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Abstract: The literary giants of early nineteenth-century England did not foster nor usher in the restoration of the gospel. Indeed, as we have seen, the only one of these giants who knew about Mormonism was Wordsworth, and his sole recorded response, on earth, was hostility. My aim, then, instead, is to explore what happened to prevent the kind of spiritual marriage between the gospel message and English poetry which would seem almost expectable and which Shelley even seems to have envisioned. I will suggest, and suggest only, for proof in matters of mental and artistic and social influences seems impossible, one key ingredient in the literary context of the day which seems likely to have poisoned the atmosphere which in so many other ways seemed so likely to be receptive. The element of the literary context on which I shall focus is the discovery of a variety of treasures of ancient writings, all of which are bound to remind us in one way or another of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.



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Gordon K. Thomas

“Do you know anything of a wretched set of religionists in your country, superstitionists I ought rather to say, called Mormonites, or Latter-Day Saints?” So wrote the great English poet William Wordsworth to his American editor Henry Reed early in 1846. This is the only reference to Mormonism in Wordsworth’s surviving letters or other writings, and it may come as a shock to modern Latter-day Saints to find such anger and hostility towards us in a poet of whom we so often think as *our* poet, one who believed much of what we believe, knew what we know, and did not mind any more than we do defying the orthodox establishment of church and state for the sake of pursuing and publishing his unorthodox ideas. In fact, though, Wordsworth felt deep personal chagrin and sorrow over the inroads which Mormonism was making in Britain by the 1840s. A niece of his wife had joined the Church and was bound for Nauvoo, and it was that fact which occasioned his letter to Henry Reed, in which the poet added that their relative had “just embarked, we believe at Liverpool, with a set of the deluded followers of that wretch, in an attempt to join their society.” This headstrong girl was neither stupid nor unlearned. As Wordsworth wrote of her, “She is a young woman of good abilities and well educated, but early in life she took from her mother and her connections a methodistical turn, and has gone on in a course of what she supposes to be piety till she has come to this miserable close.”¹

In fact, this hostility of Wordsworth, who was then England’s Poet Laureate, towards Mormonism was, as we well know, widely shared by many, perhaps most, men and women of prominence and public stature in the kingdom in the early years of the British Mission. That fact, too, though we are used to acknowledging it, may well continue to surprise us in a way. For the kinds of people of whom I am speaking, people of deep but generally unorthodox spiritual searchings and perceptions, of determinedly independent public stance, unafraid and undeterred in their personal pursuit of truth and their eagerness to share their own findings and tolerate those of others—these seem like the kinds of people from whom Mormonism might have hoped for a fair and even appreciative hearing. I think of such literary figures, besides Wordsworth, as Coleridge and Shelley, Blake and Byron, all of them so different but all of them outspoken seekers for and defenders of religious truth in the early nineteenth century.

Of course, accidents of chronology kept many of these from ever hearing of the restored gospel. Blake died a decade before the first Mormon missionaries reached England, and Coleridge died in 1834. Byron left England for good in 1816, and his pursuit of truth and a meaningful existence led him to an early death in the Greek Revolution in 1824. Shelley drowned off the coast of Italy in 1822, almost eight years before the Church was even organized, though he, like others, seems to have had at least a hazy notion of what was coming when he wrote in his 1819 preface to his poetic drama *Promethius Unbound* of what he actually called a restoration as well as a transformation in human conditions and religious awareness and opportunity. Shelley believed then that he and his literary companions would have a great role to play in what lay ahead:

The great writers of our own age are, we have reason to suppose, the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it. The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning, and the equilibrium between institutions and opinions is now restoring, or is about to be restored.²

My intent here is not to explore the fulfilling of Shelley's grand prophecy, for in any specific sense it was not fulfilled. The literary giants of early nineteenth-century England did not foster nor usher in the restoration of the gospel. Indeed, as we have seen, the only one of these giants who knew about Mormonism was Wordsworth, and his sole recorded response, on earth, was hostility. My aim, then, instead, is to explore what happened to prevent the kind of spiritual marriage between the gospel message and English poetry which would seem almost expectable and which Shelley even seems to have envisioned. I will suggest, and suggest only, for proof in matters of mental and artistic and social influences seems impossible, one key ingredient in the literary context of the day which seems likely to have poisoned the atmosphere which in so many other ways seemed so likely to be receptive.

The element of the literary context on which I shall focus is the discovery of a variety of treasures of ancient writings, all of which are bound to remind us in one way or another of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. It seems clear to me, here at the outset, that the literarily aware of Great Britain in 1837 and the ensuing years would surely have felt similarly reminded as they heard of the miraculous preservation and discovery and translation of the Book of Mormon. And the reminder would have been there whether for good or evil.

If the bringing to light of the Book of Mormon still ranks as the most miraculously dramatic recovery of ancient records we yet know of, even amid such modern discoveries as Linear B and Nag Hammadi and the Dead Sea Scrolls, there are other, if lesser, miracles. One of these, perhaps the

most important ever in English literary studies, began to unfold just over a century before the opening of the British Mission, but it developed in several stages right up into the early nineteenth century. This was the almost miraculous survival of the only manuscript of the greatest poem written in the earliest form of our language, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, which not only came through the dissolution of the monasteries by King Henry VIII and the scattering or destruction of their libraries in the sixteenth century but the accidental burning of the Robert Cotton library, in which it had been housed without yet having been really studied or recognized as a treasure, in 1731. In fact, it was this fire, which mostly just charred the edges but could so easily have destroyed the entire *Beowulf* manuscript, which first brought it to real public awareness. Even then, the poem was not yet safe. As one scholar says, "The history of *Beowulf*'s physical preservation is . . . something of a cliff-hanger."³ A series of something very much like small miracles continued on into the next century. An edition of the poem was prepared in the late eighteenth century by a Danish scholar named Thorkelin, who made copies of the only manuscript in 1787. His hand-made copies still survive, and they preserve for us many words which have since vanished from the constantly deteriorating Cotton manuscript; but Thorkelin's printed edition itself was destroyed in 1807 when the British navy bombarded Copenhagen. Scholars, who do not often get excited on paper, still write of the "sensational . . . survival" of *Beowulf* over the years.⁴ It is, for English literature, a spectacular example of a nearly miraculous voice from the dust, one of the unquestioned masterpieces of our poetry which has reached us through ways which seem defiant of human reason and logical expectation. I cannot help feeling that if *only* this story of the marvelous transmission of the poem *Beowulf* from ancient times to modern readers had been in English minds in 1837, the still more spectacular claims of the Book of Mormon to miraculous preservation and transmission would have found easier access. But the saga of the *Beowulf* manuscript was a positive influence which was to wind up almost buried amid still more spectacular negative influences.

Another positive influence, I believe, would have been the story of the saving and publishing to the world of the medieval folk ballads. This is a story with many strands, of which that of Dr. Thomas Percy is neither the first nor the most reliable and scholarly. But Bishop Percy had a success with the old British ballads which outweighed all others in its effect on the public and which had a reputation for authority and respectability which none of the literary discoveries of which I am speaking could ever equal. Dr. Percy was an Oxford scholar and antiquarian of merit who became Anglican Bishop of Dromore in Ireland. He was a close and esteemed friend of the great and immensely influential Samuel Johnson, who put

Percy in charge of “British antiquities” in the discussions of the famous Literary Club, which was founded under the leadership of Samuel Johnson in 1764 in London, and which for decades was the very center of English intellectual life and activity.⁵ Johnson said of Percy that he was one “out of whose company I never go without having learnt something.”⁶ And when Percy turned his attention to ferreting out, sometimes in nearly miraculous states of survival, and reviving and publishing the old ballads for modern readers, he acknowledged Samuel Johnson’s help and inspiration in the project.⁷ The work which finally resulted was the monumental three-volume collection of medieval ballads and other popular poems, curiously mixed with some of Percy’s own compositions and some contemporary songs, published under the title *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765. It hit a popular nerve, fostered among other things in the public mind by the story of the preservation of the *Beowulf* manuscript, of increasing popular interest in the literary antiquities of English, rather than classical literature. And it fed that interest in very positive ways. Scholars agree that it “played a major part in revolutionizing English literary taste and made the way smooth” for later great poetic discoveries and achievements.⁸ As with *Beowulf*, Percy’s *Reliques*, if it had existed alone in this literary context, would perhaps have helped make the way smooth too for the arrival of the Book of Mormon to British shores with the first missionaries in 1837.

But it was not alone. During this same period of growing excitement in literary Britain over those important and very positive discoveries of ancient writings now revealed in sometimes seemingly miraculous ways for modern readers, there were other spectacular claims being made for other discoveries which would eventually disillusion the public, especially the literary world of England, and for decades make even the most tolerant men of letters suspicious and resistant toward anything claiming to be a voice from the dust, that is to say a discovery of ancient writings.

One of these was the curious case of Thomas Chatterton, who began, as he said, at the age of twelve discovering poems written in the fifteenth century by, among others, a priest named Thomas Rowley. Whether in a fit of depression, or out of fear of discovery, or in pangs of conscience, or for other reasons only to be guessed at, Chatterton killed himself by drinking arsenic in London in 1770, at the age of only seventeen. It was mostly after his death that his name became known. In 1777, a very prominent scholar of medieval literature became involved in the Chatterton story. This was Thomas Tyrwhitt, a man renowned for his study of the great medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer and to whom, more than to any other single scholar, we owe the recovery of understanding of Chaucer and knowledge of how his poetry worked and how it was pronounced. At the very moment in which Thomas Tyrwhitt was achieving the beginnings of his great and deserved

fame as a medievalist, with his publication of *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer; to which are added An Essay upon his Language and Versification: An Introductory Discourse and Notes*,⁹ he turned his attentions to the Chatterton manuscripts. Tyrwhitt published the poems attributed by Chatterton to “the gode prieste Thomas Rowleie” and hailed them as among the great discoveries of literary antiquities.¹⁰ These claims, coming in the context created not only by the reawakened and newly informed interest in Chaucer but also by such discoveries as that of *Beowulf* and Percy’s *Reliques*, attracted a great deal of attention. But the attention was naturally accompanied by scrutiny, and the Rowley poems could not stand up under scrutiny. They were soon revealed to be counterfeits, made up of a hodgepodge of Chaucerian and Spenserian language and Reformation ideas.¹¹ After a short period of horrified discussion and public debate, these poems were quite soon and almost universally acknowledged a fraud and an imposition, though even severe literary critics tended to praise the achievement of the boy Chatterton, while denouncing his deceit. Samuel Johnson said of him, “This is the most extraordinary young man that has encountered my knowledge. It is wonderful how the whelp has written such things.”¹² A quarter of a century later, Wordsworth praised Chatterton as “the marvelous Boy/The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride”;¹³ and in the next generation John Keats dedicated his first long poem, *Endymion*, to Chatterton. Probably such men felt little inclination to punish the boy Chatterton for his literary forgery because he had already punished himself so severely. But the revelation that yet another great discovery from antiquity had this time turned out to be a fraud certainly created both disillusionment and suspicion in the English reading public. Chatterton polluted the well of truth.

The most spectacular of all the claims for literary discoveries in this period of English history, and the one which seems most like a sort of parallel parody of the Book of Mormon, was that involving the young Scotsman James Macpherson. Macpherson’s discoveries and claims and publications were to provoke both immense popular excitement internationally and also a long-lasting scholarly controversy, finally resulting, by 1837, in a British literary public “made wary” of all more or less miraculous claims for ancient books discovered and translated by modern men for modern readers.¹⁴

In 1760, Macpherson, just twenty-four years old and fresh out of college, published a work he entitled *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gaelic or Erse Language*, the first of several books which he later collected and compiled into a single work published under the title of *The Poems of Ossian* in 1765.¹⁵ The name of Ossian was not new to Macpherson’s readers. Both Ireland and Scotland

had long claimed for their cultural heritage the third-century Celtic bard who insisted that he wrote under divine inspiration and who related his own exploits and those of his illustrious father Fingal or Finn. It was a tradition as old and honored as the British legends of King Arthur and his Round Table knights—and equally misty in its origins and evidences. What was new about Macpherson's works was his claim to have discovered and have in his possession Ossian's original third-century Gaelic manuscripts, writings miraculously preserved on wood and stone and other ancient materials. His earliest discoveries, which he duly translated into English, spoke of even greater discoveries to be made if Macpherson could find sufficient financial backing for the needed searches. There was a sensational response to his appeal for funds; the money was easily provided; Macpherson went off into the Highlands; and he returned with a manuscript, so he said, of a full-blown epic. His translations into English were metrical and musical prose, and they were an immediate triumph. Understandable enough—for until then, no one had ever claimed to have discovered writings from the ancient Celts nor even to have thought that ancient Gaelic was a written language. Macpherson's claims then were doubly great: he had evidence to prove the literacy of the ancient inhabitants of Britain, and he proved them not merely literate but among the foremost literary artists of all time. These enormous claims were readily accepted, for the world was eager for great literary discoveries. Further, it was an age of growing national pride, and there were many eager and ready to believe that just as *Beowulf* had shown the literary greatness of which ancient Germanic people were capable and thus allowed Northern Europeans to enjoy the kind of sense of ancient cultural authority which Greeks and Italians had enjoyed for millennia, now the Celts had their Ossian and Fingal.

The Scottish were especially enthusiastic. One contemporary defender of Macpherson's claims within the Edinburgh literary establishment wrote: "The compositions of Ossian are so strongly marked with characters of antiquity, that although there were no external proof to support that antiquity, hardly any reader of judgment and taste could hesitate in referring them to a very remote aera."¹⁶

Translations into many European languages followed speedily; Cesarotti's translation into the Italian was said to be Napoleon Bonaparte's favorite book.¹⁷ In Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, published in 1774, the lovers Werther and Charlotte found such joy as was possible for them not in Homer, whose works they rejected, but in reading from the poems of Ossian to each other.¹⁸ Indeed, the popularity of Macpherson's productions achieved immense proportions not only throughout the British Isles and all over Europe but in America as well, where they were praised enthusiastically by such men of discernment as Thomas Jefferson and Walt Whitman.¹⁹

Ralph Waldo Emerson noted that Ossian, as Macpherson had translated him, “for poetry . . . had superiorities over Dryden and Pope.”²⁰ And Henry David Thoreau, in an amazing burst of enthusiasm, extended the favorable comparison to Homer, Pindar, and Isaiah.²¹

If, however, there was an immediate, a widespread, and, for several decades at least, an enduring acclaim for Macpherson’s translations, there was also from the very first considerable suspicion of his claims in certain quarters. The same Dr. Samuel Johnson who had helped with Percy’s *Reliques* and had praised Chatterton’s talents even while regretting his fraud, decided that the Macpherson case required some probing. Though of advanced age and not in very good health, Johnson, who was always reluctant to leave the comforts and civility of life in London, undertook an extensive journey into Scotland and its outlying isles in order to make on-the-spot inquiries and investigations. In 1775 he published his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* and announced to the public his finding that Macpherson may have had acquaintance with a few oral fragments of old stories and poems, but that the work purporting to be a translation was in fact an original composition, and not even a very good one. When one of Macpherson’s defenders asked Johnson whether he really thought that “any man of modern age could have written such poems,” Johnson’s reply was, “Yes, Sir, many men, many women, and many children.”²² Macpherson promptly challenged Johnson to a duel, but the great scholar retorted, “I shall never be deterred from detecting what I think a cheat, by the menaces of ruffian.”²³

A great and long controversy ensued, with many important men of letters taking sides. Thomas Gray, the poet and Oxford scholar, wrote that he would gladly go to the Scottish Highlands to behold the genius who was the author of Ossian’s poems if he believed, as he could not, that it might be any man alive in modern times.²⁴ Robert Burns was so certain of the authenticity of Macpherson’s publication that he spoke of Ossian as among “the glorious models after which I endeavor to form my conduct.”²⁵ And Macpherson was able to the end of his life to maintain considerable public faith in his claims by promising to publish the original manuscripts “as soon as the translator shall have time,” as he said, “to transcribe them for the press.”²⁶ Meanwhile, he became very wealthy, entered Parliament, and when he died in 1796 was buried in Westminster Abbey, all without ever producing the manuscripts. As Johnson wrote, “Where are the manuscripts? They can be shown if they exist, but they were never shown.”²⁷ Eleven years after Macpherson’s death, that is in 1807, the poems did appear in the “original” Celtic language, when they were easily seen to be mere translations from Macpherson’s productions in English back into rather shoddy modern Gaelic.²⁸ Knowledgeable scholars no longer debated the issue, and

the so-called “Ossianic Controversy” which once engulfed the literary circles of Europe and America had died. Dr. Johnson’s analysis has been shown to be right, and Macpherson’s “translations” are now known to be perhaps the most notorious fraud in literary history.

It is easy to imagine the damaging effects of such a conclusion to such a controversy on the sincere efforts of those first Latter-day Saint missionaries who went to Great Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century carrying the Book of Mormon and being largely or totally unaware of the literary context into which their book inevitably made them enter. In presenting the Book of Mormon in such a poisoned literary atmosphere, they faced irrational and predetermined distrust. The reading public of Britain had become very wary and cynical after the events I have described, and understandably so. What had for a time seemed almost like the hand of God active in preserving and revealing ancient writings had become a mixture of truth and blatant falsehood, with the falsehood leaving, of course, the stronger impression. Into the British literary context of disappointed hopes and cynical fraud entered the Book of Mormon in 1837. The missionaries who carried it would have found difficulty in making appeals based on either logic or tradition. Perhaps, in fact, the Lord had allowed the literary events of the preceding decades to unfold in such a way that the only valid appeal was to the Spirit.

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