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The Manner of Translating the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: This article quotes Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and other contemporary accounts to show how and where Joseph obtained the plates. It also quotes Emma Smith and the Three Witnesses to explain that the Book of Mormon was translated with divine aid and with the use of the Urim and Thummim.

The Manner of Translating The BOOK of MORMON

By DR. FRANCIS W. KIRKHAM

"How and where did you obtain the *Book of Mormon*?" This was one of twenty questions answered by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the *Elders' Journal* published July, 1838, at Far West, Missouri. "I am answering these questions," wrote the Prophet, "by publication for the reason they are asked me thousands of times."

"Moroni," writes the Prophet, "the person who deposited the plates from whence the *Book of Mormon* was translated, in a hill in Manchester, Ontario County, New York, being dead, and raised again therefrom, appeared unto me, and told me where they were; and gave me directions how to obtain them. I obtained them and the Urim and Thummim with them, by the means of which I translated the plates and thus came the *Book of Mormon*."

Another short statement by the Prophet was published in the *Times and Seasons* at Nauvoo, May 1, 1842. He was then mayor of the largest and most rapidly growing city in Illinois and the Lieutenant-

General of a military organization consisting of all its able-bodied male citizens:

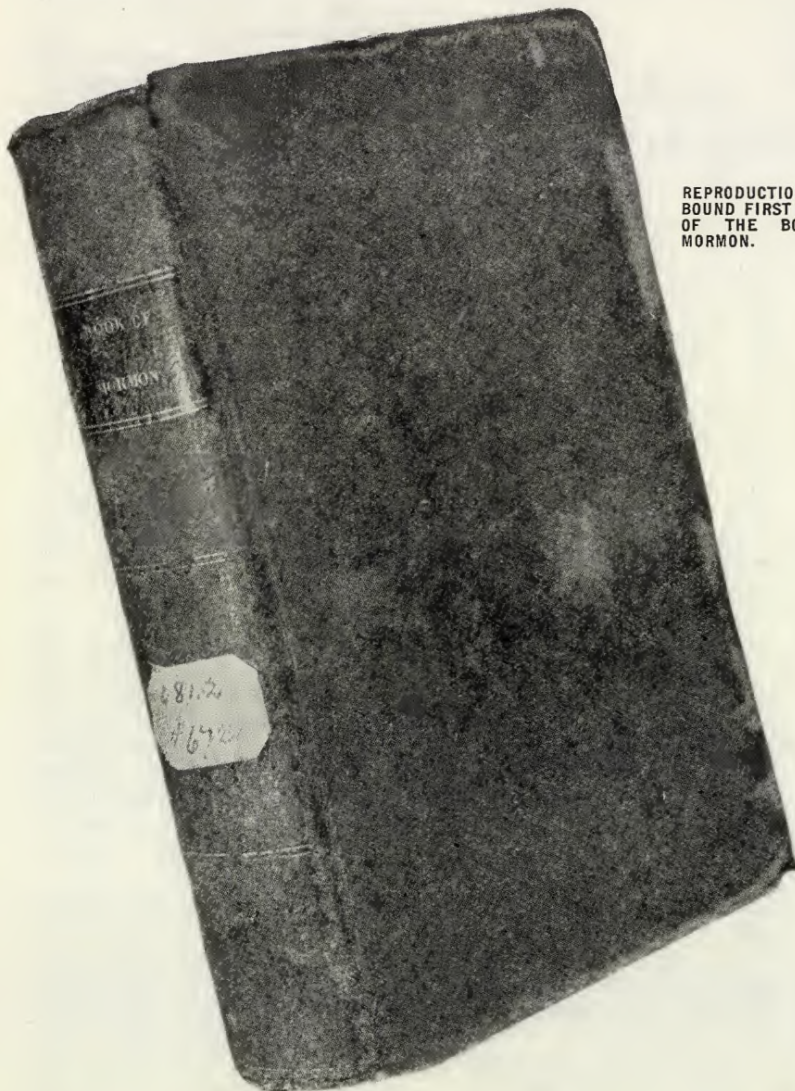
Nauvoo, Illinois, March 1, 1842. At the request of Mr. John Wentworth, Editor and Proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat*, I have written the following sketch of the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-day Saints—of which, I have the honor, under God, of being founder. Mr. Wentworth says that he wishes to furnish Mr. Barstow, a friend of his, who is writing the history of New Hampshire, with this document.

As Mr. Barstow has taken the proper steps to obtain correct information, all I shall ask at his hands is that he publish the account entire, ungarnished, and without misrepresentation. . . .

On the evening of the 21st of September, A. D. 1823, while I was praying unto God and endeavoring to exercise faith in the precious promises of Scripture, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room; indeed the first sight was as though the house were filled with consuming fire. The appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body. In a moment a personage stood before me surrounded with a glory yet greater than that by which I was already surrounded. The messenger proclaimed himself to be an angel of God, sent to bring the joyful tidings that the covenants which God made with ancient Israel were at hand to be fulfilled; that the preparatory work for the second coming of the Messiah was speedily to commence; that the time was at hand for the Gospel in all its fulness to be preached in power unto all nations, that a people might be prepared for the millennial reign. I was informed that I was chosen to be an instrument in the hands of God to bring about some of His purposes in this glorious dispensation.

I was informed also concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country, and shown who they were, and from whence they came: a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people was made known unto me.

I was also told where there were deposited some plates, on which was engraved an abridgement of the records of the ancient peoples that had existed on this



REPRODUCTION OF A
BOUND FIRST EDITION
OF THE BOOK OF
MORMON.

continent. The angel appeared to me three times the same night and unfolded the same things. After having received many visits from the angels of God, unfolding the majesty and glory of the events that should transpire in the last days, on the morning of the 22nd of September, A. D. 1827, the angel of the Lord delivered the records into my hands.

These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold: each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings in Egyptian characters and bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something over six inches in thickness, part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction, and much skill in the art of engraving. With the records was found a curious instrument which the ancients called "Urim and Thummim," which consisted of two transparent stones set in the rim of a bow fastened to a breastplate. Through the medium of the Urim and Thummim I translated the record, by the gift and power of God. (Also published in *History of All Churches*, Harrisburg, 1849, p. 345, John Wimebrenner.)

EARLY in 1838 the Prophet began the writing of his own life story which with other information has become the *Documentary History of the Church*. In this remarkable account he tells frankly and honestly the details and circumstances of the divine origin of the *Book of Mormon* so that these may be traced historically. (See *Source Material Concerning Origin of the Book of Mormon*, by Francis W. Kirkham.) He declares that Moroni, the immortal messenger from God, entrusted to him gold plates upon which was recorded "the fulness of the everlasting Gospel as delivered to the ancient inhabitants of this continent." With these plates were "two stones in silver bows, fastened to a breastplate, called the Urim and Thummim." "By the use of this instrument" and "by the gift and power of God," he translated part of the plates into the *Book of Mormon*.

In a letter addressed to N. F. Seaton, the Prophet makes the following statement (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. V, page 21):

The *Book of Mormon* is a record of the forefathers of our Western tribes of Indians, having been found through the ministrations of an holy angel, and translated into our own language by the gift and power of God, after having been hid up in the earth for the last 1400 years, containing the word of God which was delivered unto them.

The earliest printed account of the coming forth of the *Book of Mormon* is a series of eight letters by Oliver Cowdery published in the

Messenger and Advocate, Kirtland, Ohio, beginning October, 1834. In an introductory letter, Oliver Cowdery declares:

That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons that our brother Joseph Smith, Jr., has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable. With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative, well worth the examination and perusal of the Saints.

Here is evidence that the person responsible under God for the book which has become a companion book to the Bible, knew the contents of these letters and had the opportunity to edit and correct them.

Oliver Cowdery writes:

Near the time of the setting of the sun, Sabbath evening, April 5th, 1829, my natural eyes for the first time beheld this brother. He then resided in Harmony, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. On Monday, the 6th, I assisted him in arranging some business of a temporal nature and on Tuesday, the 7th, commenced to write the *Book of Mormon*. These days were never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom. Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth as he translated with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would have said, "interpreters," the history or record called the "Book of Mormon."

Further on in his narrative Mr. Cowdery, with the apparent ap-

proval of the Prophet, quotes Moroni as declaring:

Therefore, remember, that they are to be translated by the gift and power of God. By them will the Lord work a great and a marvelous work: the wisdom of the wise shall come as naught, and the understanding of the prudent shall be hid, and because the power of God shall be displayed, those who profess to know the truth but walk in deceit, shall tremble with anger; but with signs and with wonders, with gifts and with healings, with the manifestations of the power of God, and with the Holy Ghost, shall the hearts of the faithful be comforted.

About a year and a half after the publication of this divine record, 44 Elders, 10 Priests, and 10 Teachers were in conference at the home of Brother Sirenes Burnett, at Orange, Cuyahoga County, Ohio (October 25, 1831). In the minutes of this conference the following appears (*Far West Record*, p. 16):

Brother Hyrum Smith said, "That he thought best that the information of the coming forth of the *Book of Mormon* be related by Joseph himself, to the Elders present, that all might know for themselves."

Brother Joseph Smith, Jr., said "That it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the *Book of Mormon*," and also said, "that it was" (Continued on page 630)

A PAGE FROM NEPHI, BOOK OF MORMON, FIRST EDITION.

SECOND BOOK OF NEPHI. 117.

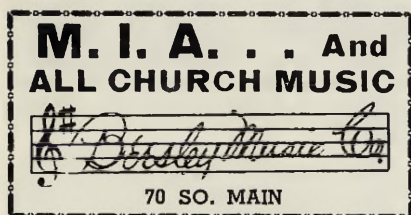
files as will repent, are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent, shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none, save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel. And now, I would prophesy somewhat more concerning the Jews and the Gentiles. For after the book of which I have sealed up again unto the Lord, there shall be many which shall believe the words which are written; and they shall carry them forth unto the remnant of our seed, and they shall carry out from Jerusalem, and that they are a descendant of the Jews. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ shall be declared among them; wherefore, they shall be restored unto the knowledge of their fathers, and also to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, which was had among their fathers. And then shall they rejoice: for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a white and a delightsome people.

And it shall come to pass that the Jews which are scattered, also shall begin to believe in Christ; and they shall begin to gather in upon the face of the land; and as many as shall believe in Christ, shall also become a delightsome people.

And it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall commence his work, among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, to bring about the restoration of his people upon the earth. And with righteousness shall the Lord God judge the poor, and reprove with equity, for the meek of the earth. And he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth; and he shall smite the people; and the wicked will he destroy; and he will spare his people; yea, even if it so be that he must destroy the wicked by fire. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness shall be the girdle of his reins. And then shall the wolf dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf, and the young lion, and the fatling, together; and a little child shall lead them. And the sucking the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the weaned child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child

THE DEAN OF TRAILERITES

(Concluded from page 601)
picturesque intermountain region. I have bagged every variety of game from a cottontail rabbit to silvertip bear and moose. I have enjoyed many a battle with the trout of turbulent mountain streams. I recall the early wilderness of the West,



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now converted into a vast empire of wealth. To me the land of the setting sun, the windswept, desert plains and sun-scorched hills of the Golden West, is the land of lofty scenes and familiar faces. I am happy to say that I can still climb mountains with men half my age. Last summer, while touring British Columbia, Alberta, and the world-famous Canadian Rockies, I climbed to the top of a range of glaciers. This celestial sojourn necessitated a round trip of sixteen miles of ups and downs. Here I found myself on the roof of the earth, in the midst of moss-covered crags and vertical

walls, where mountains rise on mountains and the glittering peaks try to pierce the sky. Amid these celestial scenes and influences—far above the competitive struggles of mankind—one finds his haven of rest. Here we breathe the air of freedom and live in a strange and future world—a world conforming with the hopeful dreams of the master minds of the ages.

But we have many mountains yet to climb, in our eternal journey, before the spiritual and moral grandeur of mankind achieve the grandeur of this glorious earthly paradise on which we live.

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not expedient for him to relate these things, etc."

A careful reading of the writings of the Prophet including his messages and sermons fails to reveal any further information regarding the manner of the translation of the *Book of Mormon*.

Explanations have been advanced by students to explain the diction, form, and construction of the language of the book. Reasons for the appearance of quotations from the King James' Bible in the *Book of Mormon* have also been given.

Here it is emphasized that the only information left us by the Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, his scribe, may be stated in a sentence. "Joseph Smith translated the *Book of Mormon* by the gift and power of God with the aid of the Urim and Thummim from gold plates entrusted to him by Moroni, who being dead was raised again therefrom."

Other witnesses to the writing of the *Book of Mormon* were Emma Smith, wife of the Prophet, David Whitmer, Martin Harris, and John Whitmer. The writings of all these are claimed to be in the manuscript at Independence, Missouri.

The *Saints' Advocate*, October, 1879, gives the last testimony of Emma Smith Bidamon, wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The questions were by her son, Joseph Smith, and were asked in the presence of Bishop Rogers, W. W. Blair, and H. A. Stebbins. A part of the interview follows:

Question: When did you first know Sidney Rigdon?

Answer: I was residing at Father Whitmer's when I first saw Sidney Rigdon. I think he came there.

Q: Was this before or after the publication of the *Book of Mormon*?

A: The *Book of Mormon* had been translated and published some time before. Parley P. Pratt had united with the Church before I knew Sidney Rigdon, or heard of him. At the time the *Book of Mormon* was translated there was no Church organized, and Rigdon did not become acquainted with Joseph and me till after the Church was established. . . .

Q: Had he [Joseph] not a book or manuscript from which he read or dictated to you?

A: He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.

Q: Could he not have had, and you not know it?

A: If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.

Q: Are you sure that he had plates at the time you were writing for him?

A: The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edge of a book. . . .

Q: Could not father have dictated the *Book of Mormon* to you, Oliver Cowdery, and others who wrote for him after having first written it, or having first read it out of some book?

A: Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well worded letter, let alone dictating a book like the *Book of Mormon*, and though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translating of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, "a marvel and a wonder," as much so as to anyone else.

Q: Mother, what is your belief about the authenticity, or origin of the *Book of Mormon*?

A: My belief is that the *Book of Mormon* is of divine authenticity—I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscript unless he was inspired: for, when [I was] acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where

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he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this; and, for one so . . . unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.

These questions and the answers she had given to them, were read to my mother by me, the day before my leaving Nauvoo for home and were affirmed by her. Major Bidamon stated that he had frequently conversed with her on the subject of the translation of the *Book of Mormon*, and her present answers were substantially what she had always stated in regard to it.

Signed, Joseph Smith.

Who is the son of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

IN THE March, 1836, issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*, John Whitmer writes as follows:

It may not be amiss in this place, to give a statement to the world concerning the work of the Lord, as I have been a member of this Church of Latter-day Saints from its beginning. To say that the *Book of Mormon* is a revelation from God, I have no hesitancy; but with all confidence have signed my name to it as such; and I hope that my patrons will indulge me in speaking freely on this subject, as I am about leaving the editorial department—therefore I desire to testify to all that will come to the knowledge of this address, that I have handled these plates, and know of a surety that Joseph Smith, Jr., has translated the *Book of Mormon* by the gift and power of God, and in this thing the wisdom of the wise most assuredly has perished: therefore, know ye, O ye inhabitants of the earth, wherever this address may come, that I have in this thing freed my garments of your blood, whether you believe or disbelieve the statements of your unworthy friend and well-wisher.

In 1887 David Whitmer writes an address "to all Believers in Christ." This was fifty years after he had separated himself from the Church. He was now past 82 years of age. In this address David Whitmer bears a faithful testimony to the divine origin of the *Book of Mormon*. He states:

I will say once more to all mankind that I have never at any time denied that testimony or any part thereof. I also testify to the world that neither Oliver Cowdery nor Martin Harris at any time denied their testimony; they both died reaffirming the divine authenticity of the truth of the *Book of Mormon*. I was present at the death bed of Oliver Cowdery and his last words were, "Brother David, be true to your testimony to the *Book of Mormon*."

He also declares:

I testify to the world I am an eyewitness to the translation of the greater part of the *Book of Mormon*. Part of it was translated in my father's house in Fayette, Seneca County, New York.

He also wrote as follows:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the *Book of Mormon* was

translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation

would appear. Thus the *Book of Mormon* was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man.

The *Deseret Evening News*, September 5, 1870, reports in part an address in the Salt Lake Tabernacle as follows:

Martin Harris related an incident that occurred during the time that he wrote the portion of the translation of the *Book of Mormon* which he was favored to write direct from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He said that the Prophet possessed

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Mary: What darling newlyweds! And I thought she'd always be "only a bridesmaid!"

Jane: I thought so, too, until she started wearing ZCMI clothes. Now she's really attractive.

THE MANNER OF TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF MORMON

(Concluded from page 631)

a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone. Martin explained the translation as follows: By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say, "Written," and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used.

Both David Whitmer and Martin Harris knew positively that they had been shown the plates by Moroni and had so declared since the time of the experience, but the Prophet declared in October, 1831, that no one knew the manner of the translation, neither was "it expedient for

him to relate these things." (See quotation above.) When both these men were past eighty years of age, and about fifty years after the event, they undertook to describe the manner of translation, which Elder Brigham H. Roberts has clearly shown is not in harmony with the manner indicated in Section 8 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*. (See *New Witness for God*, Vol. II, pages 106-133 by B. H. Roberts.) Moreover, they refer to the use of a seer stone by the Prophet. But no publication during his life contains such a statement.

A neighbor, Willard Chase, asserted Joseph stole a "singularly appearing stone" which he had found in 1822 when Joseph and his brother Alvin were employed by him

in digging a well. "Joseph put it into his hat and then his face into the top of his hat . . . alleging that he could see in it."—*Mormonism Unveiled*, Eber D. Howe, 1834.

This is an attempt to explain the alleged power of Joseph Smith to translate the plates by a person who denounced him as a fraud and an ignorant deceiver.

In the opinion of the writer, the Prophet used no seer stone in translating the *Book of Mormon*, neither did he translate in the manner described by David Whitmer and Martin Harris. The statements of both of these men are to be explained by the eagerness of old age to call upon a fading and uncertain memory for the details of events which still remained real and objective to them.

BIRTHDAY

(Concluded from page 595)

for his beloved son! Rather to have been poor and to have worked his fingers to the bone than this. Riches could not buy life, could not prevent accident.

When the doctors had told him after the accident that there was no hope and that his son would never regain consciousness, he had crept past them out of the room. Like Hagar he could not watch his son die. They had said they would do all that was humanly possible to

the last. At least his wife had been spared this agony. He alone must bear it—he alone.

With sudden determination he brought his will to attention and squared his shoulders. He would go to them and face his problem. "The eternal God is my refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms; . . . surely He will deliver thee from the snare of the fowler and from the noisome pestilence. . . ."

Calmly he folded the papers and returned them to his pocket. A sud-

den gust of wind brought down a shower of crisp leaves about his feet as the door to the sitting room opened. Stephen Porter walked to meet a woman in nurse's uniform who stood in the doorway. She said, "Come and see him; he is conscious and resting easily. The doctors are most wonderful; they are so happy to give him back to you."

"Why," he said, "you are crying," and suddenly he sat down on the low step and burst into uncontrollable weeping.

TAHITI

(Continued from page 593)

colony, is approximately the same distance south of the equator as Hawaii is north. Geographically, the islands are divided into groups known respectively as the Society, Tuamotu, Gambier, and Marquesas archipelagos. In times past there has been proselyting in each group, as well as in the Cook Islands, British possessions, but more recently work has been discontinued in the Gambier, Marquesas, and Cook Islands, and concentrated in the Society, Austral, and Tuamotu archipelagos.

BEGINNING and ending at Papeete on the island of Tahiti, mission headquarters, Elder Hardy's cruise took him on a huge circuit of the Tuamotu group, including the islands of Niau, Fakarava, Takaroa, Nihiru, Hikueru, and Hao to the north and east, and of Tubuai to

the south, a member of the Austral group. (See map, page 592.) While the members of the Society and Austral archipelagos are mountainous islands of volcanic origin—the romantic South Sea islands of popular imagination—the Tuamotu Archipelago, often called the "Dangerous" or "Low Archipelago," consists merely of thin strips of low-lying land, or coral rock, encircling lagoons whose size varies from a few miles to forty-two miles in length. There are fifty-six such coral atolls in the group, scattered over several hundred thousand square miles of ocean.

It is upon islands of this archipelago that fourteen of the eighteen branches in the Tahitian Mission have been established. Largest branch is found on Takaroa, with Taumata a Mapuhi, graduate of the one-time L. D. S. Maori Agricultural College in New Zealand, as

president. On Fakarava, Elder Hardy found the branch president to be Maeva a Marunui, governor of the island, with his first counselor, the island's head policeman. On the island of Taenga Elder Hardy dedicated a house as dwelling-place for the Elders, built by the combined efforts of the three branches of Taenga, Nihiru, and Makemo. Everywhere the Paumotu people, as the inhabitants of the Tuamotu group are called, expressed joy at the visit of one of the General Authorities. Gifts, feasts, special demonstrations marked Elder Hardy's stay at each island.

At Tubuai, due south of Tahiti, a local missionary, Brother Teao a Mauta, was set apart, for there the French government will no longer permit foreigners to carry on proselyting. With three branches fully organized and well-housed in chapels of rock construction, with beau-