

## WILLIAM BUTLER: IRISH CONVERT AND BUILDER OF THE KINGDOM

*Craig L. Foster*

In his opening remarks at the North American Regional reunion of the Butler Society in 1981, Lord Dunboyne mentioned William Butler whom he described as a:

colorful Methodist . . . who went west at the time of the Great Hunger [Irish Potato Famine] in 1846 for the odd reason that he was inconsolable at the death of the horse he had entered in the Derby. . . . In Utah he joined the Mormons and had at least 5 wives and an embarrassment of issue!<sup>1</sup>

True, it was the death of a racehorse which started William Butler on his journey which would span two continents and almost sixty years in his devotion to a new found religion. However, William Butler was much more than just an odd Irishman who warrants no more than an anecdotal reference in a speech on America-bound Irish surnamed Butler.

Indeed, Butler not only accepted Mormonism and was, as Lord Dunboyne stated in amazement, the husband of five wives, but also served three missions to Great Britain, at least two of which took him back to his homeland. On more than one occasion he suffered on behalf of his new-found religion and, given the paranoia and tendency toward martyrdom which he exhibited in his writings, enjoyed the status of sufferer in God's name.

Born William George Butler on 15 August 1825 to George and Anne Colburne Butler, William came from a noble heritage. According to family traditions, William and his kin descended from the powerful Butler family, Earls of Ormonde and hereditary Chief Butlers of Ireland. However, by the time of William's birth, what wealth and grandeur the family had known had faded

away and left behind a proud and, by necessity, hard-working family.<sup>2</sup>

Butler was born on the family farm in Banogue which was an agricultural area located outside the small market town of Gorey in County Wexford. While the family had to work hard to provide a comfortable living for themselves, they were not, by any means, poor. To the contrary, they owned a large tract of land southeast of Gorey and had what was recognized as a fine stable of racehorses which they trained. Butler's family also had a number of relatives around Gorey which formed a large network of extended family, thus providing necessary familial and financial support if any problem arose.<sup>3</sup>

Butler received a strict religious upbringing as his family were all active Methodists. In fact, in later years, one of his brothers was a prominent member and pew holder of the local Methodist congregation. Unfortunately for William, his father died when he was fifteen years old and threw what had been a contented life into turmoil.

According to Butler's biography, he inherited the large portion of his father's estate, which consisted of 116 acres and stables as well as several blooded race horses. For several years he managed the farm but after the unexpected death of his favorite horse, on which he had placed a very large wager, he decided to leave Ireland and travel for awhile.<sup>4</sup>

Thus William Butler left on an extended trip in 1846. He spent the next several years working and traveling in Canada and the north-central United States before finding his way to Council Bluffs, where, according to Butler, he first met the Mormons and heard Orson Hyde preach. Upon listening, he "became very much

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interested in the Mormon religion [especially] after meeting Elder Orson Hyde.”<sup>5</sup>

Determined to learn more about the Mormons, Butler departed Council Bluffs with an emigrant company on 15 July 1850 and traveled with them as far as the Platte River. Exhibiting his characteristic impatience, Butler and another man decided to set out on foot to try to catch up with another wagon train traveling to the Salt Lake Valley. After several experiences with Indians, powerful thirst and the side effects of drinking alkaline water, William finally made it to the valley on 26 August 1850.

William Butler was baptized a member of the LDS Church less than a month after his arrival in Utah. The next three years were spent in Salt Lake and then Davis County where he bought a farm. The thirty acre farm was on Holmes Creek in Kaysville. During this time, Butler was actively involved in his new found religion.

During April conference in 1853, Butler was called on a mission to Great Britain. Along with the proselyting mission to the British Isles, Brigham Young gave the missionaries a rather odd assignment. He asked them to transport a large stone across the mountains and plains to Omaha, Nebraska. For this task, Butler and another elder provided two teams of horses and Brigham Young provided a large wagon.<sup>6</sup>



*William George Butler*

The stone which the missionaries transported was a 3 X 2 foot limestone which was 6 1/2 inches thick. In the center of the stone was a large, carved beehive. An all-seeing eye looked out from atop the inscription “Holiness to the Lord”. Below the beehive was inscribed “Deseret”.<sup>7</sup>

This stone was bound for the Washington Monument located in Washington D.C. All of the states and territories of the United States had been requested to provide a stone native to their individual states and territories. The monument was eventually completed in 1884 and the stones from the various states and territories of the union were placed on the inside of the obelisk where they remain to the present.

Under the terms of a resolution passed by the General Assembly of the Provisional State of Deseret in 1851, the stone had been quarried near Manti, Utah and inscribed by William Ward. However, once completed, the stone had sat unused until the summer of 1853. Although Congress officially changed the territory's name from Deseret to Utah, the local general assembly still sent the Deseret stone to Washington.<sup>8</sup>

On 22 June 1853 Butler and the other missionaries, under the direction of Philemon C. Merrill, departed with the stone. According to contemporary accounts, the trip was slow, taking about three months, and difficult. The men strained at hauling such a large object across the rough countryside and suffered at times from a lack of water and other provisions.<sup>9</sup>

After finally unburdening themselves of the large stone, Butler and an unnamed companion traveled up the Missouri River and eventually made their way to Ontario, Canada where they taught the gospel. While preaching in what was then called Bytown, Canada, and is now Canada's capital, Ottawa, Butler debated with a man concerning the necessity of baptisms for remission of sins. His interlocutor asked, "Where is there a man in these days with the same authority they had in the days of the Apostles anciently?"<sup>10</sup>

In response, Butler told his questioner that the man he saw standing before him had that authority.

[My statement] provoked him to make the attempt to strike me. I then rebuked the spirit that was in him in the name of Jesus Christ, and it departed immediately. I also commanded the man to be at peace. He went straitway and sat down without speaking a word. He was silent a few minutes and I said, 'Inasmuch [sic] as you love darkness rather than light, you shall also follow the spirit.' He departed immediately in the presence of all the people present who were astonished to see it. Immediately after, I was caught in the spirit so that I scarce realized

whether I was on the floor or not. I felt so full of the power of God, to the convincing of a great many....<sup>11</sup>

During his Canadian interlude, Butler baptized sixteen people, including several relatives who had emigrated from Ireland. Also during his stay in Canada, Butler experienced what he later described as "a great deal of persecution, some threatening to tar and feather me, and others to stone me with rocks, and some to take me to the Asylum at Toronto...."<sup>12</sup>

After a short while in Canada, Butler made his way to New York City where he met the other elders who were preparing to travel to Liverpool. Seven in all, the missionaries were, to a man, penniless until a stranger came to the missionaries and offered to pay their fare to Liverpool. They readily accepted.

On 8 October 1853 they set sail for Liverpool. Their voyage was one filled with hardship and adventure as they experienced terrible storms crossing the Atlantic. At one point, lightning destroyed the upper portion of the main mast, causing serious damage to the ship. According to a story related by Israel Barlow, one of Butler's fellow missionaries, everyone believed that the ship was going to sink. The seven missionaries went below to their room and prayed for the safety of the vessel. From that time on the sea was calm and the missionaries could see six angels guarding the ship, two of whom were identified as Joseph and Hyrum Smith.<sup>13</sup>

However, the ship's problems were not over. As the ship was entering the Irish Sea on the 30th of October, they were struck by another ship and floated helplessly for several days before they were able to drift to a port near Belfast, Ireland. There the missionaries took a steamship for the final leg of the journey to Liverpool. After a few days of rest and instruction by president Samuel W. Richards of the British mission, Butler returned to his native Ireland.<sup>14</sup>

He landed in Dublin on 8 November 1853 and from thence traveled to Gorey after a seven year absence. According to Butler, the reunion with his family and friends was pleasant until they learned that he had become a Mormon. Butler recorded in his journal:

I feel to weep for my people because they cannot understand and comprehend the principles of the Gospel. Yet I trust in the Lord that he will let his blessings rest upon them and fill them

with his spirit that they might in due time be enabled to see the beauty and blessings contained in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and be led to obey the same. I feel to rejoice in the principles of the kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup>

His good intentions and high expectations notwithstanding, William Butler did not convert any members of his family. To the contrary, his brother, Henry, was particularly angry at William for trying to convert him. He and other members of the family called him a madman and told him that he had a devil in him.<sup>16</sup>

However, a little over a month after his arrival in County Wexford, Butler did baptize one man. But the joy which he felt with his first sign of success in his native land was tempered by the death of one of his brothers. George Butler, barely twenty years of age, died of consumption on 27 December 1854. On his brother's deathbed, William taught him the gospel and promised him that he would have a chance in the hereafter to accept the truth. George Butler then requested the Methodist minister to leave which greatly pleased William.<sup>17</sup>

After several months in County Wexford, Butler had been able to baptize at least one man and had also succeeded in alienating his brother, Henry, and other members of the Butler family. He had also come to the attention of the Earl of Courtown who ordered William to stop preaching and told Henry Butler to make his brother leave the county. In response, Henry, although very much in agreement with the Earl, informed the Earl that William had been away for seven years and would be welcomed to stay in the Butler home as long as he wanted.<sup>18</sup>

After a short time, Butler received a letter from Liverpool informing him of his assignment to the Worcestershire Conference. He served there until the fall of 1855 when he returned to Gorey, County Wexford for a final visit before his departure for America. Upon his arrival in Gorey, Butler began a street meeting and commenced to preach. As he began he noticed a mob gathering. He estimated about five thousand people<sup>19</sup> crowded around him and began yelling:

It seemed as though the gates of hell were opened. ... I was dragged to the middle of the street when I again lifted up my voice and uttered these words, 'thus saith the Lord God. I am free!' I then shook my coat and cried again, 'I am free!

Your blood will be upon your own heads.' ...they commenced drifting me before them and throwing a continual shower of rocks at my head. After I had traveled about a mile in this predicament, I thought of the case of Stephen, Jesus, and all the apostles who had been called to suffer martyrdom and gave myself up to the will of the Lord. I undertook to turn out of the road into a gate that led to gentleman's place, but there was a guard against me. I also turned to the opposite side of the road into another gate that led to a gentleman's place. There was a guard there also. Among the guards here was a woman who shut the gate and clasped it against me. While she was doing this, a rock passed by the side of my head and struck her in the forehead, knocking her down. I quite [sic] this place and started out again when I met a little boy running towards me who said, 'Come to our house.' The mob also headed me here and tried to prevent me getting to the house, but when I came to the turn of the road that led to the house, the mob tried to get hold of me, but I lifted my hand and fought my way through the mob to the house. After getting into the house, I went upstairs and went on my knees and asked the Lord to rebuke the spirit that was in the mob, while the little boy (about 9 years of age) that had invited me to the house took a pitchfork and swore, 'The first man that breaks the door, I will send the pitchfork into him up to the ring.' This kept the mob in check till the police came.<sup>20</sup>

According to his journal and later biography, during the entire stoning incident, neither Butler nor the young boy who came to his rescue was touched by one stone.

In early 1856 Butler married a young Mormon woman named Emma Harvey and they travelled to America on the sailing ship *S. Curling* with a body of saints in April of that same year. After making their way to Iowa City, Iowa, Butler and his new wife joined the Edmund Ellsworth handcart company for the final leg of the trek to Utah. During this journey, he served as one of two assistants to Ellsworth.<sup>21</sup>

With his arrival in Utah in 1856, William Butler's official mission to Great Britain ended. However, Butler's long Church career was far from over. Indeed, he later served two other missions to Great Brit-

ain (although neither was as well-documented as his first).<sup>22</sup>

Butler also participated in the Utah War of 1857-1858 as one of the men who rode under the command of Lot Smith. In 1862 he was one of the militia sent under command of Robert T. Burton to Kingston Fort at the mouth of Weber Canyon to arrest Joseph Morris and his followers. He was also an early settler of Marriott, Utah.<sup>23</sup>

William Butler, like so many other members of the Church in the 1880s, suffered for his practice of plural marriage. Butler was arrested in 1887 for unlawful cohabitation and served six months in the territorial penitentiary. He was arrested again in 1893 but was only fined. In 1893, Butler was arrested for the last time and his case was dismissed after two trials.<sup>24</sup>

After fifty years in Utah, William Butler died of a stroke in his home in Marriott in 1905. He was eulogized in The Standard as a pioneer of Weber County who left one of the largest families in the state. Shortly before Brigham Young died he told his daughter that "everything he had achieved he owed to" Mormonism for, without it, he "would have [remained] a common carpenter in a country village."<sup>25</sup> Pretty much the same could be said about William Butler.

If it had not been for Mormonism, Butler would probably have returned to his native Ireland, his farm, and the young woman whom he had promised to marry.<sup>26</sup> Instead, he returned to Ireland as a missionary for a new religion where he bore strong testimony of the restored gospel and suffered persecution for his belief. Ultimately, even as a prophet in his own land, he was rejected by those whom he loved. Butler eventually settled in Weber County where he, in his own way, helped build up the kingdom.

Like so many other hard-working, all but forgotten members of the church, William Butler was not a leader nor a prominent member. He was, however, one of the unrecognized majority of saints who helped spread the word of Jesus Christ and convert others to the gospel. He was, even like Brigham Young, a man whose life was forever changed by Mormonism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Lord Dunboyne, "The Butler Family Goes West," The Butler Society: North American region, News Bulletin 3 (October 1981): 3.

<sup>2</sup> According to family tradition and what few documents remain, the Butler family in the Gorey, County Wexford area descended from a younger son of the Baronet of Ballintemple, also known as the Baronet of Cloughgrenan, who was an illegitimate son of one of the younger sons of the ninth Earl of Ormonde.

<sup>3</sup> The Banogue branch of the family owned at least one large stone home and a number of out-buildings including a number of stables. According to Griffith's Valuation, the Banogue Butlers were situated on a farm of about 90 acres. Other branches of the Butler family, including the Butlers of Knockduff, Ballycomclone, Carriganeagh and Coolnaveagh (all in the greater Gorey area) held a total of around 385 acres.

<sup>4</sup> "Biography of William Butler," p. 1. (Type-script in possession of the author.) Given the circumstances for his rather quick departure from Ireland, it could very well be that he may have owed some money and decided to leave for awhile until people forgot about the outstanding debts.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> While Butler, in his memoirs, gave the date of his mission call as 1855, other sources show that it was in 1853 that he went on his first mission.

<sup>7</sup> Based on an inscription provided in The Israel Barlow Story, ( ), p. 328. Butler stated that the stone weighed two tons. However, that would seem rather heavy based on the available descriptions.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> "Journal of William Butler" (typescript in possession of the author), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Journal of William Butler, pp. 6-7 and Barlow, p. 317.

<sup>14</sup> Barlow, p. 318 and Journal of William Butler, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. This incident takes on added significance given the fact that at the time Henry Butler was the Earl of Courtown's agent at a salary of 300 pounds a year, thus making him one of the more important and wealthy men in the community.

<sup>19</sup> Given the relatively small rural population of Gorey, it is very unlikely that the mob was anywhere close to that high of a number of people.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16 and LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856-1860 (Glendale, California : Arthur H. Clark Co., 1960), p. 58. Edmund Ellsworth,

who was the son-in-law of Brigham Young, led the first handcart company to cross the plains. The company left Iowa City on 9 June 1856.

<sup>22</sup> William Butler, along with other recently returned missionaries, spoke in the October 1856 L.D.S. General Conference.

<sup>23</sup> "Journal of William Butler," pp. 17-18, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Rosa Mae McClellan Evans, "Judicial Prosecution for L.D.S. Plural Marriage: Prison Sentences, 1884-1895," (Master's thesis : Brigham Young University, 1986), p. 119, and Andrew Jensen, Church Chronology, 2nd ed., (Salt Lake City : Deseret News, 1914).

<sup>25</sup> Newell G. Bringhurst, Brigham Young and the Expanding American Frontier (Boston : Little, Brown and Co., 1986), p. 218.

<sup>26</sup> According to the "Journal of William Butler," p. 14, he had been promised to a girl named Eliza Earl. The Earl family was a prominent family in and around Gorey. Butler mentioned that she had waited for seventeen years. If that was the case, he would have been about twelve years of age and she would have been close to that age. It is obvious that this was probably a marriage arranged between the two families.