrown into confusion.

Jones then assured the missionaries and British Saints that President Young's resigning from business positions "will in nowise affect his position as President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." As far as I have been able to determine, no missionaries ever mentioned in writing that this brouhaha was a factor in their missionary efforts. It is likely that, if anything, the increased attention drawn to the Church would have been beneficial to the work.

The Panic of 1873 in the United States had a more important effect upon the British Mission. History shows that Brigham Young's leadership and the United Order system he instigated to cope with the economic crisis helped Utah weather the storm better than most of the United States did. As D. M. Stuart of Ogden assured Acting British Mission President L. J. Herrick, "All is peace in our Mountain Home, and there is plenty, notwithstanding the money panic in the States. Improvement goes on, and railroads are being built north and south, through the Territory. New developments of mineral wealth are coming to light on every hand." Nevertheless, the Saints in Utah did suffer, as Herrick learned from other observers, and this suffering had its effects in Britain. Before 1873, money from Utah's Perpetual Emigration Fund had substantially aided the British emigration effort, but in 1874 and 1875 funds from Utah were almost nonexistent. Consequently, emigration dipped from an annual average of 785 over the years 1869-73 to 650 in 1874 and 389 in 1875. By 1877, the effects of the depression were over, and emigration from Britain to Utah enjoyed a comparative rejuvenation.

From the accounts of the missionaries themselves, it would seem that a more important factor in their declining success than the anti-polygamy crusade and other events in Utah was the comparative apathy of the Saints in Britain. Most of the missionaries who arrived in England
each year from 1870 to 1875 were former Britishers. Throughout these six years, missionaries repeatedly commented on the noticeable change in religious fervor that had taken place among members of the Church in their homeland. Charles Wilcken lamented from Birmingham that some members were “neither hot nor cold” and added, “Satan is working hard to rock the Saints to sleep, and in some instances he is doing it most effectually.”13 “Many of the folks have degenerated into good old singalong sectarians,” observed George Reynolds. “Apparently not a spark of the true living spirit of the gospel is with them. They would make mighty good Methodists perhaps. They are always glad to see an elder, but there’s not the true ring about them, they are so fast asleep you can’t wake them up.”14 George Barton wrote, “We have some who do not appreciate their standing in the Church and Kingdom of God, being as dead branches attached to a thrifty tree, and it seems that forbearance will soon cease to be a virtue, unless they retrace their steps and show by their works that they are willing to keep the commandments of God.”15

Obviously, one of the reasons for this apathy was that many of the most devoted and prosperous of the Saints had already left Britain for Utah. “The saints who had means have emigrated to Zion,” wrote John Bennion, “& those left are either very poor or milk & water Saints & I almost pity the Elders who have now to labour in this land.”16 Poverty among the British Saints was clearly a major factor in preventing many from emigrating and in causing them to appear apathetic. Some members of the Church were simply without employment and struggled merely to live; saving money to leave for America was out of the question. “The Saints in [Kent] Conference are poor, and many of the brethren are out of employment, consequently they cannot do much at present in rolling on the great work,” explained George Barton. “Many of them have been in the Church twenty years and upwards, have travelled and preached the Gospel, have drunk the dregs of poverty for the sake of truth, and are here to-day waiting patiently for the time of their deliverance to come.”17

British missionaries returning to England in the 1870s also noticed that attention to religion in general had diminished in the land they had left as much as twenty years before. John Woodhouse wrote:

My first surprise was to find a great change in the people since the time when as a native priest I had first preached the gospel there. Then there seemed to be interest and the people anxious and they would come to hear the gospel. But now this seemed changed. The people seemed to have lost interest in religion.18

John Bennion noted as he passed out religious pamphlets to uninterested Englishmen that the people were “almost universally satisfied with their own creeds,” which were “very numerous.”19 Missionaries sometimes attributed this change in religious interest to the rapidly
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increasing wickedness that was overtaking “Modern Babylon,” as prophesied in the scriptures. George Reynolds considered these changes to be a sign of the times and noted:

A decay has taken place in English life, during the few years I was in Utah. Crime is increasing, licentiousness is spreading, drunkenness is growing, disease is developing, the poor appear to be poorer, if the rich are not richer and the rising generation of Englishmen appear to be a sickly, stunted race, bearing the marks of a degenerating nation.  

The elders generally concluded that the time was short before the inhabitants of Britain would reap the punishment of their wickedness. “It seems as though but few more will be gathered from this land until some great calamity overtakes the nations,” observed John Bennion.  

If Mormon missionaries of the time reflected pessimistically upon the status of religion in Britain in the 1870s, modern scholars might confirm the evaluation. The religious apathy of the Age of Enlightenment was overcome in Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by a succession of religious crusades. The last noticeable “religious awakening” of the nineteenth century in Britain occurred in 1859. The impressive number of Mormon conversions between 1839 and 1860 came, therefore, during a period of general religious fervor. But in “a slow, uneven transformation involving European civilization as a whole,” as Gilbert puts it, secularization supplanted religious fervor in Britain. “During the past two centuries industrialization has acted as a powerful catalyst to hasten the transformation.”  

Davies describes the years following 1860 as a “period of explosions” of “faith grappling with doubt” which led to a “theological revolution.” Not only did science (especially Darwinism) “throw down the gauntlet” to religion, but historical and literary critics attacked the biblical accounts of the Creation, the Flood, and the wondrous events in the life of Jesus. Hence the whole of British society lost considerable interest in the Bible and in the claims of religionists in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, agnosticism had become not only respectable but almost universal. Cox notes the decline, between 1850 and 1880, even of the Nonconformist denominations, among which would be included The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Once again the patterns of religious activity among Mormons after 1870 fell into the greater British pattern.

It appears, then, that although jarring events in Utah after 1870 might at first glance appear to be responsible for the decline in convert baptisms and emigration, these events, though of great interest to the missionaries and British Saints, actually had relatively little to do with the declines. Mormon polygamy, after all, had been widely known in Britain and had created anti-Mormon prejudice as early as the 1850s.
Extreme poverty had beset the Church in Utah on other occasions, such as in 1855–59. Still, missionary work and emigration had gone forward with great strides in the 1850s and 1860s. Much more important than the antipolygamy crusade and the Panic of 1873 to the difficulties in the British Mission after 1870 were the apathy of many members of the Church remaining in Britain and the everdeclining religious fervor among the people of Great Britain in general.

NOTES


2 There is no single list of membership statistics by years for the British Mission for this early period. Drawing from sporadic journal and manuscript records, Gladys Noyce of the LDS Church Historical Department compiled the volume, "Church Membership, 1850–1945," from which these statistics were drawn.

3 Evans, Century of "Mormonism," 243–45.


5 "Millennial Star" 32 (10 May 1870): 296.

6 George Reynolds to George Teasdale, 16 October 1871, MS 932, Reynolds Collection, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo (hereafter cited as Reynolds Collection).

7 George F. Gibbs to Julie, 10 October 1871, George F. Gibbs Letterbook, 1871–73, Library–Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

8 James Mercer and Kate Woodhouse Kirkham, "John Woodhouse: His Pioneer Journal, 1830–1916," typescript, 40, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, and LDS Church Archives.

9 The LDS Church Archives and the Harold B. Lee Library contain numerous diaries and reminiscences of British missionaries. These, together with reports from missionaries published in the Millennial Star for this period, provide the evidence for these conclusions.

10 President Young's Resignation," Millennial Star 35 (22 April 1873): 248.


13 Ibid. 35 (11 February 1873): 91.

14 George Reynolds to George Teasdale, 27 January 1872, Reynolds Collection.


16 John Bennion to Mary Bennion, 13 January 1873, John Bennion Letters, LDS Church Archives.

17 Millennial Star 32 (25 January 1870): 60. The poverty of the British Saints was a continual theme in the reports of the missionaries.


19 John Bennion to Mary Bennion, 21 November 1872, LDS Church Archives.

20 George Reynolds to Israel Barlow and Members of the Sixth Quorum of Seventies, 4 January 1872, Reynolds Collection.
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John Bennion to Mary Bennion, 13 January 1873, LDS Church Archives. Other missionaries reflected on the same theme in their reports to the mission president and in their journals.


Gilbert, Post-Christian Britain, 17.


Cox, The English Churches in a Secular Society, 7.