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King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang

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Four months before the assassination of Joseph Smith, James J. Strang, formerly a professed atheist, hitched his wagon to Joseph Smith’s star. Since childhood, Strang had dreamed of greatness and power, even of becoming a king, and when he saw all Joseph Smith had done, the possibilities for himself “with his cunning and far superior education” (6) seemed exciting. The death of his daughter in 1843 made Strang realize that his own life span was limited and that his ambitions might never be realized. Joseph Smith’s career, however, rekindled his youthful dreams, and Joseph’s assassination gave him an opportunity to seize power.

As soon as the Prophet was dead, Strang produced a letter, signed by Joseph Smith and dated nine days before the murder, appointing him as Joseph’s successor. The letter was quickly followed by a visit from an angel, who showed him where six brass plates were buried and who gave him the Urim and Thummim. Strang took four witnesses with him to dig up the plates from under a tree, and he himself soon translated them. The “Rajah Manjou Plates” told the story of a survivor of a slain ancient people and prophesied of a forerunner (Joseph Smith) who would be killed and of a “mighty prophet” (Strang) who would follow him (35). Later Strang produced the *Book of the Law of the Lord*, which included an inspired translation from additional plates, called the Plates of Laban, containing “the most important parts of the law given to Moses” (97). Aggressive, impressive, and persuasive, Strang succeeded in gaining a following that included among its leaders two former Nauvoo Saints of questionable character: John C. Bennett and George J. Adams. These two became key actors in Strang’s rise to power on Beaver Island in Lake Michigan.

Roger Van Noord brings admirable balance to the story of the rise and fall of the “King of Beaver Island.” He shows respect, even admiration, for Strang’s intellect, imagination, and skill as an orator and legislator. But he also shows that Strang was a conscious fraud who forged, or had forged, his original prophetic credentials as well as misled both followers and outsiders on many other issues. Although the narrative becomes tedious, at times, with long strings of facts or events and little interpretive analysis, it is nonetheless a fascinating tale, ending with a well thought-out interpretation of Strang’s motives and impact.
Voree, Wisconsin, was designated as Strang’s holy city, but internal conflict soon set in, apparently kindled by his deceptions and a secret order within the church. As Van Noord observes, “Those followers who were seeking a church centered around spiritual values were disillusioned, and many left the fold” (63). In the meantime Strang explored Beaver Island, found it to his liking, and in 1848–49 persuaded many of his flock to follow him there and purchase property. By the end of 1849 there were approximately 250 Strangites on the island. Strang himself purchased some property, although eventually he told the faithful that the land (mostly federal land) was theirs by right, as members of the Kingdom, regardless of the law. This attitude contributed to violent conflict with their non-Strangite neighbors.

Strang’s first wife, Mary, followed him to Beaver Island, bore him children, and longed for him when he was gone. The reason for their eventual separation is not clear, although she greatly disliked island living as well as her husband’s frequent absences. She left the island even before knowing for sure that he had taken another wife, though Van Noord suggests that there was plenty of evidence despite Strang’s vehement denunciation of plural marriage and his constant denials of his own involvement.

Strang took his second wife, Elvira Field, in 1849. In contrast to Mary, she became not only a wife, but also his “intellectual mate” throughout the rest of his life (82). At first she traveled with him disguised as a man and posing as his personal secretary, Charles J. Douglas. She was called “Charlie,” went with him everywhere, and, under her male name, wrote articles for the Gospel Herald. Not until Elvira’s first child was born did Strang finally receive a revelation permitting plural marriage. Eventually he had five wives; all of them except Mary seemed happy with him.

The Strangites quickly gained political power, not only dominating Beaver Island, but also tending to control county politics. This control added to the tension between them and their “Gentile” neighbors. Tensions increased when Strang received a revelation that he was to become king and when on 8 July 1850 an elaborate coronation ceremony took place. His followers swore absolute allegiance to him, which included a commitment to pay him one-tenth of all their possessions. These “consecrations” were expected of long-standing disciples as well as of new members who settled on the island.

Strang’s rapidly growing power created animosity both within and without the kingdom, and some of his subjects, including George J. Adams, left. Strang and other associates were arrested several times on various charges, including unlawfully occupying
federal lands, counterfeiting, and threatening people's lives. However a trial that concluded on 9 July 1851 pronounced Strang and others as not guilty, and various other indictments were soon dropped.

Strang's local power continued to accumulate as he acquired more property, largely through the auction of land confiscated from the Gentiles by the sheriff for unpaid taxes. Strang became a justice of the peace and, in 1851, a "supervisor" in the township government. Among the laws he enforced most rigorously was the state law against selling liquor to Indians, much to the dismay of non-Strangite traders. As tension continued to mount, each side charged the other with plunder and dishonesty, and by the fall of 1852 all except eight Gentiles had moved off the island.

In the fall of 1852 Strang achieved another dream when he was elected to the state legislature on the strength of the Strangite vote. He used his new position to promote legislation that strengthened the Strangites even more—the legislation created a new county—but he also received accolades from the Detroit Advertiser, once his nemesis, for his powerful arguments against a railroad bill. In general Strang received high praise for his legislative work, but the praise may have made him unrealistically heady; he unsuccessfully sought the presidential appointment as governor of the Territory of Utah to replace Brigham Young in 1854.

Violent conflict between the Strangites and their frontier Michigan neighbors was probably inevitable, and in July 1852 it finally broke out. A group of Gentiles in a little settlement on Pine River shot at a Strangite sheriff and his deputies and chased them downriver until the officers took refuge on a boat headed for Chicago. When an officer went back to Pine River to arrest those who took part in the shooting, he found the area abandoned. The Strangites had lost the initial battle but had won control of the Pine River area in addition to Beaver Island.

By 1855 the political tide was turning against Strang, and his second term in the legislature saw him battling to keep his kingdom intact. Efforts to dethrone him were not limited to Gentiles; in 1856 at least four disgruntled followers joined in a plot to assassinate him. On Monday, 16 June, two of them, Thomas Bedford and Alexander Wentworth, shot Strang from behind as he was walking toward a ship docked at St. James on Beaver Island. Bedford then bludgeoned Strang's head with the butt of his pistol. Strang was taken to Voree where, on 9 July 1856, just six years after being crowned king, he died. The two conspirators took refuge aboard the U.S.S. Michigan and later appeared before a justice of the peace in Mackinac. After a short hearing they were released.
Even before Strang died, anti-Strangite mobs were invading Beaver Island, and before the summer was over, most of the Strangites had evacuated and King James’s kingdom was gone. Today a remnant of about two hundred Strangites live in Wisconsin, New Mexico, and a few other places.

As with any work, reactions to King of Beaver Island will be conditioned by the reader’s background and interests. The author, Roger Van Noord, is a Michigan journalist who became interested in Strang while on a hunting trip on Beaver Island, where he discovered many unanswered questions about this unusual man. In his ensuing research he did a splendid job of ferreting out the details of Strang’s life, using sources that took him all over the country, including visits to the Beinecke Library at Yale, the LDS Church Archives in Salt Lake City, and numerous archives and private collections elsewhere. The result is a fine biography that fills a significant gap in Michigan history.

Those more specifically interested in Strang as a part of the larger history of the Latter-day Saints, however, may feel that the book lacks some important comparative perspectives and interpretations. This is no criticism of Van Noord, for Church history was not his concern. It seems appropriate, however, to comment briefly on some things that might cross the minds of those interested in Church history.

What jumps off the pages is the series of striking parallels between the history of Strang and Joseph Smith, many of them concocted by Strang himself. Van Noord alludes to some of them, though he does not make the comparisons in detail. He notes Strang’s claim to authority: the visit of the angel, the brass plates, the testimony of witnesses, and a new book of scripture. But there are other parallels worth noting. Just as Joseph Smith was confirmed a king (in the meetings of the Council of Fifty), so Strang was anointed king of Beaver Island. Joseph Smith proclaimed Jackson County, Missouri, to be the site of the New Jerusalem but had to find a new gathering place for the Saints after they were driven from the state. Strang proclaimed Voree, Wisconsin, as the divinely designated site for his holy city, but dissention and other problems made him move the gathering place to Beaver Island. Joseph Smith attained remarkable political power in Nauvoo, including the office of mayor and head of the Nauvoo Legion; Strang attained at least equivalent political power in his little section of Michigan. Joseph Smith aspired to be president of the United States; while Strang did not begin any moves in that direction, he aspired to the governorship of Utah Territory. The two men were criticized by their nonmember neighbors for many of the same things, including their political
power, their friendship with the Indians, the way their followers acquired land, and plural marriage. Joseph Smith began the practice of plural marriage secretly and dictated the revelation later in 1843; Strang also began the practice secretly and later announced a supporting revelation. Both men were brutally assassinated, with dissidents playing a role in their deaths. Also in both cases, the murders seemed justified in the popular mind, and in neither instance were the murderers punished by the law. Joseph Smith’s accused assassins were brought to trial but found not guilty, while Strang’s killers appeared at a hearing for less than an hour and were released. After Joseph Smith’s death his followers were driven from Nauvoo by hostile neighbors; the same thing happened to the Strangites, except that the process was much faster.

Such parallels, however, are only a historical veneer; beneath the surface one finds essential differences that are more significant to Latter-day Saint readers. An examination of the two men, in fact, could be a marvellous study in contrasts. For example, Joseph Smith’s death brought various contenders to succeed him. Strang’s death, on the other hand, brought no contenders for his throne; his kingdom, for all practical purposes, died with him. Joseph Smith became a martyr whose death strengthened the Church; Strang’s legacy was just the opposite.

The most significant difference, however, has to do with the nature of the two men themselves. While Joseph Smith still has his critics, modern scholars generally accept him as a religious person who believed sincerely that he was inspired and directed by God. They do not see him as the fraud painted by Fawn Brodie forty-five years ago. Even though he may have put too much trust in rogues like John C. Bennett, his life was one of concern for the Church and the Saints and of completely unselfish devotion to their cause.

Strang, on the other hand, is seen in the pages of this book as one obsessed by his own quest for power, willing to do almost anything to grasp and hold on to it, and as one who distorted much of what he heard from Joseph Smith. His willingness to advise his followers to take federal land unlawfully rather than purchase it, for example, is clearly the opposite of what Joseph Smith advised his followers to do in Missouri. So also was Strang’s curious interpretation of “consecration,” which seemed designed primarily to keep the king solvent and to maintain his hold on the people. The law of consecration given through Joseph Smith, on the other hand, was clearly designed for the spiritual and economic well-being of the Saints themselves, and the consecrated properties were turned to their benefit first. In the end, the majority of Joseph Smith’s closest associates not only stuck with him but continued with the
movement under Brigham Young. In contrast, Strang’s closest associates nearly all left him, and almost immediately after his death his kingdom broke up. From almost any point of view, Joseph Smith’s movement was a success; Strang’s was not.

Paradoxically, however, Van Noord observes that, by some of his own standards, Strang himself was successful: “He had realized his kingdom. He had tasted power. He had found a market for his intellect. He had gained lasting notoriety. And through time he has survived. Long before his death, he had said that kingdoms could decline and fall, that ‘all the works of man are destined to decay. . . . And fame, fame alone of all the productions of man’s folly may survive’” (274).