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A Note On Mormon Americana at Yale

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND*

One of the finest non-Mormon accumulations of important manuscripts and materials relating to the first half-century of LDS history is stowed away in the Yale University Library. While Mormon materials have been accruing to Yale for years, the heart of this rich selection is a relatively recent gift—the William Robertson Coe Collection, one of six private collections¹ acquired by Yale curators over the past two decades to swell their now highly significant array of Western Americana titles.

The genesis of the Coe Collection dates back to 1910 when Mr. Coe purchased a ranch in Wyoming from Colonel “Buffalo Bill” Cody and began to identify himself with the needs and interests of Wyoming and the West. In his work he frequently cooperated with his friend, the Right Reverend Nathaniel S. Thomas, Episcopal Bishop of Wyoming. Bishop Thomas, himself a collector of western books, suggested to Coe the desirability of the formation of a library of Western Americana while early material was still available. The suggestion appealed to Coe and shortly thereafter he bought Thomas’ small collection to serve as the nucleus for his own.

As Coe acquired Utah materials, his interest in the Mormons increased and he made every effort to obtain documents from the New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois periods of the Church’s history, as well as anything pertaining to the early

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¹The other five are Henry Wagner’s Texas and Middle West Collection, Walter McClintock’s Indian Collection, Winlock Miller’s Pacific Northwest Collection, Thomas Streeter’s Texas Collection, and Frederick W. Beinecke’s California and Far West Collection.

years in the Great Basin. Today at Yale there are over nine hundred Mormon entries in the Coe Collection alone, including rare first editions, personal correspondence from Joseph, Brigham, and others, and a variety of historically invaluable documents such as the Bringham Manuscripts, the Howard Egan Papers, the Thomas L. Kane—Mormon Papers, etc.²

Typical of the many Book of Mormon items which might be pertinent to this Spring 1970 number of *BYU Studies* is a letter dated February 12, 1830 and sent from one Lucius Fenn of Covert, Seneca County, New York to one Birdseye Bronson of Winchester [New Hampshire? Massachusetts?]. After a rather staid beginning in which Fenn notes the health of his family and their desire for news from Winchester, he refers to recent activities in the vicinity (trouble caused by the Freemasons, the importance of the "cold sober movement" in halting the spread of intemperance) and then notes:

there is something that has taken place lately that is mysterious to us it is this there has been a bible found by 3 men but a short distance from us which is something remarkable we think. there was it is said an angel appeared to these 3 men and told them there was a bible concealed in such a place and if one of them would go to that place he would find it he went and found as the angel said it was in a stone chest what is most to be wondered at is this that the man that found it could not read at all in the english language but he read [read?] this bible and nobody else cannot it has been concealed there for fourteen hundred years it is written on a kind of gold leaf it is the same that our is only there is an addition to it they are printing it in Palmyra it is expected that it will come out soon so that we can see it it speaks of the Millennium day and tells when it is a going to take place and it talks that the man that is to find this bible his name as Joseph and his fathers name is Joseph. some people think that it is all a speculation and some think that something is going to take place different from what has been for my part I do not know how it will be but it is something singular to me, as it respects religion there has been considerable of an attention paid to it this winter between these lakes and there has been considerable many as we humbly hope have been [renewed?] by the grace of God there is a general solemnity upon the people

²Some significant other letters and papers are: six letters from William Smith; one letter from Lucy Mack Smith; one letter from Joseph Smith (from the Liberty Jail); sixty letters from Brigham Young; several John C. Bennett letters (one in which he says he does not really believe all he has printed against the Church); and papers of Pickel, Oliver Olney, and Thomas Sharp, *et al.*

generally in these parts and we hope that there will be a greater ourpouring of the spirit than ever. . .³

A letter such as this, written from the immediate neighborhood of the Peter Whitmer farm where only six months earlier Joseph had been finishing the work of translation, would appear to be of at least passing interest for several reasons: it seems to acknowledge the very early public role of the Three Witnesses, it is indicative of the interest and enthusiasm with which some New York contemporaries would receive the Book of Mormon as it came off the press later that spring, and it is suggestive of the socio-religious climate of northwestern New York in 1830.

While this particular item may not be of profound significance, one wonders what other pieces of greater importance are yet lying in the Yale University Library or some maiden aunt's attic. In any case there is a good deal of wading and winnowing yet to be done, here and elsewhere, by both the self-styled and professional LDS historians.

³This letter has already been published in Mortenson and Mulder, *Among the Mormons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

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