

# Thomas Carlyle's Draft Essay on the Mormons

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Eminent Victorian intellectuals such as Charles Dickens and John Stuart Mill were drawn into the discourse surrounding the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its adherents, commonly known as Mormons.<sup>1</sup> The remarkable missionary success of the Church in nineteenth-century Britain is well-documented.<sup>2</sup> Some Victorians even traveled to the Salt Lake Valley to see firsthand the “City of the Saints” (Milnes). Thus, it is not unusual that Thomas Carlyle, one of Victorian Britain’s most well-known historians and social observers, would have commented on Mormons.

What is surprising, however, is that his thoughts on the subject were completely unknown, until research by the late Professor Clyde de L. Ryals unearthed an unpublished and untitled manuscript by Carlyle on Mormons in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript

<sup>1</sup>The appellation, Mormon, derives from the Church’s belief in the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture, translated by the prophet Joseph Smith, that together with the Bible testifies of the divinity of Jesus Christ.

<sup>2</sup>See especially studies by P. A. M. Taylor; V. Ben Bloxham, James R. Moss, and Larry C. Porter; and James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J.

Library at Yale University. He transcribed the short piece and published it in *Carlyle Studies Annual* along with commentary and notes as “Carlyle’s Essay on the Mormons” (50), herein referred to simply as “Draft Essay on the Mormons” since Carlyle left it in draft form. Ryals later summarized his article in a one-paragraph entry in *The Carlyle Encyclopedia* (2004) (338). Ryals was puzzled by the essay’s subject and could only conclude that it reflected Carlyle’s “acquaintance with a wide range of cultural subjects and, in addition, his sympathy with a religious sect that to most of his readers then and now would seem unlikely” (50). Had Ryals been aware of the Victorian discourse on Mormons, he would have known that Carlyle’s ideas could have been situated within it. Moreover, the draft essay need not be stranded on an interpretive island. An analysis of its themes shows that it is of a piece with some of Carlyle’s central concerns and, far from being an “unlikely” subject with which he should sympathize, one that throws those into relief.

As the manuscript is dated January 9, 1854, Ryals deduced that it might have been prompted by Carlyle’s mother’s death only two weeks previously on Christmas day, 1853. Owing to an internal reference to Carlyle’s *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850), the draft essay had to have been written at least after August 1850. Certainly, it might have been a kind of grief work, as can be inferred from a letter, dated January 11, 1854, Carlyle wrote to his research assistant Joseph Neuberger: “many things to do in the way of sorting and settling. Not till I get into work can this wound be expected to heal” (*Collected Letters* 29:13).

Ryals speculated that Carlyle could have learned about the Church through his mother or Henry Mayhew and Charles Mackay’s book, *The Mormons; or Latter-Day Saints*, published in 1851 (49). The activities of the Church drew the attention of the Victorian elite, including those in Carlyle’s circle. It is, therefore, important at least to sketch the historical context of the Church’s activities in Great Britain from 1837, the year its first missionaries arrived, to 1854, the latest that Carlyle’s essay could have been written. Well-known religious historian Owen Chadwick dramatically writes, “In 1841 or 1842 Englishmen became aware of a new religious sect, Mormons. At first they sneered or smiled. Six years later

everyone opened eyes of alarm. England was discovered to have more Mormons than Quakers. And still they spread fast" (*Victorian* 436).

The success of Mormon missionaries in gaining converts and the nineteenth-century practice of polygamy (officially abandoned in 1890) were two reasons why the fledgling church was brought to the attention of Victorian intellectuals. Carlyle betrays no interest in rapid growth nor polygamy (was he aware of either?); rather, he remains focused on what he perceived to be the robustness of the religion, in particular the effect of the faith in the life of a believer. Carlyle's analysis also reveals his thoughts on the role of belief and religious leadership in the modern world. Thus, his essay not only outlines his understanding of Mormons, but its themes also relate to his broader intellectual concerns and social views, in particular his ideas on "great men," government, and colonialism.

## I. MORMONS IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

When the Elders, the ecclesiastical title of male missionaries of the Church, first embarked on their labors in Preston, England, Great Britain confronted difficult economic conditions and political unrest. The poor and segments of the working class were experiencing the trauma induced by the onset of industrialization, struggling with ossified laws governing land and social welfare, facing an often brutal factory system, and suffering strains following the rapid migration of families from rural to urban areas.<sup>3</sup> Missionaries found these segments of the population willing to hear their message, and the converts became a part of the general wave of emigration from Great Britain that was then taking place (Walker 29-30; Black 103-114).

A study that analyzes conversions to Mormonism from 1837 to 1852 concludes that converts came from major denominations such as Methodism and the Church of England, Old Dissent groups (Baptists, Presbyterians, and Independents), and splinter groups and reli-

<sup>3</sup>Asa Briggs offers useful insights on mid-nineteenth-century British social

gious seekers (Thorp “Religious” 60–63).<sup>4</sup> Census Sunday, conducted throughout England and Wales in March 1851, recorded that over thirty-five thousand individuals attended Latter-day Saint services (Cowan 213). Horace Mann, a barrister who was responsible for the census returns, commented that Latter-day Saints were “perhaps the most remarkable religious movement since the days of Mahomet” (qtd. in Lively 19). By January 1854, the year that Carlyle probably composed his essay, over sixty-three thousand people had been baptized members of the Church in Great Britain. Over ten thousand converts had emigrated to America between 1837 and 1854, and approximately 145 Mormon missionaries had been sent to Great Britain from the United States (Evans 243–45).

The Church had also begun to publish religious literature in Great Britain, including the *Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star*, a periodical that would appear continuously for 130 years, beginning in 1840, in Manchester. In that same year a Latter-day Saint hymnbook was likewise published in Manchester, to be followed by an edition of the Book of Mormon in 1841 (Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker 244–54). Orson Pratt, a missionary preaching in Scotland, published a tract in Edinburgh entitled *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records Giving an Account of the Commencement of the Work of the Lord in this Generation* (1840). He enjoyed the culture and learned atmosphere of Edinburgh immensely but found the initial work of conversion slow going in the city of the Scottish Enlightenment. *The Edinburgh Intelligencer* published “a long attack on the Book of Mormon” in April 1840 (Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker 165, 209); on September 24 Pratt reported, “I keep hammering & pounding away[;] perhaps the stone will break by and by,” while on November 2, he complained, “in this place I can hardly get a dog to move his

<sup>4</sup>Edward Irving, after whom the Irvingites were named, was an old friend to both Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. (Carlyle published a eulogy for Irving in *Fraser’s Magazine*.) Grant Underwood notes that although the Irvingites “approached Mormonism in the nature and intensity of its ecclesiastical and experiential primitivism” (45), only a “few converts actually joined the Mor-

tongue’” (qtd. in Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker 212).

Even so, over three thousand individuals joined the new church in Scotland between 1839 and 1849, and from 1840 to 1855 about seventy small groups of converts were organized, mostly in Lanark, Renfrew, and Ayr “in the vicinity of Stirling, Fife, Clackmannan and Edinburgh: all in the Scottish lowlands, and all heavily involved in coal mining” (Buchanan 30). In 1847, the Church of Scotland took note of the Mormons in a debate in the Edinburgh Presbytery:

“When Mormonism was first preached in the west of Scotland, there appeared there a man who preached absurdities so gross that one wondered that any man, even a Hottentot, could receive them and believe them. And what was the result, even in the midst of all their parish schools and educational institutions! It was a fact that hundreds of persons were baptized in the faith of Joe Smith, and that scores of Scotchmen were at present expiating the follies of which they were then guilty at Nauvoo. With facts like these, would any man pretend that nothing was wanted in the education of Scotland!” (Qtd. in Buchanan 43)

The subject of the Mormons arose elsewhere in the press, which often sounded a note of caution. For example, in 1852, the *United Presbyterian Magazine* considered it a duty to voice concern as it “‘might perhaps do good in warning some thoughtless persons meditating emigration to the great theocratic settlement in America,’” and in 1853, the same periodical took note of the rapid rise of Mormonism in the United States and found it “‘not a little humbling to observe that while this increase is occasioned by importations from Europe, the largest number go from Britain’” (qtd. in Buchanan 46).

Eventually, Mormons would become common negative stereotypes in Victorian Britain:

The list of authors who resorted to the Mormon caricature as a stock villain spans genres from mystery to western to popular culture, and it includes both American and English writers: from Sir

Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes mystery to Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*, from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* to Jack London's *Star Rover*, as well as scores of novels, short stories, and poems by lesser names. (Givens 5)

Of course, these caricatures existed in European and American popular culture of the time as well, most famously perhaps in the German Karl May's *Winetou Wild West* romances. Later, the new medium of cinema brought these stereotypes to the big screen as well.

## II. "AN ARTICLE ON THE MORMONS?"

Carlyle's "Draft Essay on the Mormons" can be understood as part of a less stereotypical Victorian critical reception of Mormons. In-deed, had the essay been published in 1854, Carlyle's comments on a subject of some interest to Victorians would have been in advance of those of his two associates, Mill and Dickens. In 1859 Mill in his influential treatise *On Liberty* decried "the language of downright persecution which breaks out from the press of this country whenever it feels called on to notice the remarkable phenomenon of Mormonism" (112). The case of Mormons is a key test for Mill's theories on tolerance in a civil society in *On Liberty*. Similarly, Dickens in June 1863 boarded the packet ship *Amazon* in London "to see what eight hundred Latter-day Saints were like" (223). His assessment appeared in his weekly magazine *All the Year Round*; later, he included it as a chapter in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1865), where he confessed that he "went aboard their ship to bear testimony against them if they deserved it, as I fully believed they would" (230). Instead, he found cause—"to the rout and overthrow of all my expectations" (222)—to praise the earnestness, peacefulness, literacy (he comments several times on their letter writing), and organizational abilities of the hundreds of Mormon families he observed who were themselves unknown to each other. He states provocatively that "in their degree" they were "the pick and flower of England" (222).

Dickens related his experience to Richard Monckton Milnes, Lord Houghton, who said that he had himself written on the topic of the Latter-day Saints in the *Edinburgh Review* in January 1862. In his arti-

cle Milnes refers to a House of Commons inquiry in 1854 which is very near the time that Carlyle might have composed his “Draft Essay on the Mormons”:

The Select Committee of the House of Commons on emigrant ships for 1854 summoned the Mormon agent and passenger-broker before it, and came to the conclusion that no ships under the provisions of the “Passengers Act” could be depended upon for comfort and security in the same degree as those under his administration. . . . [T]he Mormon ship is a Family under strong and accepted discipline, with every provision for comfort, decorum and internal peace.” (198–99)

Dickens’s ethnological foray had not answered all of his questions; something had eluded him: “I went over the *Amazon’s* side, feeling it impossible to deny that, so far, some remarkable influence had produced a remarkable result, which better known influences have often missed” (230).<sup>5</sup> He did not venture to speculate on what this influence might have been; Carlyle, however, did, and this formed the heart of his essay.

What is perhaps a little unusual about the essay is not Carlyle’s topic but his selection of an American institution to single out for favorable comment. He took a dim view of America because he found little he liked there, arguing in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* that America reaped—its Constitution, its English language, its respect for law—what England had sown through “much blood, and valiant sweat of brow and brain, for centuries long” (“Present” 26). Carlyle asks, “what noble new phasis of human arrangement, or social device worthy of Prometheus or of Epimetheus, yet comes to light in America? Cotton-crops and Indian corn and dollars come to light; and half a world of untilled land”

<sup>5</sup>Another well-known Victorian, the American Josiah Quincy, reached a similar conclusion when he considered converts to Mormonism during his visit with Joseph Smith at Nauvoo in 1844, only a few weeks prior to Smith’s assassination (332–34). Neil L. York of the History Department, Brigham Young Uni-

(26–27). He had, of course, esteemed American friends such as Emerson, who had lent his considerable weight to the reception of *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) and thus fostered its positive reception in the United States. But Carlyle’s evaluation of the young Republic as a whole, was that it was unrefined, even raw:

Their quantity of cotton, dollars, industry and resources, I believe to be almost unspeakable; but I can by no means worship the like of these. What great human soul, what great thought, what great noble thing that one could worship, or loyally admire, has yet been produced there? None: the American cousins have yet done none of these things. “What have they done?” . . . “They have begotten, with rapidity beyond recorded example, Eighteen Million of the greatest bores ever seen in this world before,—that hitherto is their feat in History!” (“Present” 28)

Four years later, as evidenced in “Draft Essay on the Mormons,” Carlyle had found something that sprang from the “American cousins” that caught his interest: “An *article on the mormons?* It were well worth writing, had one heart for it” (50).<sup>6</sup>

The “Draft Essay on the Mormons” must be seen as part of the nexus of Carlyle’s thought during the mid-nineteenth century, for example his ideas in *Past and Present* (1843), and a reflection of his concerns in the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, to which he refers in the draft essay, cautioning himself that his piece on the Mormons was “getting into a L. D. Pamphlet” (51). It can also be read in connection with “Spiritual Optics” (ca. 1852), a reappraisal of religion presented in this issue of *Literature and Belief* by the late Kenneth J. Fielding. Further, it shares themes with *The Life of John Sterling* (1851), a sympathetic biography of a man who is viewed as a “young reformer” (Moore 285), but whom Carlyle cast as a pilgrim who journeyed from institutional Christianity to personal faith; Carlyle’s controversial essay, “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question,” included in *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, with its colo-

<sup>6</sup>All references to Carlyle’s “Draft Essay on the Mormons” refer to the published transcription made by Ryals, which was checked against the original manuscript (MS v., sec. 12, box 7) at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

nial themes; and *Frederick the Great* (1858–1865), not a history only but a continuation, perhaps even a culmination, of Carlyle's search, launched formally in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), for a modern hero and father figure who embodied his defined set of virtues (Vanden Bossche 142–62).

III. "BUT IN THIS ONE POINT . . . SUPERIOR TO ALL OTHER FORMS OF RELIGION NOW EXTANT"

Carlyle was openly vituperative about "the hollowness of modern religious commitment" and distraught at the "deadness" of Christian churches generally (Kaplan 372, 375). He distanced himself from his childhood Calvinism, and as to the established state religions, "He was openly contemptuous of the Church of England, he felt the Church of Scotland had declined from the high values it held in his own lifetime, and he could not bring himself to conquer the strong anti-Roman Catholic feelings which were natural to his religious background" (Campbell 125).<sup>7</sup> His disdain for the organized religions of his day was for him rooted in the problem that they were simply ineffectual as sources of spiritual sustenance and guidance. Moreover, he could abide neither the "fanatic enthusiast" nor those who wear out their lives in "passive martyrdom, sitting patient in [a] grim coal mine, looking at the 'three ells' of Heaven high overhead" (*Life* 265). He advised against seeking "sanctuary in the old Church," as Sterling had attempted (97).

As with his model in so many things, Goethe, Carlyle found that the good, the beautiful, and the true could also lie outside of western religious thought, for example, in Islam. Thus, his sympathy with certain aspects of Mormonism was a logical extension of his search for any form of religion that could inspire a person to be "devoutly submissive to the will of the Supreme in all things; the highest and sole essential form which Religion can assume in man, and without which all forms of religion are a mockery and a delusion in man" (264).

In Mormonism he seems to have found a similarity to his own religious background, for he declared it "a gross physical form of Calvin-

<sup>7</sup>See Carlyle's article "Jesuitism" in *Latter-Day Pamphlets*.

ism; gross, physical and in many ways very base.” He continues:

but in this one point incommensurably (transcendently) superior to all other forms of religion now extant, That it is believed, that it is practically acted upon from day to day & from hour to hour; taken as a very fact, the neglect or contradiction of which will vitiate and ruin all other facts of the day and of the hour. That is its immeasurable superiority. (Ryals “Thomas” 50)

Ryals hypothesizes that Carlyle might have seen in Mormons the kind of faith that his recently deceased mother represented and that his essay was at once a diversion (for his letters indicate that he could not concentrate on writing *Frederick the Great*) and a confirmation “that belief is meaningful only when it is carried into action” (50). “Doubt, of whatever kind, can be ended by Action alone” Carlyle had proclaimed in *Past and Present* (198), a quotation from his *Sartor Resartus* (145, 343) that itself had been slightly altered from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795), which Carlyle had translated as *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* in 1824. Variations on that theme occur throughout *Sartor Resartus* (609). To see in Mormonism belief translated into action resonated with Carlyle’s deepest personal philosophy.

Carlyle’s prescience—he locates the power of Mormonism in the abiding belief of the people—is attested to by a turn in scholarship which argues that British converts to Mormonism, especially those who emigrated to what would one day be Utah, were not acting out of what E. P. Thompson calls a “reflex of despair” (qtd. in Thorp “Popular” 110) but of deep religious conviction:

The Mormon migrations from Europe began in 1840 during a time of poverty and unrest in Britain. And throughout the century the combination of destitution at home and the ‘mirage of the West’ (Durand Echevarria’s phrase) that released the great flood of emigration to the New World provided powerful reinforcement to the Mormon gathering.

Certainly most Mormon converts felt they had undergone a

spiritual change. But without the lure of a home in America would there have been fewer of them? One must remember that in many ways Mormonism was the least attractive of the several available means of emigration to a new country. Demanding of the emigrant strict obedience and continuing economic sacrifice, it offered in return a home in one of the least inviting regions of the hemisphere. Clearly the Mormon religion itself, if not the sole factor behind emigration, was the key to the process. (Arrington and Bitton 129)

It is America's spiritual vapidness that Carlyle decries most, its lack of experiencing a "higher call" or "diviner wants than that of Indian corn and abundant bacon and molasses, and unlimited scope for all citizens to hunt dollars" ("Parliaments" 285). In contrast to this, Carlyle's analysis suggests that Mormons were heeding a "higher call." He asserts in "Draft Essay on the Mormons" that the religion had its roots in the "feracious Earth"—implying that it is connected to primal, universal elements and was natural. He insists that nature can assimilate good even from "barn door sweepings" by "annihilating the rubbish," yet there is one thing that even nature cannot assimilate: "the thing called Hypocrisy; the generally respectable but thrice and four times accursed thing." From the soil of "Hypocrisy," "Heroism" will not grow, but rather its parody, "Hudsonism" (50).

George Hudson was, as Ryals notes, the

founder of several railways whose mismanagement and speculation caused many investors to lose great sums of money . . . Carlyle never tired of speaking of him, in his correspondence and elsewhere, as the type of the modern bogus hero as opposed to the true heroes of earlier time. (53)

In "Hudson's Statue" in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* Carlyle engages in polemic on the mistake of erecting statues to those whom he considered to be tin gods, such as Hudson:

Are these your Pattern Men? *Great Men*? They are your lucky (or unlucky) Gamblers swollen *big*. Paltry Adventurers for the most part; worthy of no worship; and incapable forever of getting any, except from the soul consecrated to flunkeyism. Will a man's soul worship that, think you? Never; if you fashioned him of solid gold, big as Benlmond, no heart of a man would ever look upon him except with sorrow and despair. To the flunky heart alone is he, was he or can he at any time be, a thing to look upon with upturned eyes of "transcendent admiration," worship or worthship so-called. He, you unfortunate fools, he is not the one we want to be kept in mind of; not he at all by any means! To him and his memory,—if you had not been unfortunate and blockheads,—you would have sunk a coalshaft rather than raised a column. Deep coalshaft, there to *bury* him and his memory, that men might never speak or hear of him more; not a high column to admonish all men that they should try to resemble him! (329)

Carlyle's word "transcendent" signifies the kind of quality that is worthy of devotion and recalls his description in his draft essay of Mormonism, in one point at least, as "(transcendently) superior to all other forms of religion now extant" (50).

#### IV. THE GREAT MAN

The notion of emulation was of utmost importance to Carlyle, for he believed it lay at the heart of religion:

It is certain, whatever gods or fetishes a man may have about him, and pay tithes to, and mumble prayers to, the real 'religion' that is in him is his *practical Hero-worship*. Whom or what do you in your very soul admire, and strive to imitate and emulate; is it God's servant or the Devil's?" ("Hudson's" 349)

There is an echo here of the clothing philosophy in *Sartor Resartus*, when Carlyle labels Hudsonism "upholstery," a mere covering, and "apery," an unoriginal mimicry. In the "Draft Essay on the Mormons" he explains that "[f]rom this curse of curses, which indeed is almost

quite unadulterated curse, Mormonism is free; and that is an immense point” (50–51). In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, the single defining feature of a “Great Man,” Carlyle says, is “sincerity, a deep, great, genuine sincerity” (39). And he was persuaded in the draft essay that “Mormonism illustrates . . . [t]he value of sincerity towards one’s convictions” (51).

It is significant that Ryals discovered the “Draft Essay on the Mormons” amongst the papers for Carlyle’s final major history, *Frederick the Great* (49). He began working on *Frederick* in earnest after 1850. Ian Campbell describes Carlyle’s frame of mind during this period:

Carlyle in late 1851 began to read with interest and energy about the military history of Prussia, a strong state whose military government and strong royalty came more and more to represent in Carlyle’s mind a sort of shining ideal in a world which seemed to be convulsed by social change, social reform, and the decay of long-held institutions. Strong precise Prussian institutions seemed to suffer from no such decay. Further, Carlyle was no stranger to the sort of firm government which was implicit in the Prussian system: the *Reminiscences* (of his father particularly) show that it was natural to the young Carlyle to think of life as a systematic experience where men’s destinies were controlled for them, their obligations clearly marked out, and their obedience enforced if necessary by a strong authoritarian regime which believed in the long-term correctness of its strategy—even if in the short term the methods seemed brutal. The quasi-military life-style of the Prussian Court as it existed under Frederick the Great matched this picture: it is partly reflected in the extremely authoritarian world-view of Ecclefechan in the *Reminiscences*: to a large extent it lies behind the argument of the sixth and vital chapter of *Chartism*, where Carlyle argues whether Right is Might. The authoritarian aspect of life in Prussian times interested Carlyle in the light both of his own early life, and because of his conviction that such a strong government was necessary in his own upset times. (126–27)

In *Frederick*, Carlyle found a hero in the “fraudulent-bankrupt”

and “swindler” eighteenth century (*Frederick* 12:9); he marveled that Frederick’s vesture was “Spartan” and that in place of a wig he wore a military hat (12:1). To Carlyle, Frederick was a “Reality” amidst the sham and quackery of his age, the discovery of an honest man “hidden deep in the Cesspools of the Universe”; the “man himself” and his “strength,” found amongst “mud elements,” were “inducement and encouragement, to study his life and him” (12:15).

In the “Draft Essay on the Mormons” Carlyle also searches for a modern hero and seems to find at least one model in the head of the Church. Joseph Smith is mentioned several times, but the more redolent praise is reserved for Smith’s successor (who remains unnamed in the draft essay), Brigham Young. Carlyle’s London lectures, published as *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, provide one of his key definitions of a “Great Man”:

For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history, it may be justly considered, were the history of these. (3)

Carlyle, who continually searched for heroes who embodied his ideals or at least could be made to embody them, saw in the followers of Mormonism what could be achieved (for he has in mind the flowering of Salt Lake City in the tops of the mountains) through sincerity of belief. Many of his models, such as Mohammed, Luther, Cromwell, and Goethe, had been men who had struggled with belief and, having resolved to some degree their personal spiritual conflicts, lived lives of usefulness, activity, and leadership. This appears to be what Carlyle sees Mormon leaders helping their people to do.

## V. GOVERNMENT

Thus, Carlyle was acutely interested in the way the Church was governed. During the mid-nineteenth century he criticized what he saw as the ills in his society and in the draft essay claimed that Mormonism offered the kind of government “which men are so universally groping after at present.” In his mind, Church government provided a “good illustration of the mixture (manner?) of Despotism and Liberty,” if in “dim rude outline” only (51).

In the draft essay he writes that members of the Church are not coerced or tricked to believe as they do but voluntarily associate<sup>8</sup> and choose as moral agents to obey:

Here, sure enough, is Liberty: all these people are free citizens, to begin with; members of the model republic; entitled to ballotbox, caucus, free press, open vestry, open congress, fourth estate and every form of opposition, conceivable by the human mind,— nothing to limit whatever mutiny may be in them except the universal parish-constable, speaking symbolically, “Hands *not* in each other’s pockets; hands off each other’s skins!” (51)<sup>9</sup>

He adds that at any time any individual may leave Mormon society.

For Carlyle the paradox of “Despotism and Liberty” is illustrated by how “Joseph Smith’s successor” secures an absolute rule greater than that of the “Czar of Russia” (51). Russia and its Czar were examples of choice in arguing against tyranny for nineteenth-century liberals such as Mill (128), but Carlyle was not so quick to condemn all aspects of the

<sup>8</sup>Mill makes a similar point (113).

<sup>9</sup>This harmonizes well with Mill’s test for the restriction of liberty, that an individual not inhibit the liberty of others or endanger the collective. Knowing this balance is “the art of government” (130). Carlyle read *On Liberty* and drafted a response to it, as Chris Vanden Bossche summarizes: “Carlyle attempted to refute Mill by arguing that this limitation of individual action does not provide a true ethos, that Mill’s principle allows an individual to act wrongly so long as that wrong action does not affect anyone else. He concludes, as one might expect, that the solution is to discover a transcendental

government of Russia, as David Sorensen shows elsewhere in this issue of *Literature and Belief*. To have despotism in Russia was one thing, but how did Brigham Young achieve “absolute rule” with a free people? This was a puzzle that perplexed Carlyle; that is, how can a free citizenry with democratic institutions not fall into anarchy and revolution? In “Parliaments” in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* he tackles this question by defining what it is to be free:

The free man is he who is loyal to the Laws of this Universe; who in his heart sees and knows, across all contradictions, that injustice cannot befall him here; that except by sloth and cowardly falsity evil is not possible here. The first symptom of such a man is not that he resists and rebels, but that he obeys. (251)

In his draft essay Carlyle calls the Mormon leader not prophet or president, as is the Church’s nomenclature, but “King” (52). This suggests that his analysis of Mormons was written less to satisfy a need to understand the religion than to find a convenient habitus, a place to locate his mid-century ideas on government. His choice of the word “King” is deliberate, it is his highest compliment, and it lies at the heart of his understanding of Mormon leadership. He expounds his notion of Kingship in *On Heroes*:

We come now to the last form of Heroism; that which we call Kingship. The Commander of Men; he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender themselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Men. He is practically the summary for us of *all* the various figures of Heroism; Priest, Teacher, whatsoever of earthly or of spiritual dignity we can fancy to reside in a man, embodies itself here, to command over us, to furnish us with constant practical teaching, to tell us for the day and hour what we are to *do*. He is called *Rex*, *Regulator*, *Roi*: our own name is still better; King, *Könning*, which means *Can-ning*, *Able-man*. (169; see *Sartor* 183)

For Carlyle, the genius of Mormonism is its uniting of wills: the

members hearken to their “King,” and he in turn has their best interests at heart and through them has the ability to see that their needs are met. This is the old story of the just king or, in modern clothing, the Kantian King, one who rules according to a universal categorical imperative. Such would be Carlyle’s ideal form of government, as he argues in “Parliaments”: what was needed in Great Britain was not a “reforming Parliament” but “some sort of *King*, made in the image of God, who could a little achieve for the People, if not their spoken wishes, yet their dumb wants, and what they would at last find to have been their instinctive *will*” (214), or, as he postulated a decade earlier in *Heroes*,

The Ablest Man; he means also the truest-hearted, justest, the Noblest Man: what *he tells us to do* must be precisely the wisest, fittest, that we could anywhere or anyhow learn;—the thing which it will in all ways behove us, with right loyal thankfulness, and nothing doubting, to do! Our *doing* and life were then, so far as government could regulate it, well regulated; that were the ideal of constitutions. (170)

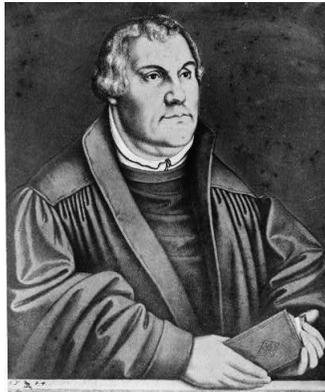
Carlyle believed, according to his draft essay, that he had found this kind of leadership in Latter-day Saint pioneer society: “The Mormon Gov[erno]r is supreme in Mormon Conviction; what he does and orders is what every good Mormon is longing to see done. That is the secret of just desp[otis]m, of a Despot[is]m which can be called beneficent” (52).

He even compares the “The Queen of England” to the Mormon “King,” a juxtaposition that is all the more powerful because it is a matching of highly unlikely magnitudes. The former literally

drinks dirty water; breathes dirty air; eats . . . adulterated bread. Not for all the united force of England can any English city get its street swept, or the humble blessedness of drainage achieved for itself: very dirt, inwardly outwardly, and not dirt of spirit (which is quite another item of account), but bodily dirt, in its stomach, in its lungs, on its skin in its nostrils has flung it under, rides sorrowfully day and night. (51)



Brigham Young (1801-77)  
Brady Handy Collection, Library of Congress



Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546)  
Library of Congress

Great Britain is home to the “wealthiest cities of the world” where all cry “[p]rosperity, prosperity” and live with “[f]oul drains, with the means of cleaning them apparent to everybody”—yet clean drains “are not probable under this gov[ernment]” (51).<sup>10</sup> Carlyle uses the Augean stable as a symbol of the degradation of English government in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* and refers to the need of a “reforming Hercules” who will take up the labor of cleaning the national stable. (“Downing Street” 122–23)

Similarly, he likens Luther to Hercules who “turned the purifying river into King Augeas’s stables” (*Heroes* 116). Brigham Young, then, is implicitly compared to Luther and Hercules in his ability to provide clean water for the people:

ill will it fare in the mormon City with any vested Interest that grounds itself on fermenting mud and the poison of the citizens’ blood. Dirty water, so soon as there is money and strength to produce clean, Joseph Smith’s successor is not likely to continue drinking. What is wrong, he *can* put right. (51)

Placing “can” in italics harks back to Carlyle’s primary definition of a King in *Heroes*, the one who is able, the man who can (169). He does not despise the poverty of the pioneer Latter-day Saints in their harsh mountain environment on the desert shores of a great dead sea, nor does he allow it to excuse them, for he knows that they will flourish; in fact, according to his calculations of character, they are destined to prosper. Rather, he is disgusted by those free men of Great Britain who have power and means, economic and political, who have knowledge and technology, but who are able to provide neither the Queen of the world’s greatest Empire nor its capital city with clean water.

For Carlyle, the notion of “clean water” would have resonated with his Calvinist ideas of purification.<sup>11</sup> In *Past and Present* water itself takes

<sup>10</sup>As Ryals writes, Carlyle exaggerates to some degree. The Thames was polluted, cholera outbreaks did occur from 1849 to 1854, and an “act to supply London with water was passed on 1 July 1852, but availability at this time

on spiritual dimensions as Carlyle likens finding one's purpose, one's work in life, to the life-giving force of water:

How, as a free-flowing channel, dug and torn by noble force through the sour mud-swamp of one's existence, like an ever-deepening river there, it runs and flows;—draining-off the sour festering water, gradually from the root of the remotest grass-blade; making, instead of pestilential swamp, a green fruitful meadow itself, let the stream and its value be great or small! (197)

That Mormons can produce “clean water” indicates not only that he viewed them as sincere but that their religion itself represented a real and productive spiritual power. The water-driven fertilization of the barren mountain region and cultivation of the land are thus an emblem of morality.

Carlyle concludes his “Draft Essay on the Mormons” by asking a final question: “How is J. Smith's successor got elected” (51)? He suspects that there is “[v]oting enough” and “no Contrivance in the fashion or handling the ballotbox,” but that through “superiority of insight” and “usurpation” (for the fittest man knows he is and persuades others that he is the “Best of the Mormons”) he is “sifted and hustled out, and raised to the top of the mormon Community” (52). Carlyle's scant knowledge of actual succession in the Church aside, there is a whiff of Darwinism in his cooking, the scent of which becomes greater as he expands his argument.

Carlyle addresses his side of the Atlantic by claiming that “Euro-pean men are still sadly behind” Mormons who “have several advantages in choosing their King.” He points out that Mormons are convinced that “wisdom is necessary” in a leader and that they actively seek the “Fittest Mormon” to go “to the top of Mormonism” because not doing so would be a sin against the “laws of Nature,” one “which God

<sup>11</sup>Anne McLaren in the School of History, University of Liverpool, drew attention to the Calvinist connection after hearing an earlier version of this paper. James Evans pointed out other examples of images of water that stand

will assuredly punish.” Thus, Mormon “Society” advances because it acts in accordance with the “laws of Nature” which dictate that the “Fittest” survive—social Darwinism. His implicit societal critique is that these so-called “laws of Nature” are artificially contravened in the normal course of government and that selecting a poor leader is its own punishment (52).

The idea of the “Fittest Mormon” being chosen as “King” and “Governor” resonates with Chapter VIII (“The Election”) in *Past and Present* where Carlyle shows intense interest in how the Monks at St. Edmundsbury elect their Abbot, narrates the process with relish, and concludes with how they

without express ballot-box or other good winnowing-machine, contrived to accomplish the most important social feat a body of men can do, to winnow-out the man that is to govern them: and truly one sees not that, by any winnowing-machine whatever, they could have done it better. O ye kind Heavens, there is in every Nation and Community a *fittest*, a wisest, bravest, best; whom we could find and make King over us. (82)

In *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (i.e., *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* [1845]) Carlyle states his perspective on electing a leader succinctly: “Here are men consummating the most *epic* of acts, Choosing their King” (3:40).

This helps to explain his focus on how “J. Smith’s successor got elected.” But what is it that the Mormon “King” does? Carlyle holds that he has the power to “remove nuisances, to promote cooperations, repress contradictions & superfluities and to increase the amount of wisdom and therefore of success in the Society’s operations, to a really surprising degree” (52). This extends for Carlyle not merely the ability to fight the “fattest corporation” to produce “clean water, clean unpoisonous bread” but also to see that “superfluous” capitalism—having forty-one hat sellers when only two are needed is his example—is organized properly so that people can do “useful work” that is “profitable to their fellow creatures. Work, were it but the producing of wheat,

coals, potatoes clothes or even other hats . . . can never fail or fall short in such a universe as ours” (52). Such comments help to explain why Carlyle concludes his “Draft Essay on the Mormons” with a certain amount of wistfulness, suggesting that Mormons have “a Gov[ernmen]t that fills us with envy” (53).

## VI. COLONIALISM

Mormons thrive because they work, are led by a “great man” who values work, and therefore experience success in their efforts. Carlyle’s Calvinist upbringing saw these as natural connections, and he articulated his view most famously in *Past and Present*:

Labour is Life: from the inmost heart of the Worker rises his god-given Force, the sacred celestial Life-essence breathed into him by Almighty God; from his inmost heart awakens him to all nobleness,—to all knowledge, ‘self-knowledge’ and much else, so soon as Work fitly begins. (197–98)

Ian Campbell reminds readers that in the Seceder Church of Ecclefechan where Carlyle’s father attended, “work was put before the worshippers as the ultimate end of life” (116). Carlyle sought some form of firm ethics without dogmatism that could be applied to practical problems and above all would imbue “a religious obligation to work” (117). John M. Ulrich writes that Carlyle sought to renew society spiritually by calling for “a religious view of work” (503). The “Draft Essay on the Mormons” is a part of his attempt to show how work can sanctify society. But related to this is a colonial subtext in it, for the implication is that under the leadership of a “great man” one of the least hospitable places in North America was being transformed into an efficient city.<sup>12</sup>

Carlyle respected Mormons because they endured the extreme conditions and colonized desolate regions of the American West. This presented a foil, in his view, to the easier settlement, owing to better geographic conditions, of other parts of America, which he calls “an ‘unparalleled country’—with mud soil enough and fierce sun enough in

the Mississippi Valley alone to grow Indian corn for all the extant Posterity of Adam at this time;—what other country ever stood in such a case?” (“Parliaments” 285). Mormon settlement in the intermountain West represented the kind of rugged self-reliance and work ethic as well as mastery over the land that Carlyle valorized as colonial ideals.

In *Latter-Day Pamphlets* Carlyle turns “our Black West Indies” into an emblem of the “lazy refusal to work” (“Present” 35). And in 1853, Carlyle revised and reissued his “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” as “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question.” It is an intentionally provocative piece, written as if it were an address by an unnamed speaker to a group of philanthropists, who become increasingly appalled by the speaker’s remarks and leave the room as the speech progresses (432). It also has another frame which juxtaposes millions of “British Whites” [i.e., the Irish] on the verge of famine against “[o]ur beautiful Black darlings” in the “West Indian Colonies” who are “[s]itting yonder with their beautiful muzzles up to the ears in pumpkins, imbibing sweet pulps and juices” (426–27). The speaker claims that he does not hate “the Negro” (436) and admits that the “enslaved Black man” has been treated with “unfairness” (462), particularly in the “Slave States” (452). He presents the problem as “[h]ow to abolish the abuses of slavery, and save the precious thing in it” (451), so as to avoid political upheaval such as will “dissever the Union” (452) or lose the colonies (453). Carlyle’s literary mask did not help, however: his racial stereotyping was only too obvious, his arguments were seen as irresponsible, and the essay was strongly criticized by many.

But “Occasional Discourse” touches on several interrelated topics, including work and colonialism: “This is the everlasting duty of all men, black or white, who are born into this world. To do competent work, to labour honestly according to the ability given them; for that and no other purpose was each one of us sent into this world” (433). Carlyle praises “heroic white men” who gave their lives cultivating the

<sup>12</sup>Catherine Hall of the Department of History, University College London, suggested this line of thought after hearing an earlier version of this paper. She has examined colonial themes in the nineteenth-century English imagi-

islands and implies that before “European heroism” the West Indies were unproductive (461) and would be again if “White men” were banished, and the area would become “all one Haiti,—with little or no sugar growing, black Peter exterminating black Paul, and where a garden of Hesperides might be, nothing but a tropical dog-kennel and pestiferous jungle” (460).

Vanden Bossche observes trenchantly that Carlyle sought an authority figure such as Goethe who could create a world of thought. But by the end of his life the creation he envisioned was actual and could be brought about by the strictest colonial measures. Frederick the Great, like Faust, reclaimed and cultivated land to create an “ideal society on it” (162). The “Draft Essay on the Mormons” can be seen as having a colonial subtext as it features Carlyle’s vision of a prosperous colony of Europeans who could make the desert blossom as the rose (Isa. 27:6) under the direction of a great (white) leader.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Carlyle’s “Draft Essay on the Mormons” is nearly devoid of theological examination; instead, it emphasizes the practical results of the religion and expresses approbation for the Church’s leadership and the kind of action-oriented belief and obedience it inspires in its members. Its significance should not be overestimated, but it does help to illuminate Carlyle’s intellectual preoccupations as a microcosm of a collage of concerns that manifested themselves in some of his major works of the period when it was written.

Does it provide evidence for Richard Bell’s thesis that in manhood Carlyle “found his way back to faith again” (3)? Carlyle was certainly concerned for thoughtful individuals such as John Sterling who sought spiritual direction in an age of increasing secularization.<sup>13</sup> He maintains that there was “[n]o fixed Highway more; the old spiritual highways and recognized paths to the Eternal, [are] now all torn-up and flung in heaps, submerged in unutterable boiling mud-oceans of Hypocrisy and Unbelievability, of brutal living Atheism and damnable dead putrescent Cant” (*Life* 96). Sterling was a “young pious soul . . .

passionately seeking land” amidst such “mud-oceans,” and Carlyle supposes that, as difficult as it is, such is the intellectual and in the broadest sense spiritual “pilgrimage we must all undertake nevertheless and make the best of with our respective means” (97). Thus, the tone of Carlyle’s “Draft Essay on the Mormons” and its admiration for a few facets of a fledgling Christian faith at the least intimate that he had not completely given up on the generative force that sincerely held religious beliefs could have in galvanizing individuals to positive action.

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<sup>13</sup>See Chadwick’s *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Cen-*

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