

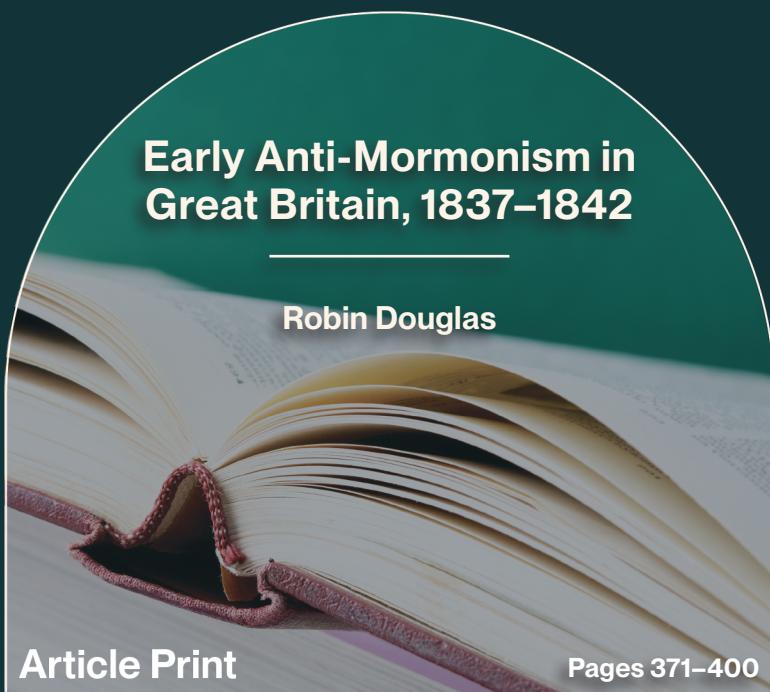


# Interpreter

A Journal of Latter-day Saint  
Faith and Scholarship

Early Anti-Mormonism in  
Great Britain, 1837–1842

Robin Douglas



Article Print

Pages 371–400

© 2025 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution — NonCommercial — NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

## Mission Statement

*Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.*

The Interpreter Foundation supports the Church in the following ways:

- **Promotion:** We provide tools to encourage and facilitate personal learning by study and faith, and disseminate accurate information to the public about the Church.
- **Explanation:** We make the results of relevant scholarship more accessible to non-specialists.
- **Defense:** We respond to misunderstandings and criticisms of Church beliefs, policies, and practices.
- **Faithfulness:** Our leadership, staff, and associates strive to follow Jesus Christ and be true to the teachings of His Church.
- **Scholarship:** Our leadership, staff, and associates incorporate standards of scholarship appropriate to their academic disciplines.

The Interpreter Foundation is an independent organization that supports but is not owned, controlled by, or affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The material published by the Interpreter Foundation is the sole responsibility of the respective authors and should not be interpreted as representing the views of The Interpreter Foundation or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This journal compiles weekly publications. Visit us online at [InterpreterFoundation.org](http://InterpreterFoundation.org)

# Early Anti-Mormonism in Great Britain, 1837–1842

---

Robin Douglas

**Abstract:** This article seeks to shed light on an under-researched subject: the more negative public responses to the first five years of the Latter-day Saint mission in Britain, from 1837 to 1842. Sufficient research attention has not been given, to date, to the full range of responses of the British people to the arrival of the new Church on their shores. These responses were often—although by no means exclusively—unfavorable. In short, what we have here is the story of what happens when strangers arrive bearing a message of a newly restored gospel to an insular society that has both a rigid class system and incumbent churches that regard themselves as the only legitimate forms of Christianity. It is a story that offers some lessons for modern times.

From 1837 onwards, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been sending missionaries to Britain—messengers carrying a new gospel to an old land. There are a number of helpful works available on the history of the Church in Britain.<sup>1</sup> There has also

---

1. See V. Ben Bloxham, James R. Moss, and Larry C. Porter, eds., *Truth Will Prevail: The Rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles, 1873–1987* (Solihull, UK: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987); James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J. Whittaker, *Men with a Mission: 1837–1841: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992); Bruce A. Van Orden, *Building Zion: The Latter-day Saints in Europe* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), archive.org/details/buildingzionlatt0000vano; Cynthia Doxey et al., eds., *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: The British Isles* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007); Matthew Lyman Rasmussen, *Mormonism and the Making of a British Zion* (Salt Lake City:

been a considerable amount of material published on early Latter-day Saint missionary activity more generally. This material, quite naturally, tends to be written from the viewpoint of those who were sent on missions and those who were converted. However, an examination of the perspective of those who rejected and opposed the missionary message may provide other useful insights. Drawing for the most part on primary sources such as newspaper articles, this paper explores the more negative aspects of the responses of some British people to the Latter-day Saint mission in its earliest years.

This is a story of anti-Mormonism, which is perhaps an unpleasant subject. Yet the story that this article tells may have some relevance for the modern reader as well as some lessons to learn. In summary, this investigation sheds light on what happens when strangers arrive bearing a message of a newly restored gospel to an insular, hierarchical society whose incumbent churches are sensitive to any challenge to their position. It is a story that has yet to be fully told. Notably, it is not sufficiently told in the principal existing works on the history of anti-Mormonism.<sup>2</sup> Some of the ground was covered in an interesting and well-researched 2002 study by Craig Foster, although that study focused on pamphleteering in Britain specifically and it was not, for the most part, directed to the time period covered in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

My chosen timeframe is the period of five years beginning with the arrival of the first missionaries in July 1837. After this period, the parameters of British responses to the Church changed significantly when the first reports of plural marriage reached Britain by early 1843 and Joseph Smith was assassinated in June 1844.

---

University of Utah Press, 2016); and Carol Wilkinson and Cynthia Doxey Green, *The Field Is White: Harvest in the Three Counties of England* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017).

2. See Terry L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and J. Spencer Fluhman, “A Peculiar People”: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), [archive.org/details/peculiarpeople0000fluh](http://archive.org/details/peculiarpeople0000fluh)/mode/2up.
3. Craig L. Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics: A Critical Analysis of Anti-Mormon Pamphleteering in Great Britain (1837-1860)* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002).

## The Mission

The basic facts relating to the early Latter-day Saint mission to Britain are well-established. There were, in broad summary, two waves of missionaries who came to the country from the United States in the period under consideration.

The first wave came in 1837, when the Saints were based in Kirtland, Ohio. On 4 June 1837, Joseph Smith set apart Heber C. Kimball to lead a mission to Britain, with Orson Hyde to assist him. A third elder, Willard Richards, was set apart a few days later, on 12 June.<sup>4</sup> These men formed the nucleus of a missionary party of seven American and Canadian Saints.<sup>5</sup>

The second wave began in 1839. From 1839 to 1841, nine apostles of the Church—which was by now based in Nauvoo—preached the gospel in Britain, assisted by other missionaries. In addition to Apostles Kimball, Hyde, and Richards, the missionary Apostles included Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and George A. Smith.<sup>6</sup>

The first party of missionaries set sail from New York on 1 July 1837. They arrived in Liverpool on 19 July. The elders set out almost immediately for the cotton manufacturing town of Preston (population approximately 45,000), which was located thirty-five miles to the north. The first British branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized in that town in August 1837. Preston remains a significant Latter-day Saint center today. Notably, it is the location of one of the two British temples. Not long after their arrival in Preston, the missionaries began looking for new areas in which to work. These included nearby villages such as Downham and Chatburn but also the towns of Alston further north and Bedford, which was many miles away in eastern England. Figure 1 shows the locations of some of those early destinations. By the end of the period under consideration

---

4. See Larry C. Porter, "Beginnings of the Restoration: Canada, An 'Effectual Door' to the British Isles" in *Truth Will Prevail*, 34–37.

5. The remaining four missionaries were Joseph Fielding, John Goodson, Isaac Russell, and John Snyder.

6. See generally James B. Allen and Malcom R. Thorp, "The Mission of the Twelve to England, 1840–41: Mormon Apostles and the Working Classes," *BYU Studies* 15, no. 4 (1975): 499–526, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol15/iss4/11/](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol15/iss4/11/); V. Ben Bloxham, "The Call of the Apostles to the British Isles," in *Truth Will Prevail*, 104–20; Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 67–83; and Arnold K. Garr, "George A. Smith's Mission with the Twelve in England, 1839–41" in Doxey et al., *Regional Studies*, 24–25.



**Figure 1.** Some of the early missionary destinations in Britain.

the elders had reached—very broadly speaking—locations in most areas of the country.<sup>7</sup>

The missionaries had none of the preparation or resources that modern Latter-day Saint missionaries benefit from. They attended no Mission Training Center; they had no mission home. Even copies of the Book of Mormon were scarce; no British edition was printed until 1841.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the elders had some success in advocating for

7. Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Wilford Woodruff visited and preached in London in 1840. See Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 96.

8. See generally Clyde J. Williams, “More Value . . . Than All the Gold and Silver

the restored Church. The early missionaries to Britain were strongly encouraged to focus primarily on gospel fundamentals. One example of this comes from a lucid exposition of the main principles of the Latter-day Saint message, which an Elder Curtis put forward in a debate before an unsympathetic audience in 1841:

We believe that when Christ first sent forth his Apostles, they did preach the Gospel, but that there was afterwards a great falling away in this respect; this falling off in fact came on even before the death of the Apostles, and this is spoken of in the Scriptures. Paul, in his epistle to the Thessalonians, and in his epistle to Timothy, speaks of the falling away. When St. John was banished to the Isle of Patmos, his letters to the Seven Churches of Asia speak of it. This falling off not only commenced then, but it has continued up to the present period. We do not wish it to be understood but that there are good people in all sects; if people worship God according to the best of their belief and are sincere in that worship, it is all that God requires of them. We believe that the Gospel has not for a long time been preached in its fulness, but the time has now arrived when it will be preached in its fulness. The Gospel may be divided into four parts: first faith, second repentance, third baptism, and fourth the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. These four things constitute the Gospel. Now some believe in the three first but not in the last, and some also who believe in the last reject the three first. One society turns it one way, and another society turns it another. My firm opinion is that the Gospel will be preached in its fulness before the second advent of our Saviour, but I call upon my opponent to prove that it is so in England at the present time—that it has been so, even as it was in the Apostles' days, for the last 1700 years. If he can prove that, I shall feel satisfied.<sup>9</sup>

It appears that there was more of an eschatological emphasis in the missionary message than would be usual today (although the purpose of missionary work has always been, then and now, to prepare

---

of England': The Book of Mormon in Britain, 1837–52" in Doxey et al., *Regional Studies*, 79–107.

9. "The Latter-day Saints and Mr. Cluer," *Cheltenham Journal and Stroud Herald*, 24 May 1841, 1. The quote has been modified to restore direct speech.

converts for the Second Coming).<sup>10</sup> For example, we are told that, in public meetings in Cheltenham: “The main topics were—the literal fulfilment of all scripture prophecies—the personal reign of Christ on the earth—‘the land of promise’ in America.”<sup>11</sup> That said, sometimes tactical discretion was required. Joseph Smith himself counseled the missionaries to emphasize the “first principles of the Gospel,” which corresponded to the four subjects referred to in the quotation above.<sup>12</sup> So it was that, for example, at a debate in Gloucester with a Protestant minister, the missionaries opted to confine themselves to the issue of baptism, declining to get drawn into a discussion of the Book of Mormon or other specifically Latter-day Saint doctrines.<sup>13</sup>

Responses to the missionaries fell along the whole spectrum from warmly favorable to bitterly hostile. This article concentrates on responses in the latter category, but the former must not be forgotten. It must also be remembered that many British people who declined to join the Church nevertheless did not descend into anti-Mormonism. They accepted that their fellow citizens had the right to follow the faith of their choosing and did not develop any bigotry against them.

The surviving figures attest to the progress made by the early missionaries. On Christmas Day 1837, over 300 people assembled at the Church’s first General Conference in Britain.<sup>14</sup> By May 1838, the Church had around 1,000 members.<sup>15</sup> Apostle Wilford Woodruff recorded in April 1840 that there were 1,671 Saints, thirty-four elders, fifty-two priests, thirty-eight teachers, and eight deacons.<sup>16</sup> As to the total number of people baptized during my period of interest, it is difficult to come to reliable figures because of the imperfect state of the records.<sup>17</sup> Two articles published in 1987 and 1992 gave the figures of 6,729 and 5,500 respectively for the number of converts baptized by 1841,<sup>18</sup> but

10. See Allen and Thorp, “Mission of the Twelve,” 517–19.

11. “Latter Day Saints,” *Cheltenham Examiner*, 3 November 1840, 2.

12. See Rasmussen, *Making of a British Zion*, 54.

13. “The Mormonites,” *Hereford Journal*, 10 November 1841, 3.

14. Wilkinson and Green, *Field Is White*, 11.

15. Wilkinson and Green, *Field Is White*, 16.

16. “Journal (January 1, 1840–December 31, 1840),” 16 April 1840, *Wilford Woodruff Papers* (website), [documents.wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/4a002fc3-f279-4989-a07c-2c49a0ad2775/page/e4f52618-2d55-4da2-87c8-a04679cccf14](http://documents.wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/4a002fc3-f279-4989-a07c-2c49a0ad2775/page/e4f52618-2d55-4da2-87c8-a04679cccf14).

17. On some of the difficulties here, see Wilkinson and Green, *Field Is White*, Chapter 5.

18. Malcolm R. Thorp, “The Setting for the Restoration in Britain: Political, Social, and Economic Conditions,” in *Truth Will Prevail*, 69; and David J. Whittaker and

these numbers are open to revision in the light of ongoing research. In any event, behind the raw figures lie thousands of personal stories—testimonies of individual Britons who felt drawn to embrace the restored gospel. It is worth noting that conversions usually happened on an individual basis, although one Methodist group known as the United Brethren converted *en masse*.<sup>19</sup>

The record provides evidence of real success achieved by a small group of elders who had arrived in Britain from a foreign country with a new and unfamiliar message. The last word here may be given to Brigham Young, reflecting on the fortunes of the early mission:

We landed in the spring of 1840, as strangers in a strange land, and penniless, but through the mercy of God we have gained many friends, established churches in almost every noted town and city in the Kingdom of Great Britain, baptized between seven and eight thousand, printed 5000 Books of Mormon, 3000 Hymn Books, 2500 volumes of the Millennial Star, and 50,000 tracts, and emigrated to Zion 1000 souls, established a permanent shipping agency, which will be a great blessing to the Saints, and have left sown in the hearts of many thousands the seeds of eternal truth, which will bring forth fruit to the honor and glory of God, and yet we have lacked nothing to eat, drink or wear: in all these things I acknowledge the hand of God.<sup>20</sup>

## The British Context

Great Britain in this time period was still, literally and metaphorically, an insular society.<sup>21</sup> While the country was the metropole of an international empire, its culture remained parochial in many respects. As to

---

James R. Moss, "Missions of the Twelve to the British Isles," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/EoM/id/3939.

19. See Howard Collett, "1840 Baptisms," *Wilford Woodruff Papers*, 8 June 2021, wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/media/articles/1840-baptisms.

20. "History of Brigham Young," *Deseret News*, 10 March 1858, 1, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/desnews1/id/178727. Quoted in Arrington, *American Moses*, 96.

21. The scope of this paper is limited to the island of Great Britain, which comprises the countries of England, Scotland, and Wales. The history of the Church in Ireland—and in the Isle of Man, an island located between Great Britain and Ireland—falls to be considered separately.

religion, Britain was deeply and normatively Protestant; indeed, British culture was defined to a large extent against that of its Catholic neighbor, France.<sup>22</sup>

The ecclesiastical landscape was dominated by the *Established* churches: those that enjoyed the sponsorship of the British state. These were the Church of England (also known as the Anglican Church) and the Church of Scotland (which had a different theology from its southern counterpart, based on Presbyterianism).<sup>23</sup> Alongside these large, wealthy, and prestigious bodies, there existed a number of other Protestant denominations, known as the *Nonconformist* or *Dissenting* churches. These included the Methodist, Baptist, and Congregationalist communions. Nonconformism posed a significant challenge to the hegemony of the state churches, even though the latter were ultimately too resilient to be displaced. Besides the Dissenting denominations, Britain had a very small Roman Catholic population. It also had an even smaller Jewish community and a tiny number of adherents of other non-Christian religions.

The privileged position of the Established churches had been somewhat eroded in the years prior to the arrival of the Latter-day Saints. In fact, the Nonconformist churches had made inroads into the Church of England's constituency from the late seventeenth century onwards. In particular, they appear to have expanded for several decades from around 1790 to 1800, although this period of growth may have run into difficulties in the 1840s. North of the border, the Church of Scotland's position was eroded even more seriously by Presbyterian dissent.<sup>24</sup> At the end of the 1820s, most of the legislation imposing statutory religious tests had been repealed, throwing public offices open first to Nonconformists and then to Roman Catholics.<sup>25</sup> Such changes were helpful to a new movement like the Latter-day

---

22. On British identity in general in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, revised ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

23. Strictly speaking, the Church of England during this period was part of the United Church of England and Ireland.

24. See Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Macmillan 1984), 18, 30–32 and Clive D. Field, *Periodizing Secularization: Religious Allegiance and Attendance in Britain, 1880–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 24–27.

25. In the Sacramental Test Act 1828 and the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829. Other legislation of the era that undermined the Anglican establishment included the Places of Religious Worship Act 1812 and the Marriage Act 1836.

Saints. There was a growing ethic of religious freedom, one that to some extent tempered even anti-Mormon writers.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, state-sponsored religion was a reality in Britain in a way for which there was no parallel in America.<sup>27</sup> When the first missionaries arrived, it was still technically necessary for non-Anglican ministers to obtain a license from the civil authorities, although this requirement was often disregarded.<sup>28</sup>

In this article, I refer to the pre-1837 British churches collectively as the "incumbent" or "existing" churches. These terms include both the Established churches and the Nonconformists. The reactions of the incumbent churches to the Church of Jesus Christ tended to be uniformly hostile. The Established churches, which were already in competition with Nonconformism and outright irreligion, were badly disposed toward what they saw as another illegitimate sectarian body that was very successfully challenging their privileged position. The Nonconformist churches did not hold a privileged position, but they had achieved a certain size and stability, and they were sensitive to a disruptor appearing and drawing away their members. Both the Established and the Nonconformist churches were committed to the truth of Protestant theology in a way that is not always easy to grasp today. They saw what they considered to be theological error as genuinely dangerous to souls.

There are some difficulties in assessing the religious climate in Britain at the start of the Latter-day Saint mission. The first broadly reliable national figures for religious observance do not become available until 1851, when an official census of places of worship was taken. Trends in churchgoing and church membership in the years leading up to the census are not easy to discern. One view is that 1851 amounted to something of a peak in observance, "following increases stemming from the Evangelical Revival and intense competition between established Churches and Dissent, as a religious marketplace opened up."

---

26. See Malcolm R. Thorp, "The Field is White Already to Harvest," Appendix A in Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 341.

27. The last state to have an established church, Massachusetts, severed its ties with the Congregationalist Church in 1833. By that time, state religion was already an anachronism in America.

28. See Peter Fagg, "Preston—License to Preach," *Discovering LDS Britain* (website), 13 February 2015, [ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2015/02/preston-license-to-preach.html](http://ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2015/02/preston-license-to-preach.html); Peter Fagg, "Minister's License," *Discovering LDS Britain*, 4 August 2016, [ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2016/08/upon-isles-of-sea-ministers-license.html](http://ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2016/08/upon-isles-of-sea-ministers-license.html).

At present, however, it is “not yet possible to determine” the accuracy of this thesis.<sup>29</sup> What we *can* say is that the churches were acutely aware that they could not take their congregations for granted. The Anglican monopoly had been broken, and Anglican priests knew it. For their part, the Nonconformists were equally desirous of maintaining and increasing their membership rolls. In this context, it is worth noting that Methodist clergy seem to have been particularly hostile to the Saints.<sup>30</sup>

More broadly, whatever the actual trends in observance were, clergymen in nineteenth-century Britain *feared* that Christianity was losing its grip on the nation. This was particularly so in relation to urban areas in the wake of industrialization. Clerical fears in this regard have been described using the phrase “the myth of the unholy city.”<sup>31</sup> The threat of losing urban workers to what seemed to be a rising tide of godlessness was a sore point for the incumbent churches.

So it was that the Latter-day Saint missionaries stepped into an unsettled world in which any new Christian body was apt to be perceived as unwelcome competition by the existing churches, whose position in British society had fallen into question and was felt to be declining. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, the field was ripe for the harvest. Changing patterns of religious allegiance and practice had created a receptive audience for new ways of being Christian that departed from Anglican orthodoxy. It is significant that the first British converts to the Church of Jesus Christ were mostly people who were already disaffected from the Church of England. Only 20.7% of converts were Anglicans, and the largest category comprised Nonconformists (primarily Methodists, at 25.0%).<sup>32</sup>

The incumbent churches did not take much notice of the Latter-day Saints before the arrival of the first missionaries in 1837. The Church had little public profile in Britain in its earliest years. It received scant attention in the press in the first half of the 1830s. Indeed, the earliest

---

29. Field, *Periodizing Secularization*, 43.

30. See Allen and Thorp, “Mission of the Twelve,” 522.

31. Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800–2000*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 18–30. The phrase is an ironic play on the biblical term “the holy city” (referring to Jerusalem).

32. Thorp, “Setting for the Restoration,” 60. See further in general Malcolm R. Thorp, “The Religious Backgrounds of Mormon Converts in Britain, 1837–52,” *Journal of Mormon History* 4 (1977): 51–66, [digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=mormonhistory](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=mormonhistory).

coverage simply recycled content from American papers.<sup>33</sup> Even after the missionaries arrived, there were sometimes difficulties in appreciating that this was a fundamentally new religious endeavor. It was not just another reform movement, but an attempt to restore the original Church of Jesus Christ. The arrival of American missionaries in Britain was nothing new, so it was perhaps predictable that the Latter-day Saints were initially assumed to be just another set of Evangelical Protestants.<sup>34</sup>

British observers also attempted to understand the new Church through the lens of earlier British prophetic movements. In my period of interest, at least three figures were prominent in the public memory as having led such movements in the more or less recent past: Joanna Southcott (1750–1814), Edward Irving (1792–1834) and John Thom (1799–1838). Contemporaries reached readily for these figures and others as comparators for Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints.<sup>35</sup> Whether such comparisons were accurate is another question. Southcott was a prolific author who claimed to be the biblical "Woman of the Apocalypse" but never quite founded a church; Irving was a Scottish Presbyterian minister who veered off into experiments with Pentecostal phenomena; and Thom was a political revolutionary with mental problems. A couple of writers even compared the Latter-day Saints to the Puseyites—the Catholic revival movement in the Church of England, which really had very little in common with the restored gospel.<sup>36</sup> In addition, comparisons were made, perhaps inevitably, to Muhammad and the Qur'an.<sup>37</sup> British critics were evidently

33. See "Fanaticism," *Morning Advertiser* (London), 10 March 1831, 4, reprinted from the *Painesville Gazette* (OH); "The Mormonites," *Morning Advertiser*, 27 October 1831, 3, reprinted from the *Painesville Gazette* which, in turn, was republishing from the *Missouri Republican*; "The Mormonites," *Morning Advertiser*, 8 November 1831, 1, reprinted from the *Jacksonville Patriot* (IL), 13 September 1931; "Mormonism," *Morning Advertiser*, 21 January 1832, 1, reprinted from the *Salem Gazette* (MA), 16 November 1831.

34. See Thorp, "Setting for the Restoration," 44, 59.

35. *Church of England Quarterly Review* 3 (1838): 509; "The Latter-Day Saints," *The Sun* (London), 5 November 1840, 1; "The Mormonites," *Gloucester Journal*, 21 November 1840, 2, which mentions "Swedenbergians" and "Southcottonians"; "The Mormonite Impostures," *Stockport Advertiser and Guardian*, 4 February 1842, 4, compares the Anabaptist movement.

36. D. L. St. Clair, letter to the editor, in "Latter Day Saints," *Gloucester Journal*, 20 November 1840, 2; "The Mormonites—A New Sect of Impostors & Ignorant Enthusiasts," *Kendal Mercury*, 10 April 1841, 4.

37. "The Book of Mormon and the Mormonites," *The Athenaeum* 701 (3 April 1841), 251, [archive.org/details/sim\\_athenaeum-uk\\_1841-04-03\\_701/page/250](http://archive.org/details/sim_athenaeum-uk_1841-04-03_701/page/250)

trying to understand the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by framing it in familiar ways. But they were not necessarily trying to understand the Church on its own terms.

## Criticism of the Missionaries

From the perspective of the existing churches, the missionaries were in error. It was always possible to see them as erring in good faith, but in many cases that was not the view that was taken. The missionaries were often not given the benefit of the doubt. In large part, this was undoubtedly due to a sincere belief that they were leading people to hell. But more worldly motives may also have been in play, since the institutional and financial interests of the churches and their clergy were threatened.

There seems to have been a widespread view that the missionaries had not been innocently misled. Rather, they were seen as engaging in a conscious deception of “artful, crafty, and designing men.”<sup>38</sup> It was said that they were “as much rogues as fools”,<sup>39</sup> and that they “probably combine as much of the knave as the fanatic in their composition.”<sup>40</sup>

If the missionaries were deceivers, what was the purpose of their deceit? Critics came up with essentially two answers to this question.

First, it was widely believed that the young Church was a money-making scheme. Time and again, accusations were made that it was a financial fraud.<sup>41</sup> One commentator, for example, concluded from the practice of encouraging converts to emigrate to Zion that “a genuine American trick, of selling uninhabitable land, is at the bottom of the whole matter.”<sup>42</sup> One Scotsman even composed a satirical

---

/mode/2up; “The Book of Mormon,” *The Argus*, 6 November 1841, 709–10, which also included a parody of the Book of Mormon.

38. “Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge,” *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 11 March 1841, 4.
39. “The Mormonites,” *Hereford Journal*, 5 May 1841, 3.
40. “The Mormonites,” *Hereford Journal*, 14 April 1841, 3.
41. See “Latter-Day Saints,” *The Sun*, 1; “The ‘Mormonite’ Fanatics,” *Gloucestershire Chronicle*, 19 December 1840, 4; “Mormonites—A New Sect,” *Kendal Mercury*, 4; “Latter Day Saints,” *Manchester Times*, 10 April 1841, 4; “Mormonites,” *Hereford Journal*, 5 May 1841, 3; “Latter-day Saints and Mr. Cluer,” 1; “The Mormonites Again,” *Westmorland Gazette*, 28 August 1841, 2; “Mormonism,” *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 22 January 1842, 5.
42. “The Mormonites,” *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 8 January 1842, 7.

poem about the alleged mercenary nature of the missionaries.<sup>43</sup> All this seems to have flowed from a knee-jerk assumption that the missionaries *must* be confidence tricksters. In many cases, the accusations of fraud were advanced with generality and vagueness, without particulars being provided to enable readers to make their own assessments. Modern historians, including those coming from a critical perspective, would probably reject the allegations. Whatever view is taken of the Restoration, the missionaries who came to Britain to preach the restored gospel appear to have been personally sincere. In other cases, British writers repeated secondhand claims of financial malpractice that they had found in American sources. This happened, notably, with Richard Livesey's pamphlet, which will be discussed later.

The allegation that the missionaries were financial fraudsters was a risky one for critics to make. The elders went out "without purse or scrip," and they largely depended on material support from members. They also sold printed material for money. But they were not alone in this regard. The accusation that religion was being used to make money—in other words, *priestcraft*—could easily be turned against the incumbent churches. The churches operating in Britain at this time, and the Church of England in particular, were major economic actors who did not hesitate to make financial demands on the public. The payment of Anglican tithes remained a matter of legal obligation until 1936; the widespread system of "pew rents" made worshippers pay to sit in church; even today the Church of England is the thirteenth largest landowner in the country. Money and religion are not always easy to disentangle. The new converts who joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were not naïve about such things.<sup>44</sup>

The second accusation of critics was that the missionaries were political revolutionaries. Captain St. Clair, an anti-Mormon writer discussed in the next section, claimed that "the main object of these persons is to engender a bitter fanatical feeling, and by alienating the lower order from the sympathies of the wealthy, to extirpate *true* Christianity as a preliminary to revolution."<sup>45</sup> Another observer wrote of the Church, "In one locality it professes to be actuated by an extraordinary degree of disinterested piety; at another, there is all the morbid

---

43. "New Sect—Mormonism," *Fife Herald and Kinross, Strathearn, and Clackmannan Advertiser*, 9 September 1841, 115.

44. See Thorp, "Setting for the Restoration," 63.

45. "Latter Day Saints," *Gloucester Journal*, 20 November 1840, 2, emphasis in original.

spirit of a revolutionist.”<sup>46</sup> This suspicion of subversion may also have been why the Latter-day Saint mission caught the hostile attention of an anti-socialist political campaigner by the name of John Brindley.<sup>47</sup>

Such fears were wholly groundless, but they made sense to a certain degree in the British political context of the time. The industrial revolution had created serious social problems—as the missionaries realized.<sup>48</sup> The period with which this paper is concerned was one of poverty and discontent, and the threat of political unrest was real. The infamous case of the Tolpuddle martyrs (a group of early trade unionists) occurred in 1834. The start of the Church’s mission in 1837 coincided with the onset of a period of economic hardship that led into the “hungry forties.” The year 1838 saw the birth of Chartist—a radical, if mostly peaceful, reform movement that campaigned for universal male suffrage and other political rights. One group of Chartists launched an insurrection in Newport, Wales, in 1839. We hear of a British Latter-day Saint speaker described as “a chartist named Smith,” who preached at the “Democratic meeting-room” in Gloucester.<sup>49</sup> But people like that appear to have been the exception. “In general . . . in accounts of their lives written by Latter-day Saint converts from this period, what stands out as a common thread in all is their apparent lack of concern about politics.”<sup>50</sup> While the missionaries were willing to denounce social injustices, their practical program was not political revolution but the building of Zion in America.<sup>51</sup> It is also worth noting that actual revolutionaries could be scornful of the Latter-day Saints. A radical paper declared that the advance of the Church “prove[s] conclusively the duty of substituting knowledge for ignorance, and common sense for priestcraft.”<sup>52</sup>

## Criticism of the Converts

The key point to bear in mind when looking at perceptions of the early Latter-day Saint converts is the morbid British preoccupation with

---

46. “Mormonism,” *Preston Chronicle*, 30 June 1838, 3.

47. See, for example, “Mr. Brindley’s Lectures,” *Liverpool Standard and General Commercial Advertiser*, 30 November 1841, 7.

48. See generally Thorp, “Setting for the Restoration”; Allen, Esplin, and Whitaker, *Men with a Mission*, 10–19.

49. “Mormonites,” *Hereford Journal*, 10 November 1841, 3.

50. Thorp, “Setting for the Restoration,” 56. See also Thorp, Appendix A in *Men with a Mission*.

51. Thorp, Appendix A in *Men with a Mission*.

52. “A New Bible,” *The Radical*, 3 April 1836, 5.

class. The complex hierarchy of (mostly inherited) status and wealth known as the "class system" was the single most important mechanism for identifying a person's place in society and the related norms that determined what behavior and entitlements were appropriate to them. As a principle for structuring social roles, class had—and to some extent still has—a salience in Britain that is unequaled elsewhere in the English-speaking world.

We have already referred to the fears that existed among clerics that the churches were losing the allegiance of the urban working classes—the discourse of the "unholy city." These fears were somewhat exaggerated. Quite a number of working-class people were seekers after gospel truths and were looking for a religion that corresponded to the Church established by Jesus Christ. Many such people ended up as members of movements such as Methodism and (later) the Salvation Army. Yet the fears of the clerics were not without foundation. Being an observant member of the Established churches often correlated with being a member of the "respectable" classes of society; and, to a significant and increasing extent, the same was true of the Nonconformist churches. Contemporary perceptions that religion was disproportionately a middle-class affair seem in general to be borne out by the available data.<sup>53</sup>

The endeavors of the Latter-day Saint missionaries went against this trend. There was a tendency for the early converts to the Church to be working-class.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, around 75% of the new Saints were from urban areas (although many had migrated there from the countryside).<sup>55</sup> It has well been said that "the Mormons were one of the few successful religious bodies among the working classes."<sup>56</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ had evidently managed to evangelize a demographic that the incumbent churches had lost or were finding hard to reach. Those churches did not respond to this well. There was a reluctance to admit that the Latter-day Saint message might have been persuasive on its merits. One commentator observed that the Book of Mormon "is not without evidence of considerable but

---

53. See generally Hugh McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London: Croom Helm, 1974), 23–41.

54. Thorp, "Setting for the Restoration," 57–58 and Appendix A in *Men with a Mission*. See also Thorp, "Religious Backgrounds," 66.

55. Thorp, "Setting for the Restoration," 58.

56. Allen and Thorp, "Mission of the Twelve," 514. See also Thorp, "Religious Backgrounds," 52: "one of the few denominations to experience success among the working classes."

perverted ingenuity and talent. The scriptural style is well sustained, and the doctrinal points and injunctions are made to accord in a very plausible manner with those in the authentic bible.”<sup>57</sup> But this kind of perspective was not typical. In general, an assumption was made that the Church was clearly false; and this in turn made it necessary to explain the mystery of why people converted to it.

The main answer that commentators came up with to this question was that the new converts were stupid and poor; the two things were presumed to go together. Conversions were attributed to “the credulity of the uneducated classes.”<sup>58</sup> The converts were described as “the ignorant multitude,”<sup>59</sup> “ignorant and silly-minded,”<sup>60</sup> “deluded” “unfortunate dupes,”<sup>61</sup> “most lamentably ignorant,”<sup>62</sup> “the ignorant portion of the manufacturing community,”<sup>63</sup> or people “whose reasoning powers go no deeper than the surface of things.” They were thought to consist of “the astonished natives of rural villages and the weak-minded and wavering classes of larger towns.”<sup>64</sup> A Church of England journal called them “credulous.”<sup>65</sup> One Anglican cleric, Reverend W. J. Morrish, discussed below as an early anti-Mormon writer, was prepared to tell his flock directly that they were “simple-minded Christians,” “unstable and wavering,” who were being “led astray.”<sup>66</sup>

This kind of attitude was not entirely universal. The *Athenaeum*, a literary journal, reported that converts came not from what it called the “lowest ranks,” but from what were considered to be morally upright artisans and tradesmen.<sup>67</sup> One observer was even willing to recognize that converts included “persons of substance as well as the labouring classes.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, an attempt was made at one point to convert

---

57. “Mormonites,” *Gloucester Journal*, 21 November 1840, 2.

58. “Mormonite’ Fanatics,” *Gloucestershire Chronicle*, 4.

59. “Latter-Day Saints,” *The Sun*, 1.

60. “New Sect—Mormonism,” *Fife Herald*, 115.

61. “The Mormonites,” *Gloucester Journal*, 7 August 1841, 3.

62. D. L. St. Clair, letter to the editor, in “Mormonism,” *Chester Courant*, 23 November 1841, 4.

63. “Mormonism in America,” *Welshman*, 2 November 1838, 4.

64. Letter to the editor, *Preston Chronicle*, 7 April 1838, 3.

65. “Mormonites—A New American Sect,” *Church of England Quarterly Review* 3 (1838): 503, [books.google.com/books?id=iw4EAAAQAAJ&pg=PA503&source=gbs\\_toc\\_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=iw4EAAAQAAJ&pg=PA503&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false).

66. “Latter-Day Saints,” *The Sun*, 1.

67. “The Book of Mormon and the Mormonites,” 252.

68. “The Mormonite or ‘Latter-Day Saint’ Swindle,” *Stockport Advertiser and Guardian*, 8 October 1841, 4.

Queen Victoria; Brigham Young arranged for her to be presented with a handsomely-bound Book of Mormon through the hands of Lorenzo Snow.<sup>69</sup> It would be fascinating to know whether the monarch read the volume and, if she did, what she made of it.

Nevertheless, social and clerical snobbery recurred repeatedly in the reports about the early mission. The Latter-day Saint elders did not fit the conventional stereotype of ministers: educated men who emerged from the affluent classes of society and received recognized ordinations after years of theological study.<sup>70</sup> There is an obvious parallel to be drawn with Christ and his original Apostles who had been uncredentialed peasants. All received a frosty reception from the religious authorities of their day. The polemic that we see in the sources on this subject is difficult—impossible, even—to reconcile with Biblical ideas about the poor and God's dealings with the underprivileged.

One critic in Gloucester, who ironically labeled himself as a "silent observer" nonetheless broke his silence long enough to send a long letter to the editor about what he considered "the folly and gross absurdity of the Mormonites."<sup>71</sup> He expressed his judgement that the ordinances of the gospel were "ill-fitting the hands of a country cooperator and his apprentice, who, till some three or four years since, had lived any thing but a religious life." The conversion of a sinner was less important than the priesthood being conferred on a mere artisan. The pioneering anti-Mormon writer Captain St. Clair was similarly outraged that the Latter-day Saints had "ordained persons, who can neither read nor write, priests after the order of Aaron." He was particularly scandalized that one of the ordained Saints had called a property-owner to repentance. He wrote, "One of these priests had the folly and presumption to tell a farmer, an acquaintance of my own, that, if he and his family did not receive baptism from him, they must all be damned."<sup>72</sup> St. Clair claimed, more generally, that the advance of the Latter-day Saints was attributable to "the misery and frightful ignorance of our rural population." The solution was that "the lower

---

69. See Parry D. Sorensen, "Through a Century of History," 29; *Millennial Star* (22 July 1937): 470, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/dac0128d-987a-40de-86fd-883ff39acf1d/0/0.

70. Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 4–10.

71. "Latter-Day Saints," *Gloucester Journal*, 14 November 1840, 4. The writer also claimed that the cooperator in question had mental illness in his family.

72. "Latter-Day Saints," *The Sun*, 1.

classes must be taught the common principles of Christianity, which at present they do not know.”<sup>73</sup>

### Criticism of the Existing Churches

Blaming the missionaries for being crooks and the converts for being fools was not enough. Some of the more perceptive critics of the new Church realized that the missionaries would not have been able to attract members if the existing churches had been functioning adequately and had succeeded in securing people’s adherence. It was not sufficient to attribute the appeal of the restored gospel to what the *Athenaeum* dismissively called “a vast extent of popular ignorance.”<sup>74</sup> Such a claim of ignorance demanded an explanation. It is not that assertions of this sort were entirely *wrong*. Willard Richards and Brigham Young observed of the British people that “their priests have taught them but little.”<sup>75</sup> The point is that, when advanced by critics of the Church, they amounted to an admission of serious failure on the part of British Christianity. If anti-Mormons were right that the people were “fearfully deficient in religious knowledge,” whose fault was that?<sup>76</sup>

In the first instance, it was the fault of the Established churches, which were officially assigned the role of disseminating Christian knowledge in the country. The Church of England in particular was not lacking in funding or personnel, and there was a sense that its clergy were failing to do the job for which they were being paid. One paper in Leeds asked, “How is it that the well-disciplined and well-paid spiritual army of the English Church, suffer its flocks to be led away by such gross delusions?”<sup>77</sup> When the missionaries came to the city of Gloucester, a newspaper writer suggested that the Bishop of Gloucester was not earning his keep: “Has this Bishop, so well paid for attending to the flock, done anything to abate this ignorance?”<sup>78</sup>

---

73. “Latter Day Saints,” *Gloucester Journal*, 2, emphasis in original.

74. “The Book of Mormon and the Mormonites,” 253.

75. Letter from Brigham Young and Willard Richards to the First Presidency, 5 September 1840, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-brigham-young-and-willard-richards-5-september-1840/10#full-transcript](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-brigham-young-and-willard-richards-5-september-1840/10#full-transcript), quoted in Thorp, “Setting for the Restoration,” 68. Young and Richards also commented, “Neither have the priests much more information than the people.” See also Allen and Thorp, “Mission of the Twelve,” 514.

76. “Mormonites—A New Sect,” *Kendal Mercury*, 4.

77. “The Book of Mormon, the Latter-Day Saints,” *Leeds Times*, 10 April 1841, 6.

78. “Latter-Day Saints,” *The Sun*, 1. This seems to be the article that is referred

One priest, addressing fellow Anglicans at a public meeting, noted that there was a challenge here to which they needed to rise: "If Churchmen would not educate youth, others would, and thus instead of Church principles, wrong views would gain ground."<sup>79</sup>

In some quarters, there was an explicit recognition that the bigotry of the established clergy and their neglect of the poor had created an opening for alternative ministers, such as Latter-day Saint elders, who lacked Anglican clerical prejudices. As one person put it, "The temporary success of the Mormonites, and the many other delusions in religion which have sprung up, has been entirely owing to the poor being personally visited by the inventors and disciples of these strange systems."<sup>80</sup> There was even a rumor that Anglican clerics wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury asking him to use his influence to ban the Latter-day Saints from Britain, and that he had replied that "if they had the worth of souls at heart as much as they had the [hunting] ground where hares, foxes, and hounds ran, they would not lose so many of their flock."<sup>81</sup> (Hunting in Britain is a stereotypically upper-class pastime.) This was probably a myth, but it spoke to a certain truth. The cliché of the wealthy, uncaring parson was often unfair, but it was not without foundation. I mentioned earlier the anti-Mormon pamphleteer, Rev. John Symons. When he died in 1866, he was lampooned for the contrast between his zeal against the Saints and his un-pastoral neglect of his parishioners.<sup>82</sup>

## The Beginnings of British Anti-Mormon Discourse

Active opposition to the Latter-day Saint mission from the incumbent churches was quick to arise. Lectures from local clergy aimed at opposing the missionaries' endeavors are reported as early as January 1838.<sup>83</sup> Public debates were also held between the missionar-

---

to in *History of the Church*, 4:236, archive.org/details/historyofchurcho4robe/page/252/mode/2up.

79. "Huddersfield Branch of the Diocesan Board of Education," *Leeds Intelligencer*, 26 February 1842, 7.
80. "Gloucester City Mission," *Gloucester Journal*, 28 November 1840, 3.
81. This rumor is preserved in Wilford Woodruff's autobiography. *Wilford Woodruff Papers* (website), [wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/8b2aa80a-b208-418b-81eb-43a596287c6f/page/aa279a5a-7f01-48dc-9da8-1f86ff2f32d0](http://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/8b2aa80a-b208-418b-81eb-43a596287c6f/page/aa279a5a-7f01-48dc-9da8-1f86ff2f32d0).
82. Thorp, Appendix A, *Men with a Mission*.
83. See "Lecture," *Preston Chronicle*, 20 January 1838, 3 (lectures by a Baptist minister in Preston, William Giles). See also "Mormonism," *Blackburn Standard*,

ies and their critics. At least some of these were reported in the press. One such debate, for example, was held in Bedford, with George J. Adams as the Latter-day Saint representative.<sup>84</sup> Another took place in Cheltenham.<sup>85</sup> This paper has already referred to a debate that took place in Gloucester.

While most engagement between the missionaries and their critics would have taken place verbally, there was also much engagement through the written word. Some sensational stories were reported in the press. A murder trial was convened in Preston as a result of the first death of an English convert, Alice Hodgson, in 1838. Alice died as a result of complications arising from childbirth. It was alleged that Latter-day Saints had deprived her of medical treatment and had insisted on her using folk remedies and faith healing based on Willard Richards' walking stick. The counter from the Latter-day Saint side was that Sister Hodgson herself had chosen to decline medical treatment and that the proceedings had been brought not by genuinely aggrieved relatives but by anti-Mormon outsiders. The defendants were released by the court without needing to mount a defense.<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere, we find a press report that an "aged and infirm" female had suffered as a result of the "rough handling and danger of death from drowning" in the baptism ceremony. "The old woman, as might have been expected, became worse after this rough and highly censurable usage, and in a few weeks died."<sup>87</sup> There were also moral insinuations about elders and their "indelicate approach to the bed-chamber of females in order to anoint the diseased with 'holy oil,' [which] have

---

8 August 1838, 3 (anti-Mormon meeting in Preston addressed by a minister of the Primitive Episcopal Church, James Fielding). H. Stevenson, *A Lecture on Mormonism* (Newcastle: J. Blackwell, 1839) was originally delivered as a lecture in a Methodist chapel in Alston near Preston on 7 December 1838, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/1984. James Fielding was the brother of Joseph Fielding and had originally allowed the Saints to preach in his chapel. Reverends Giles and Fielding seem to have been associates of each other, and Giles also gave pulpit space to an apostate Saint, Thomas Webster, whom I will discuss below. See Peter Fagg, "Preston—Reverend Giles," *Discovering LDS Britain*, 27 February 2015, [ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2015/02/preston-reverend-giles.html](http://ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2015/02/preston-reverend-giles.html). Fielding further supported Richard Livesey, whom we are about to meet; see Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics*, 51–52.

84. "The Latter-day Saints," *Cambridge Independent Press*, 15 May 1841, 3.

85. "Latter-Day Saints and Mr. Cluer," 1.

86. "Serious Charge Against a Mormonite Priest," *Blackburn Standard*, 10 October 1838, 3; Bloxham, "Call of the Apostles," 115–16.

87. "New Sect—Mormonism," *Fife Herald*, 115.

excited some alarm, if not suspicion, of persons whose moral character they are entirely strangers to!"<sup>88</sup> The inference that the Saints were sexual predators later gained currency in connection with the practice of plural marriage, but it was evidently older in origin.

This kind of domestic sensationalism was combined with the importation of American anti-Mormon material. It is striking how quickly such material found its way across the Atlantic Ocean, and how similar it was to modern critical discourse. As early as June 1838, we find a critic telling a local newspaper that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon using a stone in a hat.<sup>89</sup> By November of the same year, a Welsh paper was printing a garbled account of how the "idiot" Smith had translated twelve golden plates with the help of twelve scribes. This account included a grossly inaccurate version of the episode of the lost 116 pages—in this telling, "sixteen pages"—in which the printer ended up printing the original lost pages in order to show the differences with the replacement ones.<sup>90</sup>

The first native British anti-Mormon tract to be published was Richard Livesey's *An Exposure of Mormonism*.<sup>91</sup> This work was dated 24 July 1838, and it probably appeared at the end of that month or at the beginning of August. The author was a Methodist preacher from Lancashire who had come back to Britain for a time after spending several years in America. He was surprised to find that the "Mormonites" had reached his native country, and he felt compelled to act to check them. Livesey explicitly stated that his work was based on earlier American material; he expressly referenced Eber D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled*.<sup>92</sup>

As it happens, Livesey's pamphlet serves as a reminder that the

---

88. "Latter-Day Saints," *Gloucester Journal*, 14 November 1840, 4. See also Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics*, 57, on this insinuation in Thomas Webster's tract, which is mentioned below.

89. "Mormonism," *Preston Chronicle*, 30 June 1838.

90. "Mormonism in America," *Welshman*, 2 November 1838, 4.

91. Richard Livesey, *An Exposure of Mormonism, being a Statement of Fact Relating to the Self-Styled "Latter Day Saints" and the Origin of the Book of Mormon* (Preston, UK: J. Livesey, 1838), [contentdm.lib.bsu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/1731](http://contentdm.lib.bsu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/1731). It was republished in the late twentieth century as a historical document. See also Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics*, 51–52.

92. E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: 1834), [contentdm.lib.bsu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/804](http://contentdm.lib.bsu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/804). Livesey also referred to "Mormonism Exposed and Refuted," *Universalist Union* (New York) 3, no. 26 (5 May 1838): 205, which had been published in New York, [contentdm.lib.bsu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/1865](http://contentdm.lib.bsu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/1865).

written word can have physical consequences. In August 1838, an anti-Mormon tract, which was very probably his, was introduced into a Latter-day Saint meeting in Preston. This resulted in “uproarious scenes.” “Angry words, threatenings, and uproar, were nearly succeeded by blows, and the whole spectacle was one of confusion and spite.”<sup>93</sup> Livesey himself appears to have also been engaged in preaching his anti-Mormon message in live addresses in Lancashire at around this time.<sup>94</sup>

*Mormonism Unveiled* seems to have served as a source for several early British anti-Mormons. Livesey aside, these included three other tract-writing clergymen: Reverend Christopher Bush of Cheshire<sup>95</sup> and Reverends W. J. Morrish and John Symons of Herefordshire.<sup>96</sup> The use of Howe’s book had one particular consequence: it ensured that the “Spalding theory”—the idea that the Book of Mormon had been plagiarized from a novel by one Solomon Spalding—became established in British anti-Mormon discourse at an early stage. The Spalding theory has been rejected by most historians today, but it was taken seriously in nineteenth-century Britain. It appeared, notably, in the first major hostile examination of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, as well as of Joseph Smith, which appeared in 1841.<sup>97</sup> It is mentioned and implied to be true in the official report of the 1851 religious census referred to above.<sup>98</sup>

The influence of American sources on early British anti-Mormonism should not be understated. An article published in an Anglican journal in 1838 drew on critical content taken from an American book.<sup>99</sup>

---

93. “Mormonism,” *Preston Chronicle*, 18 August 1838.

94. Peter Fagg, “Ribble—Opposition in Downham,” *Discovering LDS Britain*, 16 March 2015, [ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2015/03/ribble-opposition-in-downham.html](http://ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2015/03/ribble-opposition-in-downham.html).

95. C. S. Bush, *Plain Facts, Shewing the Falsehood and Folly of the Mormonites, or Latter-day Saints* (Macclesfield, UK: J. Swinnerton, 1840), [archive.org/details/plainfactsshewin00bush](http://archive.org/details/plainfactsshewin00bush). For further on Bush, see Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics*, 67, 71.

96. See “‘Mormonite’ Fanatics,” *Gloucestershire Chronicle*, 4; “Latter-day Saints and Mr. Cluer,” 1. Additional information on these writers is found in Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics*, 58–61.

97. “The Book of Mormon and the Mormonites,” 251–53.

98. *Census of Great Britain, 1851: Religious Worship in England and Wales* (London: George Routledge, 1854), 48, [archive.org/details/censusgreatbrit00manngog/page/n67/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/censusgreatbrit00manngog/page/n67/mode/2up).

99. “Mormonites—A New American Sect,” 503–9. The book was John Hayward, *The Religious Creeds and Statistics of every Christian Denomination*

Another journal article in 1839 quoted a book on American Christianity, which an English-born priest based in North America had published in London.<sup>100</sup> A piece printed in the Free Church of Scotland's newspaper in 1841 quoted a letter from Charles Anthon, which was taken from "an American paper."<sup>101</sup> The following year, a newspaper in northern England quoted from the *Montreal Herald*.<sup>102</sup> It may be tempting to assume that the dissemination of both correct and incorrect material about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints across international borders is a novelty of the internet age; but some of the same information that appears in modern critical writings was already being imported into Britain from North America in the earliest years of the British mission.

In this context, it is unsurprising that the Latter-day Saints sought to find their own voice. The *Millennial Star* journal began publication in May 1840 and a British edition of the Book of Mormon was available by 1841. Also available were a hymn book and up to 60,000 copies of tracts and pamphlets, including Orson Pratt's *A[n] Interesting Account Of Several Remarkable Visions*, which contained the earliest version of the First Vision to appear in a Church publication.<sup>103</sup> Another tract that was circulated and debated publicly was Parley P. Pratt's *A Voice of Warning*, which has been described by the Church as "the most important of all Mormon missionary tracts of the 19th century."<sup>104</sup> (Later, in 1851, the now-canonical *Pearl of Great Price* was assembled as a pamphlet in Liverpool by Elder Franklin D. Richards.)

The work of clergymen like Livesey, Bush, Morrish, and Symons accounts for some of the early anti-Mormon pamphleteering in Britain, but not all of it. In 1839–40, there appeared several tracts written by Methodists who may not have been ordained ministers. Those

---

*in the United States and British Provinces* (Boston: John Hayward, 1836), archive.org/details/religiouscreedss00hayw.

100. "The American Church," *The British Critic* 26 (1839): 299, babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101064462011&seq=319. The book was Henry Caswall, *America and the American Church* (London: J. G. & F. Rivington, 1839), books.google.com/books?id=7uRHW87L04gC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\_ge\_summary\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.
101. "The Mormonites," *Witness*, 31 July 1841, 4.
102. "The Mormonite Impostures," *Stockport Advertiser*, 4.
103. See Allen and Thorp, "Mission of the Twelve," 500–1n3; also, more generally, Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 236–66.
104. "Latter-day Saints and Mr. Cluer," 1. For a description of Pratt's tract, see history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/library/a-voice-of-warning.

included J. Stevenson, Thomas Taylor, and William Hewitt.<sup>105</sup> One notable pamphleteer of this time was definitely a layman—Captain D. L. St. Clair, mentioned earlier. He was a Gloucester magistrate who was a proponent of the allegation that the missionaries were engaging in financial fraud.<sup>106</sup> He claimed that he had become involved in anti-Mormon advocacy because there was no resident clergyman in his parish. He further claimed that he had subsequently received “letters . . . from clergymen in every part of England.”<sup>107</sup> If so, the established priesthood was clearly worried.

The early years of the mission also saw the first British examples of what would become an established genre: the exposé of “Mormonism” from disillusioned insiders. One Thomas Webster may have published an exposé of the Doctrine and Covenants as early as December 1838. He had become convinced that the Church was a money-making scam.<sup>108</sup> By the latter part of 1841, the first British insider exposé of the Church in America had appeared. This came from a Mr. and Mrs. Margretts from The Leigh in Cheltenham. After joining the Church, the Margretts had emigrated to the United States, where Mr. Margretts had ended up talking to some disaffected residents in Nauvoo. As a result, he and his wife left after only three weeks. The Margretts were of the view that Joseph Smith was a financial fraudster. They believed that he was too sharp in business and money matters to be a prophet; and Mr. Margretts was skeptical of proposals that he had made regarding land and business deals. These suspicions fall some distance short of proving the charge of fraud.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, one must be respectful

---

105. Stevenson, *Lecture on Mormonism*. On Taylor and Hewitt, see Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics*, 67–68. Pratt’s refutations of some of these tracts are freely available: Parley P. Pratt, *A Reply to Mr. Thomas Taylor’s “Complete Failure,” &c. and Mr. Richard Livesey’s “Mormonism Exposed”* (Manchester: W. R. Thomas, 1840), [contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/2356](http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/2356); and Parley P. Pratt, *An Answer to Mr. William Hewitt’s Tract against the Latter-day Saints* (Manchester: W. R. Thomas, 1840), [jstor.org/stable/35248720?seq=1](http://jstor.org/stable/35248720?seq=1).

106. “Latter-Day Saints,” *The Sun*, 1. For further information on St. Clair, see Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics*, 57–58.

107. “Mormonism,” *Chester Courant*, 23 November 1841, 4.

108. See Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 241; Foster, *Penny Tracts and Polemics*, 57, 68.

109. The Margretts also implied that Joseph had threatened that they would be harmed if they left Nauvoo; but they did not hear this from him personally, and it is not clear what was actually said. For their account, see “The ‘Latter-Day Saint’ Swindle,” *Cheltenham Journal*, 23 August 1841, 2. The narrative

of the hardships that the couple plainly suffered. Perhaps the most salient feature of their account lies not in any religious claims but in the grim picture that it presents of the material privations of a nineteenth-century American frontier settlement.

Anti-Mormon literature became a real problem for the young British Church in a surprisingly short space of time. It was sufficiently prevalent by December 1841 that Parley P. Pratt could write to Joseph Smith:

Discussions, Contentions, Lectures, Sermons, play cards, tracts, Books, Papers pamphlets, etc. etc. are flooding the Country in Great number, all containing Little else than Lies and foolishness of the Grossest kind against the Cause of truth.<sup>110</sup>

### Physical Opposition

Opposition to the Saints was not confined to the written and spoken word. They were also confronted physically by opponents. Threats and acts of violence were perpetrated against both missionaries and converts.<sup>111</sup> When the elders preached in public, the audience was sometimes on their side, but on other occasions it was not.

Theodore Turley reported that he was accosted by a mob who threatened to horsewhip him and then throw him into a coal pit. At Bridgen, Wilford Woodruff was attacked with rotten eggs, one of which hit him but failed to break until it hit the ground. Another hostile crowd pelted him with stones as he baptized five people. On still another occasion he reported that Mr. John Symons, the rector at Dymock, was responsible for

stirring up mobs against the Saints which had disturbed the meetings of the Saints in sevral instances, & on this occasion as we began to gather together, the beat of drums, pails, pans & sticks was herd through the Street & the mob soon collected a Parraded in the Streets in front of the hous we closed

---

was also carried in other papers (and see "Mormonism," *Chester Courant*, 23 November 1841, 4, for a secondhand version of it).

110. See David H. Pratt, "Oh! Brother Joseph," Historian's Corner, *BYU Studies* 27, no. 1 (1987): 130, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol27/iss1/12/.

111. On one occasion, with perhaps fatal consequences, see Thorp, Appendix A, in *Men with a Mission*.

the window shutters & doors in the room whare we are, & I opened meeting by singing & Prayer & no sooner had we commenced than the mob armed themselves with eggs, Bricks, rocks & evry thing els they could lay their hands upon & began to throw they upon the house like a shower of hail stones for nearly an hour they dashed in the windows scattered Stones, Brick, & glass, through the rooms broke the tile on the roof & continued such depredations untill the close of the meeting.<sup>112</sup>

I previously mentioned Rev. Symons as an anti-Mormon pamphleteer; we have here another illustration of the relationship between the written word and physical actions.

There was some tolerance for physical anti-Mormon behavior, even in ostensibly respectable circles. One newspaper chose to blame the victims: “Much as we dislike everything like violence, it is greatly to be regretted that persons should by their absurdities, not to say impieties, actually invite such treatment.”<sup>113</sup>

Sometimes people intervened to help the missionaries. At Presteign, Wales, it was reported, “On one occasion they would have been used very roughly but for the kind interference of a respectable inhabitant.” Another episode in the same town ended less happily: “some young men” disrupted a meeting and several people were hit with whips or dunked in a vat of water.<sup>114</sup> Elsewhere in Wales, in the town of Monmouth, a Methodist minister (Reverend James) was physically ejected by the crowd when he challenged Elder James Palmer at a public meeting in January 1841.<sup>115</sup>

Serious violence was the exception rather than the rule, but the cumulative effect of even minor physical hostility must have been debilitating. Research for this article has uncovered that the town of Cheltenham was the scene of a continuing series of disturbances in the latter part of 1841, resulting in a series of court cases. The first two

---

112. Allen and Thorp, “Mission of the Twelve,” 522–23, including a quote from Wilford Woodruff’s journal entry of 16 September 1840.

113. “The Mormonites,” *Hereford Journal*, 17 March 1841, 3.

114. “The Latter-Day Saints, or Mormonites,” *Hereford Journal*, 17 November 1841, 3.

115. Diary of James Palmer, 25 January 1841, *Welsh Mormon History* (website), [web.archive.org/web/20051223020159/http://welshmormonhistory.org/resourcelist.php?&resourcetypeid=1&resourcetypeid=1&offset=60&resourceid=1#pager](http://web.archive.org/web/20051223020159/http://welshmormonhistory.org/resourcelist.php?&resourcetypeid=1&resourcetypeid=1&offset=60&resourceid=1#pager).

cases were brought in September 1841. In the first, a Latter-day Saint brought two men before the magistrates for disturbing a meeting held at the Mechanics' Institute in the town; the men were acquitted. In the second, several people living near the Institute complained about the noise made by protesters inside and outside the building. It seems that the protesters jostled local Saints as they assembled for meetings. The magistrates seem to have been unfriendly to the Church, but nevertheless they ordered the police "to clear the streets of any concourse of persons which should obstruct the highway in future."<sup>116</sup>

Later in the same month, an anti-Mormon meeting was held in the town, the attendees of which included a clergyman, Reverend L. J. Wake. A Latter-day Saint elder, probably George A. Smith, attended as well. He engaged in a peaceful exchange with a critic and ended up being physically ejected:

Mr. Wilson [a phrenologist], in the opening of his address, was giving a description of Mormonism, not altogether in accordance with the priest's taste, upon which the latter got up and said, "I disown that name — I belong to the Latter Day Saints." Mr. Wilson replied, "I protest against thus using the name 'saint,' by people who are as far from being saints as the devil is from being an angel of light. So let us understand terms at once: I call these people by the name which is plastered throughout the book of Mormon." (Great laughter.) When Smith rose to reply, the audience granted him a patient hearing for a few minutes; but the absurd nonsense which he was talking of soon exhausted their patience, they rushed towards the platform, and drew the "priest" down, who, after being severely jostled, was glad to make his exit, followed by a concourse of persons in full chase.<sup>117</sup>

The harassment did not stop there. In October, a Latter-day Saint, Samuel Clutterbuck, took two men, Charles Hobbs and William Hayes, to court for disturbing a meeting at the same Mechanics' Institute:

Clutterbuck stated that on Sunday afternoon between three and four o'clock, Hobbs came into the room while the sacrament was being administered, [and] said, let me have a penn'orth, on being told he must be quiet or he would be put out of the room, he said it would take four or five of them

116. "The Mormonite Nuisance," *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 8 September 1841, 3.

117. "Anti-Mormonite Meeting," *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 29 September 1841, 3.

to put him out. He then pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lighted it with a match and began smoking as if he were in a public house. A disturbance ensued. Hayes was cracking walnuts and stamping on the shells: he then got up on a form and wanted to ask a question, but was told that no discussion was allowed.

Hayes was cautioned by the court. Hobbs was required to find two sureties for £100 pending appearance at the Sessions (a higher court in the English system).<sup>118</sup>

Not long afterwards, in December 1841, the Saints had to go to court again over problems at the Institute: “There is a great company comes up there every Sunday evening stamping and hallooing.” One John Hatch was charged with maliciously damaging a door; it had apparently been broken open several times. Hatch was fined seven shillings and sixpence and made to pay three shillings for the damage. One of the magistrates observed that “a parcel of young fellows” were responsible for the disturbances.<sup>119</sup>

There was yet another court hearing that took place in November 1841 in the nearby town of Gloucester. The local police court was told that a person had rented a set of rooms to the Saints but that, as a result of hostile action, “the windows had been broken and some of the furniture destroyed.” Nobody seems to have been convicted for the damage, but the mayor was reported as declaring that the police would intervene if there was a breach of the peace in the future.<sup>120</sup> Policemen were not necessarily friendly, but they could at least sometimes provide protection. As Wilford Woodruff wrote while in Gloucestershire, “We closed our meeting without any disturbance from the mob who were present and was kept quiet by the police who were present, but dressed in disguise.”<sup>121</sup>

The chain of events presented above seems not to have been especially unusual. Early missionaries to Britain might end up facing a pattern of tedious, low-level harassment that was grim even if

118. “Mormonites Again,” *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 13 October 1841, 3. One website equates £100 in 1840 to £13,018 today, [in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1840?amount=100](http://in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1840?amount=100); another converts £100 to USD \$13,253, [uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm](http://uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm).

119. “The Mormonites Again,” *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 15 December 1841, 3.

120. “City Police Court,” *Gloucestershire Chronicle*, 27 November 1841, 2.

121. The meeting took place on 15 February 1841. See Peter Fagg, “Gloucestershire—Fond Farewells,” *Discovering LDS Britain*, 29 June 2015, [ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2015/06/gloucestershire-fond-farewells.html](http://ldsbritain.blogspot.com/2015/06/gloucestershire-fond-farewells.html).

it did not quite break out into full mob violence. Such conduct seems to have been mostly the work of thugs who were inclined to amuse themselves by targeting groups who were distinctive or different. In addition, some responsibility for incitement may be assigned to clerics who feared losing their congregants.

It is apparent that in some instances the authorities offered protection to the Saints. We have mentioned above the role of the police in this regard. There was no real state persecution, as was encountered back in America and is still experienced in some countries today. One missionary mentioned earlier in this section, Theodore Turley, had the misfortune to end up in jail. Elder Turley was an Englishman who had emigrated to Canada and eventually came to settle in Nauvoo. He was jailed for several weeks in 1840 on his return to England. His imprisonment was ordered on the secular grounds of non-payment of an old debt. However, religious persecution seems to have been a background motivating element in the case.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, the legal system in Britain did provide an avenue of recourse for the elders, and anti-Mormons did not seem to have as much success in using the courts to target Latter-day Saints as they did in the United States. Attempts at involving state authorities in anti-Mormon activism could even backfire. In Herefordshire, a local Anglican cleric sent a constable to arrest Wilford Woodruff, but the constable ended up getting baptized.<sup>123</sup>

### Summary and Conclusions

"Mormonism carries within it the seeds of its own destruction, and ere long it must fail to rise no more."<sup>124</sup> So one commentator wrote confidently in 1841. This prophecy has not aged well. The Church has survived for 188 years so far in Great Britain, and it will surely last for many years more.

In some ways, the experiences of the first missionaries were quite different from those of their modern counterparts, but there are elements of the familiar too. The flowing tides of pro- and anti-Mormon publications did not begin with the internet age but go back to the early Victorian period and the first introduction of the restored gospel into Britain. The reception given to the early Latter-day Saint missionaries

---

122. See Garr, "George A. Smith's Mission," 30.

123. See Collett, "1840 Baptisms."

124. "Anti-Mormonite Meeting," *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 3.

was often cold or even hostile. They were widely regarded as fraudsters and their converts as ignorant riff-raff. But these attitudes are best understood not as reflections on the Saints themselves but as expressions of the weaknesses of contemporary British society. Those weaknesses included anxieties about the faltering influence of the Church of England and other incumbent churches, combined with endemic class prejudice, a general cultural parochialism, and the consequences of an ongoing failure to engage working people in Christian faith and practice. In this regard, one compelling lesson from the experiences of the early Victorian missionaries is that anti-Mormon bigotry, like religious bigotry in general, is often really about the bigots themselves.



**Robin Douglas** is an independent scholar and a writer on the history of religion. He has a PhD from Cambridge University, where he previously completed his master's and bachelor's degrees in classics (with specialization in ancient history). His book *Paganism Persisting* (a history of pagan religions in Europe after classical times) was published by Exeter University Press in 2024.



*Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by The Interpreter Foundation. Our mission is simple: Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.