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Abstract: A visitor strolling down a Salt Lake City street in 1870 would have heard a clipped British accent almost as frequently as a flattened Yankee drawl, as a third of the people in Salt Lake County in that year were British-born. Why had the English ground proven so fertile for the Latter-day Saints? An 1840 letter written by two prominent Mormon apostle/missionaries provides partial answers. Willard Richards had labored in England since 1837; Brigham Young disembarked three years later. Together in 1840 they wrote back to Nauvoo of the jarring events which were transforming England.

Their letter is a significant document, for it provides a contemporary Mormon-American view of the life in hardship of early Victorian England. They also disparagingly described the religious scene. All this helps to explain the British attraction of Mormonism. The Latter-day Saints with their promise of a better life in America, gathered some converts who sought a remedy to their harsh and difficult conditions. But even though Mormonism moved in the same reform current as at least a dozen major agitations and movements which stirred England through the period, its major appeal was profoundly religious. Religion dominated Victorian society, and the Saints' message of a restored and pure Bible Christianity, its claims of priesthood authority, its display of spiritual gifts, its millennial hopes, and its emphasis upon Sabbath observance, sobriety, temperance, and family solidarity appealed to many religious seekers. This article reproduces the letter of Willard Richards and Brigham Young.



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The Willard Richards and Brigham Young 5 September 1840 Letter from England to Nauvoo

Ronald W. Walker

A visitor strolling down a Salt Lake City street in 1870 would have heard a clipped British accent almost as frequently as a flattened Yankee drawl, as a third of the people in Salt Lake County in that year were British-born.¹ Why had the English ground proven so fertile for the Latter-day Saints? An 1840 letter written by two prominent Mormon apostle/missionaries provides partial answers. Willard Richards had labored in England since 1837; Brigham Young disembarked three years later.² Together in 1840 they wrote back to Nauvoo of the jarring events which were transforming England.

Their letter is a significant document, for it provides a contemporary Mormon-American view of the life in hardship of early Victorian England. The English population doubled during the first half of the nineteenth century, while the Industrial Revolution in turn uprooted the nation's countryside and shifted the nation's population to the new cotton and iron mill towns of the Midlands and north. There in the congested squalor of his new environment, the English laborer found the certainties of his old lifestyle lost. Gone were his few acres of garden soil—replaced by sooty factories and workshops. The rhythm of agrarian life with its weekly pilgrimage to the Anglican church was only a memory. Moreover, during the late 1830s and early 1840s, unseasonable weather and the sputtering national economy depressed already difficult times. Richards and Young write convincingly of these conditions.

They also described the religious scene. Writing disparagingly of “monied *monopolizing* Priests,” they joined critics both in and out of the Anglican establishment who despaired its mismanagement of temporal possessions, its secular power, its simony, nepotism, and the holding by some priests of clerical livings in plurality. Notwithstanding, the Mormons found that the Methodists, not the Anglicans, offered the greatest opposition. But even Wesleyanism presented an opportunity. Its growing political and religious conservatism lessened its attraction among laborers and made it easier for rivals like the followers of Joseph Smith to penetrate its flock.

All this helps to explain the British attraction of Mormonism. The Latter-day Saints with their promise of a better life in America, gathered

some converts who sought a remedy to their harsh and difficult conditions. But even though Mormonism moved in the same reform current as at least a dozen major agitations and movements which stirred England through the period, its major appeal was profoundly religious. Religion dominated Victorian society, and the Saints, message of a restored and pure Bible Christianity, its claims of priesthood authority, its display of spiritual gifts, its millennial hopes, and its emphasis upon Sabbath observance, sobriety, temperance, and family solidarity appealed to many religious seekers. In short, the Church found converts in England because it promised salvation both for this world and for the world to come.

The original manuscript of the letter is located in the Joseph Smith collection in the LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City. The punctuation of the original in most cases has been retained, although some commas and periods have been altered to improve readability. Words marked out by Richards and Young in their letter have been deleted. With these exceptions, the document is printed as it was written.

Star Office, 149 Oldham Road

Manchester, Eng.

Sept. 5th 1840

To the first Presidency of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,
viz, Joseph Smith Jun, Sidney Rigdon & Hyrum Smith,

Beloved of the Lord and of his saints:

We esteem it a great privilege to be permitted to address you on paper, while we are far separated from you in a land of Strangers, or perhaps we might say with propriety, the land of our forefathers: but be this as it may, it is, indeed, a land of strangers to us, only so far as we have begun to become acquainted with the inhabitants by a few months or years travels among them. The time of our acquaintance is but short at the longest, but when we contemplate our absence from our homes & kindred, & especially from the Society of those who are over us in the Lord, whose faces we delight to look upon, & whose councils we are ever glad to receive, & rejoice in following the time seems to be prolonged; & while we remain in this situation we hope you will not think us burdensome, if we trouble you occasionally to read our thoughts & answer us a few questions, or many, even as many as is wisdom in God you should answer, for if we ask those which are improper it shall be on account of our ignorance, therefore we pray you forgive us. We desire not to council you in any but to be counseled by you, for it is the desire of our hearts to do the will of God in all things, & we feel our own weakness & insufficiency for the great work which is committed to us, & feel to place all our hope, strength, & confidence in Israel's God, who is sufficient for all things, & not do as many who profess to love the Lord & at the same time live in neglect of his commandments & his ordinances & despise the order of his council and government. No, we rejoice that the Church has a *Moses* in these last days (and an *Aaron* by his side)³ of whom the Saints may enquire, as in days of old, & know the mind of the Lord. We by no means suppose you ignorant of our

situation of the situation of the people here, or our proceedings, & yet as is common among men we presume it will not be unacceptable to you to read something from us also, concerning the circumstances by which we are surrounded. There are some things which we expect to find common amongst men of different nations, such as a disposition to believe error instead of truth, & love sin instead of holiness; also, a disposition, among a few of the honest in heart to believe the truth & rejoice in it when it is brought within their reach; & yet, such are the attendant circumstances with which people of different nations are surrounded & individuals of the same nations, but of different neighborhoods, that they require very different treatment or address in order to induce them to receive the truth, & even then will require very different degrees of time to accomplish or bring into exercise the same amount of faith. The man who has only read the histories of the people of England, which we had seen before we left America, is liable to meet with some disappointments, at least, when he comes to make his introduction amongst them. This may in part be owing to the historian, for it is generally the case that what we find in history relates more particularly to the higher classes, in the nations, for England, unlike America, is divided into classes; many indeed, but they may all be comprised in three, so far as we need designate at this time, (*viz*) Lords, Tradesmen, & mechanics or laborers, or, in other words, the highest, middle, & lowest classes, each of which have their particular customs, & manners but the histories we refer to, have more generally treated of those of the higher order, or, at least, we find an acquaintance that those histories are now more applicable to the higher & middle classes than any other. But, perhaps a part may be owing to the great changes which have taken place in the nation, within a few years, with regard to money matters, which has caused a mighty revolution, in the affairs of the common people.

A few years since, and almost every family had their garden, their cow on the common & their pig in the sty, which added greatly to the comforts of the household; but now we seldom find either garden, cow or pig.

As we pass around among the country cottages & see the stone walls which are thrown down but more commonly the hedges in a decaying & mutilated state it is very naturally for us to inquire what have you here? & what the cause of this destruction? & we generally get but one answer, “a few years ago I had a flourishing garden on the spot you now see & it was surrounded with this hedge which was planted by my own hand; I had a cow of my own which fed on yonder common—I labored on my masters farm, & had plenty of time, morning and evenings, to till my garden, in which I raised scarce enough for my family, & every year I had a good pig, plenty to eat, & we were happy, but our Lords & masters have become more avaricious, & are trying to get all they can themselves, & will hardly let the poor live. You see my landlord has made my garden into a meadow, & feeds his own cattle upon it; the Lord of the manner fenced in the common, so that I had no place to keep my cow & I was obliged to sell her; I killed my pig to prevent its starving. The small farms are united & made into large ones, so we could get nothing to do on the land. I have been obliged to go into the factory, with my wife & children, to get a morsel of bread;” or, “I have taken to handloom weaving, to keep my wife & little one from starvation.”⁴

By this brief sketch you will easily discover that the histories, which we refer to, were much more applicable to the times for which they were written, than for the present time, so that it is no wonder foreigners should be disappointed in visiting England at the present time, who may not have seen some very recent histories. It cannot be expected that we should give any thing like a history of all the changes in Old England, in one brief communication, & that in the midst of much confusion, arising from the preparation for the departure of the brethren, the getting up of the Star⁵ &c, &c, which is now crowding us, but you will see at a glance that the few changes we have hinted at would prove the cause of a multitude of effects.

Manufacturing is the business of England. The cotton mills are the most numerous, the weavers will get from 6 to 10 shillings per week, the spinners something more. The handloom weavers have to work hard to get 6 shillings per week. Now after paying 2 or 3 shillings rent per week—1 shilling for coal, beside taxes of every kind, we might say, for smoke must not go up [the] chimney in England without a tax, light must not come in at the window without paying duties, many must pay from 1 penny to 6 pence per week for water, & if we should attempt to tell all we should want a government list, after paying all taxes what think you will a family have left for bread stuff?

Add to this the tax on corn⁶ which is a great share of the expense of the article, & what is left but starvation, leaving out of account all seasonings such as Peppers, Spices, &c which by taxation is four times the value it is in the United States—So you may well suppose that the poor are not troubled much with these things. The poor are not able to keep dogs, & if they were they would have to pay from 8 shilling to 1 L per head per annum, tax. There are taxes for living & taxes for dying, insomuch that it is very difficult for the poor to get buried any how, & a man may emigrate to America & find a grave, for less money, than he can get a decent burial for, in Old England. We scarce recollect an article without tax except cats, mice and fleas.

After what we have written we scarce need tell you that England is filled with beggars. They call at our doors, from 1/2 a Dozen to a Dozen per day. If we go in the streets they gather round us and it is hard to get rid of them without a penny, indeed, we do not try, so long as we can get a penny by buying or begging, for we remember that the measure we meet shall be measured to us again. Hunger & Rags are no curiosity here, & while things remain as they are what can we expect but theft, robbery, murder which now fill the land—Leaving out of the account, both as cause & effect the drunkenness & gambling, sweering & debauching—which are common on every hand?—

It will readily be discovered that the people have enough to do, to keep from dying with hunger without taking much thought for the improvement of the mind. Many of the people cannot read, a great many cannot write, children are admitted into the factories at 8 years old, working a part of the day & attending school a part till they are 14 years old & then work continually, though as yet we have been able to discover but very little benefit from the factory school, it is by Parliament compulsion on the part of the masters, & not of free will, of course the easier got over the better, the cheaper the master, the more money remains in pocket.

A few years since the spinners & weavers had “Turn outs” (as they now sometimes have in America) when their masters displeased them—but trade

is now so dull, the masters care little for their manufactures, & have reduced the workmen's wages to almost, the lowest extremity, & if their hands should turn out for more wages, they have nothing before them but destruction for there [are] thousands & tens of thousands who cannot get one days work in a month, or six months, so they continue to labor 12 hours in a day for almost nothing rather than starve at once. Their miserable pittance is mostly oatmeal & water boiled together, & they would be quite content if they could get enough of that, with sometimes a little Treacle, which is floor & molasses, or a little rancid butter, or skim milk made of whiting & water to a great extent if we mistake not, although they have to give from 3 to 4 pence per quart for it. Buttermilk is also a treat to the poor people and is easily increased in quantity by whiting & water.—There is no scheme which can be devised left unimproved to grind the face of the poor & this [word indecipherable] & we feel that the time has nearly come for the words of James to be fulfilled [“]go to now ye rich men weep & howl for the miseries which are come upon you[”] &c.⁷

Much has been said in history of the learning & neatness of the English people. Of the latter subject we have neither time nor disposition to say much, although we are now short of matter, but simply ask how can it be expected that neatness should be a very prominent trait in the habits of a people who are obliged to improve every moment to get a morsel of bread?—And as to learning such a thing as a news-paper is scarcely to be found among the common people, & if it was the English papers are filled with little else than “cold blooded murder,” “Horrid Tragedies” “Roberies” “Thefts” “Fires” “Notic[e] of the Que[en]s Dinner” or “Prince Alburts Ride out,” or [“]visit to the Theatre,” or [“]Rail Road accident,” “Hunting excursions[”] &c, &c, &c, which is calculated to harden the heart & prepare it for far still greater wretchedness. Such is the poverty of the people that but few of the Saints can afford to take the Star we are publishing once a month, price 6 pence.⁸

Neither have the priests much more information than the people, indeed there are many of the common people whom they dare not meet in argument, although they have their livings, thousands upon thousands, & some of them own whole townships or parishes & will tell their parishioners & tenants if they allow any one to preach in their houses they will turned out of doors, or if they are baptized they will fare no better, & thus many simple souls who believe our message dare not be baptized, because they have not faith sufficient to screen them from the threats of an insolent priest or factory master, knowing they will worry them to the utmost if they displease him, our hearts mourn for such. It is apparently starvation on one hand & domination on the other. The Lord have mercy upon them.—Amen.⁹

We find the people of this land much more ready to receive the gospel, than those of America, so far as they do receive it, for they have not that speculative intelligence, or prejudice, or prepossession, or false learning, call it what you please, which they have there [in America]. Consequently we have not & labor with a people month after month to break down their old notions, for their priests have taught them but little, & much of that is so foolish as to be detected at a glance. Viewing the subject in this light we find ignorance a blessing, for the more ignorant of false notions the more readily they sense truth. The greatest opposition we meet with is from the Methodist. The Church of England would fain make themselves believe they are on the

rock and cannot be shaken, therefore they trouble themselves little about these things, as yet, the more is to come.

Thus while we have not the learning and prejudice of the people to contend against as in America we have the influence of the monied *monopolizing* Priests & factory masters, & yet after all their influence, those who have received the word have generally received it very readily & the trouble of keeping up “church discipline” here has been small compared with our native country. But how, those who receive the word so readily will stand in the day of trial remains yet to be proved, as there has been nothing in this land as yet which need try the faith of any one.¹⁰ But of this we confidently hope that many have already received the word which will endure unto the end.

We have many things we would gladly say to you did time permit, & were we not afraid of wearying your patience, but, brethren, bear with us a little further, we beseech of you, for we want to tell you a little of what we have done, & ask a few questions, & for your patience you shall have our feeble prayers that our heavenly father will multiply his blessings unto you.

According to council we have gathered from different parts of England & Scotland a company of the Brethren & sisters who are now in Liverpool ready to sail for America on Monday next.¹¹ Most of them are very poor; those who had money have given most of it to help those who had need, as this was not sufficient; we, seeing the poverty & distress of some families, have made use of our own credit, among the brethren to carry them along with the rest.¹² It was the decision of the Council in July that Elder Turl[e]y should lead this company to Zion, & he goes accordingly.

Brethren, our hearts are pained with the poverty & misery of this people, & we have done all we could to help as many off as possible to a land where they may get a morsel of bread, & serve God according to his appointment; & we have done it cheerfully as unto the Lord, & we desire to ask you have we done right? Or is it a right principle, for us to act upon, to involve ourselves, to help the poor Saints to Zion?¹³

We have heard by the bye that Brothers Joseph & Hyrum are coming to England next season. Is this good news true? May we look for you?¹⁴

Shall we gather up all the saints we can & come over with them next spring?

Have we done right in Printing a hymn book?

Are we doing right in Printing the book of Mormon?

Are we doing right in staying here & leaving our families to be a burden to the C?¹⁵

We have sent some of our papers to America, is this Right?

When the Book of Mormon is completed, will it be fit[ting?] for any one to carry any of them to America?¹⁶

Shall we print the Doctrine and Covenants here or not? or will the D. & C. be printed & go to the nations, as it now is or not? or will it be reviewed & printed for the nation?¹⁷

Shall we send all we can to America next season & stay here ourselves?

What is the Lords will concerning Bro. Richards? Shall he take his family to America next season? or shall he tary here with them awhile longer? what shall he do?—¹⁸

We have lately visited a museum where we saw an E[gyptian] mummy. On the head stone &c are many ancient & curious characters, & we asked the privilege of copying them, but have not received an answer yet.

Shall we copy them & send them to you for translation?¹⁹

Finally, Brothers, how long must we be deprived the company of our Dear Brethren whom we Love for this works sake, & we feel that it is our privilege to love those who are willing to lay down their lives for the Brethren.

We need not say we send our love to you for that is always with you. Should you doubt it Time & works must declare it. We hope you will favor us with a letter, for we exceedingly desire council in these matters, & all others which the Lord may have in store for us.

We would rejoice to see you in this country, & although your hearts would be pained with the poverty & wretchedness that prevails—you would see many things which would interest you, such as the ancient & curious workmanship of the churches, cathedrals, monuments &c which have stood, some of them a 1000 years or more & are now in a great state of preservation.²⁰

We remember the observation of Bro Joseph, “that we should hardly get over the nation before the Judgments of God would overtake the people”, & we fully believe it & are trying to do what we can to send forth the Gospel. One of our Elders has gone to South Australia, one to the East Indies & we expect one to start for Hamburg in Holland this week.—We want council & wisdom, & any thing that is good. Our motto is *go ahead*. Go ahead.—& *ahead* we are determined to go—till we have conquered every foe. So come life or come death we’ll go ahead, but tell us if we are going wrong & we will right it.—

Your Brethren in the Everlasting Lord.

B. Young

W. Richards

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1. *U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of the Census, Ninth Census, 1870, The Statistics of the Population of the United States*, p. 373.

2. For the story of the opening of Mormon missionary work in England, see James B. Allen and Malcolm R. Thorp, “The Mission of the Twelve to England, 1840–41: Mormon Apostles and the Working Classes,” *BYU Studies* 15 (Summer 1975): 449–526. See also James B. Allen and Thomas G. Alexander, eds., *Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton, 1840 to 1842* (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1974).

3. The “Moses” referred to, of course, was Joseph Smith. Young and Richards were possibly thinking of Hyrum Smith, Joseph’s brother, in referring to an “Aaron,” though Sidney Rigdon had been designated as a “spokesman” for Joseph Smith in 1830. But by this time Hyrum Smith was generally recognized as the closest person to Joseph, and his most intimate advisor.

4. The destruction of the traditional open-field system of agriculture, with free-men sharing the commons, proceeded at an escalating rate throughout the eighteenth century and climaxed in the nineteenth. Between 1761 and 1801 alone, Parliament

passed two thousand acts which enclosed three million acres. These enclosures brought efficiency and wealth to the gentry but destroyed the communal life of the village farmer, who was forced in fact to abandon his way of life.

5. That is, the Latter-day Saints' *Millennial Star*, which the Mormon elders in England began to publish in 1840. Brigham Young was primarily responsible for the initial funding of the *Star* and other publications of that year.

6. By "corn" the American missionaries meant "wheat" or grain as per British usage. The "corn laws" placed a tariff on imported grain and greatly benefited English agriculture by allowing products to sell at inflated prices. High grain prices in the market place, however, did not please an increasing urban, consuming nation, and in 1846, after tumultuous agitation and political crises, Parliament moved to allow grain to enter the nation without duty.

7. The quotation is from James 5:1. Throughout this whole section of the letter it is obvious that Young and Richards empathize with the common man, and especially with the poor whose lives were adversely affected by the rapid economic changes of the early nineteenth century. Many years later Brigham Young recalled his own efforts at charity. "Whenever I went from my office, if I neglected to take my pocket full of coppers to give to the poor mendicants which are everywhere to be met with, I would return to the office, and take a handful of coppers from the drawer, and as I walked along would give something to such objects of pity and distress as I met, and pass on without being hindered by them." At the same time, it was the feeling of the elders that the Church would be built by converting such people. "We organized the Church," Brigham Young continued, "and from that time we have been gathering the poor." Sermon of 17 July 1870, *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1855–86), 13:212, (hereafter cited as *JD*).

8. During this period the government taxed paper, newspaper advertisements, and newspapers themselves. It was not until after that abolition of these taxes in the middle 1850s and early 1860s, that the famous nineteenth century penny press began. Young and Richards hardly overstated the vacuous and sensational nature of the early British newspapers. For an examination of the popular tastes of the English reading public, see Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

9. Young later wrote that the threats of ministers and mill owners actually proved self defeating. "The Priest and leaders drive the people to us," he wrote in November 1840, "so they can due nothing aganst the truth, but for it, it all helps to role the worke on to the final crices." Young to Mary Ann Angell Young, Philip Blair Collection, Western Americana, University of Utah.

10. While there were probably about as many people who left the Mormon Church as joined it between 1838 and 1840, the apostles nevertheless apparently felt that it was easier to keep the Church generally united in England than in America. Undoubtedly, they were remembering the earthshaking events of the past two years, when apostasy forced both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young to flee Kirtland, Ohio, for their lives, and when in Missouri many of the leading brethren, such as Oliver Cowdery and Thomas B. Marsh, had abandoned the Church. The nature of apostasy in America was much more threatening to the structure of the Church than the drifting away of members in England who had little influence anyway. At the same time, the problems with the Kirtland economy as well as the efforts to impose discipline during the Missouri persecutions were certainly more trying to the faith of the Saints than any problems faced by the English Saints during this period.

11. Though one small emigrant company under the leadership of John Moon had already sailed for America in June (see *BYU Studies* 17 [Spring 1977]: 339–41), and a few English Saints had migrated individually, this was the first emigrant company to be organized by the Church leaders in England. In effect, it began the official emigration of the European Saints, which resulted in the gathering of over 50,000 to America in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This particular company, led by Theodore Turley, finally set sail on Tuesday, 8 September.

12. Later Young again acknowledged the poverty of the British immigrant-convert. It was mainly “the poor and the ignorant,” he said, who found themselves gathered into the Mormon gospel net; see *JD*, 13:148. Subsequent study has proven the point. During the early 1840’s only one of five British emigrants could be judged roughly as middle class. Thereafter the ratio steadily declined until by 1860 there were almost nine times more common laborers coming to America than farmers, shopkeepers, professional men, or clerks; see P. A. M. Taylor, *Expectations Westward: The Mormons and the Emigration of Their British Converts in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1965), pp. 149–51, 157.

13. Though the Church was now officially encouraging emigration, and assisting in its organization, the official Church emigration agency, The Perpetual Emigration Fund, was not begun until 1849. Prior to that time there were various private efforts at financial help and organization.

14. The Smith brothers, of course, never did go to England.

15. “C” apparently refers to the Nauvoo High Council, or perhaps simply “The Church.”

16. Later the missionaries received a letter from Joseph Smith indicating that he was troubled by their conduct in England, and Young assumed that this censure pertained to their printing of the Book of Mormon and the hymnal without previous approval. At the time of publication, Young believed that such approval “did not seeme to be posable” and confessed “all I have to say about the matter . . . is I have don all that I could to doe good and promote the cause that we are in. I have don the verry best that I knew how. . . .” See Young to Mary A. Young, November 1840, Blair Collection, Western Americana, University of Utah.

17. The first European edition of the Doctrine and Covenants was not printed until 1845, in Liverpool.

18. In October 1840, Joseph Smith called all the apostles who were laboring in England home except Parley P. Pratt, who remained to preside there. He left the following April.

19. No doubt this query was prompted by Smith’s fascination with some Egyptian papyrus which had come into his possession in 1835 and which resulted in the publication of the Book of Abraham.

20. While Richards had observed England’s historical sites for several years, the experience was a new one for the recently arrived Brigham Young. Only two weeks following his landing at Manchester, in April 1840, he visited Worcester’s cathedral church of Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose origins extended into Saxon times. During the first week of December, several months after writing this letter, Young visited the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, St. Paul’s Church, London Bridge, and the British Museum; see Elden Jay Watson, ed., *The Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1801–1844* (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), pp. 72–73 and “Diary of Brigham Young, 1840–44,” 3 to 9 December 1840, Church Library Archives, Salt Lake City.