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## The Politicization of Religious Dissent: Mormonism in Upper Canada, 1833–1843

*Darren Ferry*

By the 1830s, Upper Canada was a breeding ground for a wide variety of religious groups, from the mainline Protestant and Catholic churches to more obscure sects such as the Quakers, Irvingites, and the Children of Peace. Included in the diverse mixture was a religion founded in 1830, known in the region as the Mormonites or the Mormons. Formally named The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, this new religion attracted many adherents in Upper Canada, particularly in the years between 1833 and 1836. But the Mormons were soon experiencing a marked decline in Upper Canada converts. Some historians point to the large immigration of Latter-Day Saints to the United States in 1838 as the conclusive factor explaining such a drop in the conversion rate.<sup>1</sup> While this certainly was one of the reasons for the decline of Mormonism in the region, clearly other factors were at work.

The Latter-day Saints experienced problems in establishing a strong leadership base in the region due to the distances between Upper Canada and their headquarters in the U.S. Midwest, and these difficulties had become unresolvable by 1840. Furthermore, the Mormons were caught in the middle of the political debates and religious rivalries raging in Upper Canada in the 1830s. While the depth of sympathy held by the radical reformer William Lyon Mackenzie for the Latter-day Saints is a matter of

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some debate, the Methodist, Anglican, and Presbyterian lay leaders and clergy did not appreciate even a hint of positive press by Mackenzie in favour of the Mormons. The deliberation over the merits of Mormonism reflected the ideological differences between the radical reformers and the governing Tory clique. It was mainly this conflict, coupled with a fierce competition for converts among religious sects, that precipitated the decline of the Mormon population in Upper Canada by the early 1840s.

On 6 April 1830 a small group of worshipers gathered at a small log house at Fayette, New York, to organize The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Its founder and president, Joseph Smith, claimed to have received revelations from God to re-establish Christ's "true and living church" upon the earth, which had been lost through apostasy and indifference. Not only did Smith receive direction to restore God's authority but also he discovered some gold plates that he then translated into the *Book of Mormon*, a record of an ancient Christian civilization on the American continent. The astonishing claims of new revelation, a new "gold Bible," and the resurfacing of prophets again on the earth were a welcome message to many converts. It also guaranteed Smith and the Mormons a hostile reception from the more traditional Protestant religions. The history of Mormonism in the United States from 1830 to 1844 is, therefore, one of persecution, as the Saints were driven from state to state in the Midwest, culminating in the murder of Joseph Smith in a Carthage, Illinois, jail cell in 1844. While the controversial doctrines of the Mormons seemed exotic to more mainline Protestant sects, in reality Latter-day Saint theology should be viewed on the larger canvas of the Second Great Awakening. The religious excitement of this period produced millennial movements, seekerism, revivalism, and the search for a new inner spirituality, traditions that the Mormons drew upon for support.<sup>2</sup> It was within this "religious maelstrom" that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was born.

Not long after the establishment of the Mormon Church, Upper Canada became a major focal point of Mormon missionary labours. Joseph Smith himself preached in the Mount Pleasant and Brantford area during the entire month of October 1833. According to his journal, the missionaries met with great success, preaching to large congregations. Smith baptized fourteen people himself, including the Freeman Nickerson family, influential leaders of the Mormon Church in Upper Canada. Joseph Smith and his entourage established a fairly large branch in Mount Pleasant that would become the backbone of the Church in the area. Another round of Mormon successes occurred in 1836 with the missions of Parley P. Pratt and Orson Hyde to the Toronto area of Upper Canada. The elders were so well received that Pratt trumpeted the news that the "truth had now triumphed in

Canada” through the creation of several branches of the Church and elders ordained to lead the Saints.<sup>3</sup> Pratt also baptized John Taylor, who later became the third President of the Mormon Church, and other prominent Canadian members such as Joseph Fielding. The mission of Pratt and Hyde marked the watershed for the growth of the Latter-day Saint Church in Upper Canada.

From the outset, organizational obstacles handicapped the Mormons in the colony. When Joseph Smith departed the Mount Pleasant area in 1833, he left behind a problem that was to continually haunt the Saints. The Mormon missionaries appointed only one elder, Freeman Nickerson, to lead the entire Church in the surrounding regions. This lack of leadership led Freeman Nickerson’s son, Moses, to write to the editor of the *Evening and Morning Star*, a Mormon journal that appeared out of Kirtland, Ohio. Moses informed Sidney Rigdon, one of the Mormon leaders, that “your labors while in Canada have been the beginning of a good work; there are thirty-four men attached to the Church at Mount Pleasant, all of whom appear to live up to their profession. . . . If you can send a couple of preachers out here, as soon as you receive this you would do us a kindness. . . . Send those you have confidence in or none: the work requires competent workmen; for the harvest is truly great.”<sup>4</sup>

Other problems surfaced soon after. The minutes of a branch conference held just outside Kingston in 1835 revealed that the Upper Canadian Saints were unaware of the doctrines being taught other Mormons in the United States. As a result, six members of a traveling high council—including Heber C. Kimball and Orson Pratt, influential leaders of the church—attended the branch conferences to inform the members of the “principles of a new covenant” and other important Church doctrines. If the absence of solid leadership in Upper Canada led the Canadian members to endure a lack of doctrinal information from the parent church, they likewise were unaware of dissenters within the ranks of the Latter-day Saints in the United States. Joseph Smith himself noted the continuing difficulties facing the Saints in Upper Canada. He returned to the colony in August of 1837, this time alighting in the Toronto area to strengthen the branches there. The branches indeed required reinforcement as a result of the presence of Sampson Avard, an apostate member from Kirtland who had deposed John Taylor as president of the district and was attempting to reorganize branches of the Church under false pretenses. One of Joseph’s missions to Upper Canada was to denounce Avard and return the presidency of the district to its proper authority.<sup>5</sup>

Two main elements contributed to the Mormon Church disorganization in Upper Canada during the period 1837 to 1840. The first question was



*William Lyon Mackenzie, leader of the reformers in Upper Canada, date unknown, ca. 1851. Although Mackenzie did not exhibit much sympathy for Latter-day Saint theology, rituals, or practices, he did appreciate religious plurality and the limiting of established Church authority in British North America. Mackenzie's assistance to Parley P. Pratt and other Latter-day Saint missionaries was not meant to encourage "Mormonism" in Upper Canada but to spread religious pluralism and weaken the power of the state Church. Photograph courtesy of the Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.*

elected to accompany the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to England. Extensive conversions in Britain and the subsequent immigration of Canadian Saints to the Midwest also meant that the resources originally directed toward Upper Canada were reallocated to England. In the census taken during the 1840 October general conference of the Church in Britain, leaders discovered that the British Mission contained twenty-seven branches with approximately four thousand members.<sup>6</sup> The Canadian counterpart simply could not keep up with these numbers, and thus the momentum of missionary work shifted to Britain.

While the Latter-Day Saint Church experienced organizational hardship, severe loss of members to emigration, and institutional neglect, a more

whether they should immigrate to the United States, joining other Mormons in Missouri. It is surmised that this suggestion emanated from Joseph Smith, as hundreds left for the United States just one year after his second visit. The largest exodus occurred when John E. Page led a company of over two hundred wagons to Missouri. This group arrived with little fanfare but greatly strengthened the Church in the Midwest, even as it was weakening in the north. While this wholesale emigration did indeed pose a problem for the Canadian leadership, in reality, the depletion in the ranks of prominent Saints occurred much earlier.

The main culprit for this earlier removal of the Church talent was the newfound focus on the British mission in 1837. Several prominent Upper Canadian Mormons, including Joseph Fielding, Isaac Russell, and John Goodson, were

significant factor in the decline of Mormonism in Upper Canada was to be found in the troubles brewing in the region itself during the years 1837–40. One of the most interesting questions in Canadian religious historiography is how an American-based religious sect entangled itself in the rebellions of Upper Canada and the politics of religious dissent festering in the region. Colin Read, in his history of the rising Western Upper Canada, noted that only one Mormon involved himself in the rebellion, Moses Nickerson. Nickerson, spotted by witnesses on Navy Island with Mackenzie and the rebels, was indicted as a traitor *in absentia*. Read also recorded that two Mormon preachers, Jeremiah Willey and Michael Yeomans, were accused of spreading “seditious doctrines” along with their religious beliefs. As a result of such molestation, both Read and the official *History of the Church* concluded that the reason the Saints emigrated from Upper Canada was to escape the “commotion and rumors of war in the region.”<sup>7</sup> But if only one Mormon was actually involved in the uprising and two merely suspected, were colonial officials justified in harassing the Latter-Day Saints and eventually assisting in driving them out of Upper Canada? In an examination of the connection between the Mormons and William Lyon Mackenzie, the reason for the decline of Mormonism during the years of political squabbling in Upper Canada becomes clear.

On the surface, it appears that the Mormons secured much cooperation and support from Mackenzie. Parley Pratt called on the reformer to aid him in his preaching during his mission to Upper Canada. Pratt came across the Irvingite preacher William R. Caird, who offered to debate the missionaries on points of the gospel. In order to counteract Caird’s views, Pratt requested that Mackenzie make available a large hall that would hold hundreds of people. Mackenzie agreed and allowed the Mormon missionaries to conduct two meetings in the hall. Moreover, in the newspaper clippings found among Mackenzie’s personal papers, there is an article concerning the murder of Pratt in 1857. Apparently, Pratt was killed by a jealous husband who believed the Mormon missionary was attempting a polygamous union with his wife. Mrs. McLean wrote to several newspapers before she met Pratt and the Mormons and affirmed that she had no relationship other than a spiritual one with the Mormon elder. She thus claimed that Pratt was innocent of all charges.<sup>8</sup> While this suggests that the two men were somewhat close, further evidence demonstrates that the bond was not that strong between Mackenzie and the Mormon sect itself.

Mackenzie included in his newspapers several articles relating to the Mormons, many of them positive. The initial one surfaced in *The Constitution* of August 1836. At first glance, it was sympathetic to the Mormon cause, as it stated that “its miracles too, are very well attested; the

visit of the Angel to Smith, its founder, is as positively stated, and as fully believed . . . and all its miracles being of a very similar kind to those recorded in the ancient records of our faith, they will probably possess a vigorous influence over the vastly swelling population of the mighty west for many future centuries.” Other articles in Mackenzie’s newspapers were also seemingly friendly to the Mormon cause. In a December issue of *The Constitution*, Mackenzie reprinted an item from the *Bathurst Courier* lauding a Mormon baptism for its complete immersion of the baptismal candidate and the laying on of hands afterwards. In one of his later periodicals published in New York, *Mackenzie’s Gazette*, two articles appeared that commented on tensions between the Mormon settlers and the older inhabitants of Missouri. One was neutral in reporting the violence in Missouri, stating that the Mormons “were led by enthusiasm and the old settlers by hatred,” therefore distributing the blame equally on both sides. A second article condemned the massacre of Mormons at Haun’s Mill in Missouri. The editorial disapproved of the episode, calling it “bloody butchery” and outlining the details of the slaughter and looting.<sup>9</sup>

Upon closer examination, however, the position Mackenzie took regarding the Latter-day Saints was far more ambivalent. That first *Constitution* article contained words of warning about the sect. One concern put forward was the mammoth growth of the sect in the Midwest: “We have long been of opinion that it will eventually become the most numerous sect of any in the western country at least, if not the whole union. There is an originality and depth of imposture about it, which can scarcely fall or render it more prosperous than any religion that had arisen since that of Mahomet.” There was evidently some alarm over the spread of this religion, and the reference to the “heathen” sect of Islam and its prophet Mahomet was hardly a flattering portrait of the Latter-day Saints. The article also seemed to imply that there was a growing conspiracy in the Midwest between the Mormons and the native tribes of the region. The “zealous friendship” between the Latter-day Saints and certain powerful aboriginal peoples concerned the author. While the tenor of the commentary was sympathetic, the article raised some doubts among a non-Mormon audience as to Mormon motivations.

Reports in *Mackenzie’s Gazette* regarding the Haun’s Mill massacre revealed the same ambivalence. While the substance of the editorial remained condemnatory towards the actions of the mob, it likewise contained a disclaimer. To the editor, the honor of the state of Missouri was tainted not only because of “savage enormities” which attended the slaughter but also because it involved a religious controversy that in itself was disgraceful.

This renunciation was not the end of the story regarding Mackenzie and the persecution of the Mormons at Missouri. As a result of this massacre and the subsequent exodus from Missouri, Joseph Smith called on a select committee of Saints to make public the grievances of the Missouri members. Smith charged this committee not only with gathering “libelous reports” from anti-Mormon newspapers for their own information but also with obtaining affidavits from Saints who had lost all their property. The purpose of this exercise was to convince the press of the righteousness of the Mormon position. In response to this plan, Smith decided to petition Congress and specifically the president of the United States for a hearing on their prosecution. Smith was exceedingly disappointed by the reception he received at the hands of Martin Van Buren. Van Buren told Smith that his cause was just but that he was unable to help, noting that the Democrats would lose the vote of Missouri in upcoming elections if the president aided the Mormons in any way. If Mackenzie was such a confidant of the Latter-day Saints, this was a cause that would be dear to his heart. As a “fast friend” to Pratt and as one who was clearly antagonistic to the “whiggish” policies of Van Buren, Mackenzie should have been more aware of the situation. As it is, Mackenzie’s polemic biography of Van Buren that appeared in the *New York Examiner* neglected any mention of this incident whatsoever.<sup>10</sup> The Missouri episode would have been a good stick with which to beat Van Buren and something that might have clarified the reformer’s stance toward the Mormons. Mackenzie’s silence on the matter speaks volumes on his ambivalence toward the Latter-day Saints.

It appears that Mackenzie chose other articles on the Mormons simply to satisfy his own political agenda. Mackenzie’s views on public education and the Clergy Reserves were similar to those of the Mormons. He believed that Upper Canada was multid denominational and that no special treatment should be given to any one sect. When an education bill was proposed taxing the Mormons and other dissenting religious groups such as the Quakers, Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, and the Children of Peace to pay for the building of a college at Coburg, Mackenzie objected. The college would be under the sole jurisdiction of the Methodists, even though other religious groups would be forced to pay over \$16,000 in taxes. Mackenzie thus clothed his support for the Mormons in the type of language he used to push for reform of the Clergy Reserves and the nonsectarian public education.

Mackenzie also used the Mormon example in expounding his own personal beliefs. In an article denouncing Van Buren’s platform of whiggery, Mackenzie wrote a scathing introduction ridiculing Whig education policies and the teaching of false principles. Not only did education in other countries bring such nonsensical doctrines as those found in the “hindoo” region



"The Bank Question," Correspondent and Advocate, 1835. Because the chief banks in Upper Canada were tied directly to the state and a "Family Compact" of entrenched conservative elites, William Lyon Mackenzie opposed many banking institutions. As a liberal reformer, Mackenzie favored open banking institutions run by "the People," and thus he was initially highly interested in the workings of the Kirtland Anti-Banking Society run by the Latter-day Saints in Ohio. Image courtesy of Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

and the Islamic countries but also in Christianity as well. The Irvingites taught the “howling of the Unknown Tongue,” the Spanish had the Inquisition, the Jews refused to acknowledge Christ, and “are not thousands of American citizens about to decide by an appeal to the god of battles, the truth or falsehood of the book of revelations of Mormon to the Latter-day Saints?”<sup>11</sup> Mackenzie was not shy in taking advantage of his supposed allies in order to score political points.

A better example of the way Mackenzie exploited the Mormon experience came in his editorials on the Saints back at Kirtland. Mackenzie held strong views on the institution of private banking in Upper Canada. The newspaperman was as opposed to the “Union of bank and state” as he was to the union of church and state. He felt that elite banking in Upper Canada existed only to make profits for the privileged few while enforcing the payment of debts at usurious rates. Services offered by the banks not only impeded the natural prosperity of honest industry but also encouraged cheating and fraud. The financial establishments of Upper Canada were a stumbling-block to individual success, and they encouraged immorality and crime. Mackenzie also harbored a strong grievance against the printing of paper money. True capital was labor, and the printing of “worthless” paper money just encouraged rampant speculation and contributed to the lack of specie in Upper Canada.

Mackenzie’s forthright stance on banking and paper money soon proved to be a dilemma in his views of the Mormon bank at Kirtland, Ohio. Better known as the Kirtland Safety Society and Anti-Banking Company, the First Presidency of the Mormon Church established the institution in January of 1837. This Latter-day Saint bank provided basic banking services and also printed its own paper money. Mackenzie was startlingly neutral when presented with one of the bank notes in February of 1837. Under the headline “Mormon Money!” He wrote that “A gentleman this morning put into our hands a handsomely engraved three dollar bill,” noting with approval that “The word *Bank* in the bill is in very large type, and the prefix ‘anti’ and the termination ‘ing’ in very small type.” Soon after this article appeared in *The Constitution*, the Kirtland Safety Society fell on hard times and was tainted by allegations of scandal. One of the former Upper Canadian Saints, Isaac Russell, wrote Mackenzie and asked him to insert an article from the *Cleveland Weekly Advocate* into *The Constitution* that would clarify the bank’s position. Mackenzie was in a quandary, as he attempted to reconcile his enthusiasm for private lending with his distrust of paper money. The article in the *Advocate* managed to allay Mackenzie’s fears over the Mormon bank’s failure to redeem its paper currency. According to the author, the Mormon treasury contained well over \$16,000 in specie, and only \$12,000 in bank

notes were in circulation at any one time. Mackenzie decided that if a bank contained enough specie to cover its printing of bank notes, it was a worthwhile institution. The last mention of the Mormon bank in one of his newspapers was in the 14 July 1838 issue of *Mackenzie's Gazette*. Unfortunately, the currency of the Kirtland Safety Society landed on the pages of Mackenzie's list of altered, counterfeit, or spurious bank notes.<sup>12</sup> The Mormon bank challenged Mackenzie's view of private banking, yet somehow he managed to support the Mormon position while advocating his own personal agenda.

Mackenzie's perceived support for the Latter-day Saints resulted in increased vilification of the Mormons from the three mainline Protestant churches in Upper Canada, the Anglicans, Methodists, and Presbyterians. But clerical opposition to the Mormon missionaries did not suddenly appear in 1837. When Joseph Smith visited Upper Canada in 1833, he encountered many clerics who attempted to harass his party. As Smith preached to the congregations at Mount Pleasant and Brantford, he was "publicly opposed" by both a Presbyterian minister and a Wesleyan Methodist. The Methodist minister who objected to the Mormon presence was probably Samuel Rose. In a letter to his brother, Rose wrote that he had discovered Mormon preachers in the Mount Pleasant region and that they had baptized fourteen converts, including three members of his own flock. Rose recorded that "When I came to this place and found that those Miserable imposters were at work here, and that they were taking away some of our members, I told the people plainly that I believed them as great a set of imposters as was on earth. They now have left this part and have now gone down towards Kingston." Ministerial disapproval also followed Elder William McLellin's mission to Kingston in 1835. McLellin wrote of being interrupted by a reformed Methodist preacher while he preached to a large private congregation. He recorded that the man of the house quickly silenced all opposition to the Mormon elders. When another preacher named Fellows arose to question the elders regarding baptism, McLellin rather smugly added that in answering his queries, he "supposed him satisfied."<sup>13</sup>

Even the latter stages of the Canadian mission during the tenure of Parley P. Pratt attracted considerable opposition. Pratt made religious debates with the "learned clergy" one of his many preaching tools. Not only did Pratt attempt to debate Caird, the Irvingite preacher, but he also contended with the Methodists during his tour of Toronto. Pratt recorded that during their meetings, the Mormon missionaries were "often disturbed by Rev. Gentlemen of the clergy." On one occasion, Pratt was preaching on the subject of the Book of Mormon when the "Rev. Mr. Ev[e]ns, Editor of the *Christian Guardian*," interrupted the sermon to label Pratt an imposter and a

fraud. Upon hearing this, Pratt challenged the group of clergymen assembled to debate on the merits of the Book of Mormon, which they “very prudently refused.” The next day Pratt was able to debate a Reverend Milkins on points of the gospel. Pratt recorded that he won, to the delight of the nine converts baptized soon after.<sup>14</sup>

Attacks on the Latter-day Saints intensified during the heightened tensions caused by the reformer and Tory feud. Three months after the rebellion in Upper Canada, an article appeared in *The Church*, the conservative Anglican newspaper, deriding Christian dissenters. To editor A. N. Bethune, a prominent Anglican clergyman, the importance of educational institutions regulated by the ruling tory faction was clear. Education was vital to Upper Canadians in suspending the “open market” approach to religion that some inhabitants exhibited and that the reformers tolerated:

So that it is no unusual thing to find that the Methodist of to-day—according to the bias of the agent of the new impulse—becomes a Baptist tomorrow; the Baptist, from a similar influence, merges by and by into the Christian; the latter, after a time, discovers grounds for preferring the novel creed of Disciples; and this last is perchance abandoned in the end for the wild and untenable schemes of the Mormon. The last speaker and the latest excitement, as is usual, the greatest, because of the freshest influence.

Such a declaration underscored the significance of an Anglican-run educational system in Upper Canada aimed at thwarting the reformers and their religious counterparts, the dissenters. Closely allied conservatives, such as the Methodist minister W. M. Harvard, did not appreciate the inference that the Wesleyan Methodists were cut from the same cloth as Mormons and wrote a letter to *The Church* in protest. Bethune took great pains to distance such like-minded conservatives from the scandalous brush of the religious dissenters. The editor proclaimed that the Methodists and Anglicans were busy establishing teaching institutions to combat such “religious fanaticism” as Mormonism, a noteworthy achievement for both groups.<sup>15</sup> An educational system run by the established clergy was at the heart of a conservative religious position and anathema to reformers and religious dissenters alike.

Even though the influence of the Latter-day Saints waned after the rebellions of 1837, they were enough of a threat to the Church of England that its leaders printed three letters condemning the Mormons in the 12 June 1841 edition of *The Church*. The correspondent “Selector” noted that the “Mormons delusion was not yet extinct” in Upper Canada. He denounced the formation of the supposed Mormon secret society, the Danites, as an attempt to “establish their religion by the sword.” The author of one letter stated that the Latter-day Saint leaders would resist officers dis-

charging their duty and held a general disrespect for the rule of law. He further intimated that the Latter-day Saints would generally initiate a "Mormon rebellion" in Missouri, presumably along the same lines as the aborted Mackenzie fiasco in Upper Canada. The third letter continued along these lines, claiming that the Mormons ignored the lawmakers and were intent on rebellion. "To sum up the whole matter," the series concluded, "the Mormon ringleaders, and many of their followers, were proved . . . to be a gang of murderers, assassins, robbers, *rebels and outlaws*, that ought to be swept from the earth with the broom of destruction. No community would harbor them in their bosom, under the circumstances that existed in Missouri."<sup>16</sup> The political nature of this anti-Mormon diatribe was clearly inspired by the failed rebellion a few years earlier.

The Methodists, also wary of the many "radical" dissenting Christian sects, used similar language to discredit the Mormon faith and, by association, Mackenzie and his followers. The Methodist press, in particular the *Christian Guardian*, printed several anti-Mormon articles within its pages. Three months after the Mackenzie/Ryerson "split," a reprinted commentary from an American newspaper about the Mormons in Missouri appeared in the journal. In describing the "Mormon revolt" in that state, the article stated not only that the Mormons make unpleasant neighbors but also that the law needed to protect others from their "fanaticism." A few months later the *Guardian* published another invective against the Mormon religion, again in political terms, which also made for a thinly veiled denunciation of Mackenzie and the reformers. On the surface, the piece was an assault on the character of Joseph Smith, who was portrayed as an imposter and deceiver. But it was also said that he was only after money, and a man who did not repay his debts.<sup>17</sup> This last accusation was one that was frequently thrown at Mackenzie and the reformers by the Methodist and Anglican Tory factions.

Perhaps the best example insinuating an affiliation between the reformers and the radical dissenting Mormons occurred in the 29 November 1837 issue of the Methodist *Christian Guardian*. The leading story on the front page of the newspaper was a strong polemic about the Mormon faith. Written by a Methodist circuit rider in Upper Canada and entitled "Mormonism: The Child of Covetousness and Fanaticism," the piece was concerned with the rapid growth of the "religious error" in Upper Canada. "Many persons," the author maintained, "have been seduced by the great zeal and apparent piety, by the flattering promises and terrific threatenings, by the boisterous dogmatism and impious invocations, by the bold pretensions and artful evasions manifested by two or three men who came from south of the St. Lawrence to instruct and to exhort the inhabitants of this Province." The success of the Latter-day Saint missionaries in the Upper

Canada region rattled the Methodists. They also seemed perturbed that Mormon converts were leaving the province in droves to go to Missouri. To this author, it was lamentable that Upper Canadians had joined American foolishness in leaving for the Mormon Zion. This Canadian circuit rider also betrayed his fear that certain Mormon publications beguiled the residents of Upper Canada. Even though the bulk of the article attempted to discredit one of the Mormon books of scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants, it warned the citizens of Upper Canada that many copies of this book and the Book of Mormon had flooded into the province. Arresting the development of Mormonism in Upper Canada required that these books be exposed as fraudulent works of Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

The writer also deliberately endeavored to connect the Mormon sect to the ideas circulated by William Lyon Mackenzie and the reformers. He accused Upper Canadian Mormons, and by implication Mackenzie, of being “closet Yankees.” After quoting a passage in the Doctrine and Covenants that lauded the American Constitution as being written by God, the author noted that “if this emanated from God, then it must be acknowledged . . . that the British colonies were in bondage . . . [and] that the republican government of the United States is of divine origin. But who will believe either proposition? Who can believe that this paragraph was written by the divine pen, when it contains what is opposed by fact?” An appeal was therefore made to the Loyalist population in Upper Canada to reject not only “Yankee” Mormonism but also the principles advocated by Mackenzie as well.<sup>19</sup> Surely the reprinting of the article on the eve of the rebellion in Upper Canada is no coincidence. Even though the rebellion posed a major threat to Upper Canada, apparently the Methodist editors believed that discrediting Mormonism was as important as censuring Mackenzie and the reformers—and kept the editorial in place.

The *Christian Guardian* devoted a great deal of editorial space to the rebellion in Upper Canada throughout December 1837. Yet the editor still made space for another letter on the Mormon threat in the region. Benjamin Slight, a Methodist itinerant preacher, noted that the “vile monster” of Mormonism emerged in the guise of some missionaries. The impetus of Slight’s letter was to illustrate the faithfulness of the native population in rejecting the Latter-day Saint emissaries, and it too was couched in political language. Slight suggested that the Mormon elders were only after the property of settled aboriginal peoples and consequently neglected to preach to the “wild Indian.” This of course reiterated the conservative position that the reformers were covetous of property, a characteristic shared by their radical dissenter counterparts. What is even more interesting is that this episode was not even mentioned in Benjamin Slight’s journal. The majority

of his entries from 6 December to 29 December focused on the “vile” Mackenzie and the rebellion in Upper Canada. Is it any coincidence that in his tirades about Mackenzie’s lack of respect for authority that he would also pen a letter to the *Christian Guardian* about the Mormon preachers encroaching on his territory?<sup>20</sup>

For the Methodists, the problems of radical religious dissension and the reformer political position were two halves of the same whole. The amount of space dedicated to the eradication of the Mormon plague in Methodist journals sharply declined after 1840, and the sense of urgency that attended earlier polemical articles on the Latter-day Saints was clearly missing. One of the last articles in the *Christian Guardian* that maligned the Latter-day Saints appeared in the August 1842 issue of the periodical. Summarizing the outrages committed by the Saints as written by an excommunicated member, John C. Bennett, the commentary detailed the political intrigue, plural wives, and financial scandal that occurred in the Mormon stronghold of Nauvoo, Illinois. The harsh tone of the editorial served to reinforce the dismal reputation of the Saints for Upper Canada readers.<sup>21</sup> Even though the *Guardian* continued to hold a distinct anti-Mormon bias, evidently the fierce debate over the merits of the religion was over. It is more than likely that the loss of Mackenzie to exile and the Mormons to emigration was a major factor in the waning of belligerent, material written by Methodists.

Printed attacks on the Latter-day Saints were not restricted to the political sphere or limited to the Methodists and Anglicans. The Mormons were only one of the number of sects competing for converts in Upper Canada. Parley Pratt’s debates with the Irvingite minister Caird illustrated the fierce rivalry between the sects, even among radical religious dissenters. It is noteworthy that Pratt believed in the distinct possibility that Caird would be baptized into the Latter-day Saint faith, despite his adherence to “erroneous” doctrine. When Pratt went to Kingston to hear Caird preach, he was at first impressed with the Irvingite message. However, Caird soon revealed his true colours when he delivered a stinging discourse on the evils of Mormonism. Even those who were not affiliated with a religious group were concerned with the growth of Mormonism in Upper Canada. After meeting Mormon missionaries, a correspondent to the *Western Herald* proclaimed that “I am no professor of religion, and adhere to no sect under heaven, but I confess, it requires all the nerve I am possessed of, to listen to these men; and I feel increasing wonder and astonishment, that such fanaticism should make its way into an enlightened country like our own, and sweep from social intercourse, almost, an entire neighborhood.”<sup>22</sup>

The Anglican clergy were concerned not so much with the competition from Mormonism as with the variety of religious dissenters who made their

way into Upper Canada. In a religious census taken by *The Church* in the Home, Niagara, and Bathurst districts in October of 1839, it was noted that the Mormon Church was the fifth-largest denomination in the Bathurst district, close in number behind the Baptists. Even though the Anglican church retained the largest congregations in the Home and Niagara districts and came a close second to the Presbyterians in the Bathurst area, the growing number of radical Christian sects disquieted Anglican clergy. It is therefore no coincidence that soon after these statistics surfaced, three articles appeared in *The Church* that attempted to thoroughly discredit Mormonism in Upper Canada. Ranging from the denigration of the Book of Mormon to the condemnation of Mormon leaders and the “Latter-Day Saint Swindle,” the Anglican leaders feared that other Upper Canadian residents and, in particular, members of the Church of England would be lost to this “delusion.”<sup>23</sup>

The Methodists, who often shared with their Anglican counterparts a disdain for the Mormon faith, also recognized the threat of Mormon missionaries to their congregations and actively denounced the Latter-day Saints. With the second great wave of Mormon missionary activity in 1836–37, the Methodists demonstrated an aggressive castigation of the Latter-day Saints akin to that of the Anglican ministers. The 1837 Wesleyan Methodist conference minutes noted that fifty-two members had been lost to Mormonism during the year, while George Ferguson, a Methodist minister, experienced an alarming loss of converts firsthand when he noted that “the ‘Mormons’ had annoyed us considerably, and had induced some of our people to embrace their vagaries and to set out to the ‘Promised Land.’ . . . In consequence of the strict disciplinary course we pursued, and the efforts of the . . . Mormons and others we experienced a decrease of forty-two.”<sup>24</sup> Jealously guarding their flocks from radical dissenters, Methodist and Anglican clergymen and lay leaders mounted an effective campaign against the Mormon emissaries during their peak in the Upper Canadian region.

The largest group that objected to the presence of the Latter-day Saints in Upper Canada on religious grounds was the Presbyterians. Many Presbyterians were not adversaries of the Mormons for political reasons, as leading reformers such as Mackenzie and James Leslie protested the stranglehold of the Church of England in Upper Canada. Even leading churchmen not connected with the reformer faction, such as the Reverend Robert McGill and lay spokesman William Morris, wanted to have “equal treatment for all” religions in the colonies.<sup>25</sup> Prominent Presbyterians may have agreed with the Mormon political position concerning the issues of religious dissensions, but they were not religious allies. The Reverend William Bell, who was in charge of the Perth Auxiliary Bible Society, received a report

from Peter Gray, a traveling agent, about the activity of the Mormon preachers in that area. The society was anxious regarding “the considerable number of people” in Upper Canada who had accepted the Mormon gospel and anxious too about the fact that many in the region regarded their dogmas as “harmless.” Gray believed that the Mormons he came across deceived themselves regarding the doctrines of “unknown tongues and the cupidity of ministers.” It thus became apparent that their beliefs were not so innocuous as previously understood.<sup>26</sup>

A calculated assault was made on the Latter-day Saints in the October 1838 issue of the *Canadian Christian Examiner*. What evidently irritated the Presbyterian editors was the fact that the Mormons were making inroads into the religious life of Upper Canada. “During the last two years,” the article began, “a considerable number of the inhabitants of our Province have embraced it. It has had its emissaries openly teaching and ‘creeping privily into houses,’ and here and there performing ‘lying wonders,’ so that several of our farmers have been induced by them to sell their farms and stock, and retire to the promised Zion.” The author spared a little criticism for the Irvingites as well, comparing the two groups as two halves of the same whole. He then called upon other Christians to recognize the seriousness of the Mormon threat and combat the spread of the heresy. “The partial success of such false teachers may well cause great searchings of heart, both in Christian ministers and Christian people. Does their success indicate the want of the knowledge of the first principles of religion amongst many of our population? Then how laborious and prayerful should we be in promoting the spiritual instruction of the rising generation, and all others within the reach of our influence!” Mormonism was similarly denounced in a later article, which labeled the Book of Mormon a plagiarized fraud.<sup>27</sup> Presbyterians were not enamored of the Mormons, regardless of a few reformers’ political views or their “alliance” with William Lyon Mackenzie. Such an assault on the established churches as well as radical dissenters underscored the fiercely competitive nature of religion in Upper Canada.

If William Lyon Mackenzie wavered in his support of the Mormon cause in Upper Canada, the forces of religious and political opposition were united in their denunciation of the Latter-day Saints. Unfamiliar with the political and religious turmoil in the region, the Mormons found themselves ambiguous allies of the reformers, which in turned earned them the wrath of the ruling Tory faction, as well as the animosity of the mainline Protestant churches. As these groups attempted to divide Upper Canada into two distinct camps, the disloyal and dissenting disciples of Mackenzie or the loyal established followers of the British crown, the Mormons were lumped into the former by association. It was primarily this development, together with the organizational difficulties experienced by Latter-day Saint leaders in

Upper Canada and the massive immigration to the United States, that prompted the decline of the Mormon Church in the Upper Canadian region during the period of the rebellion.

### Notes

1. See Melvin S. Tagg, *A History of the Mormon Church in Canada* (Lethbridge: Lethbridge Herald Co., 1968), 1–18. See also Richard Bennett, “Plucking Not Planting: Mormonism in Eastern Canada, 1830–1850,” in B. Y. Card, et al., eds., *The Mormon Presence in Canada* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1990), 19–34; and Fred Landon, *Western Ontario and the American Frontier* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 119–20.

2. The most complete history of the Mormons is Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979). For arguments that the Mormons drew on the Second Great Awakening, see Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989). That Mormons followed traditions of seekerism, millenarianism, and radical reformation ideals, see Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1988); Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

3. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 18–22; and Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:416–22 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*). See also Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 110, 140.

4. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 20; *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2, no. 17 (February 1834): 134; and Tagg, *History of the Mormon Church in Canada*, 6.

5. The record of the West Loborough branch conference is recorded in *History of the Church*, 2:235; and William McLellin, *The Journals of William E. McLellin* (Provo, Utah, and Urbana and Chicago: BYU Studies and University of Illinois Press, 1994), 187. For the Sampson Avard episode, see *History of the Church*, 2:508; and Tagg, *History of the Mormon Church in Canada*, 13.

6. The exodus of the Mormons from Upper Canada is recorded in *History of the Church*, 3:27; 3:85; and in the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette* 20, no. 4 (14 July 1838). The Canadian contribution to the English mission can be found in *History of the Church*, 4:215; and Pratt, *Autobiography*, 143. See also Ronald K. Esplin, “The 1840–41 Mission to England and the Development of the Quorum of the Twelve,” in Richard Jensen and Malcolm Thorp, eds., *Mormons in Early Victorian Britain* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 70–91.

7. *History of the Church*, 3:117; and Colin Read, *The Rising in Western Upper Canada, 1837–8: The Duncombe Revolt and After* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1982), 108, 133–34, 193–96.

8. See Pratt, *Autobiography*, 139. See also Mackenzie-Lindsey Collection, newspaper clippings, Archives of Ontario (hereafter cited as AO); and “The Murder of Parley Pratt, the Mormon Elder” from the *Van Buren Intelligencer*, c. 1857.

9. "The Mormonites," *The Constitution*, no. 9 (31 August 1836); and "A Mormon Baptism," *The Constitution*, no. 26 (28 December 1836). See also Mackenzie's *Gazette* 1, no. 29 (29 September 1838); and 30, no. 1 (1 December 1838).

10. The Missouri grievance episode is recorded in Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 404; *History of the Church*, 3:302; 4:80. Selections from Mackenzie's biography on Van Buren can be found in the *New York Examiner* 1, no. 2 (7 October 1843).

11. *The Constitution*, no. 37 (15 March 1837); and Mackenzie's *Gazette* 1, no. 22 (6 October 1838).

12. "Mormon Money!" *The Constitution*, no. 32 (8 February 1837); "Kirtland Safety Society," *The Constitution*, no. 39 (29 March 1837); and Mackenzie's List of Altered, Counterfeit and Spurious Bank Notes," in Mackenzie's *Gazette* 1, no. 10 (14 July 1838).

13. Samuel Rose to his brother, 21 November 1833, Rose Family Papers, AO. See also Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 16–20; and McLellan, *The Journals of William McLellan*, 188.

14. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 114–17, 131–33; and *The Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 8 (May 1836): 317–18; and 2, no. 12 (September 1836): 380–81.

15. *The Church* 1, no. 40 (17 March 1838); and 1, no. 45 (21 April 1838).

16. *The Church* 4, no. 29 (12 June 1841).

17. *The Christian Guardian* 5, no. 9 (8 January 1834); 6, no. 4 (3 December 1834); see also 5, no. 41 (20 August 1834).

18. "Mormonism: The Child of Covetousness and Fanaticism," in *The Christian Guardian* 9, no. 4 (29 November 1837).

19. *The Christian Guardian* 9, no. 5 (6 December 1837). Appeals to loyalty were often made to the citizens of Upper Canada by the ruling Tories throughout the nineteenth century in order to combat reformer ideals. See David Mills, *The Idea of Loyalty in Upper Canada, 1784–1850* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).

20. *The Christian Guardian* 9, no. 5 (6 December 1837). See also Benjamin Slight, Journal, 6–29 December 1837, Benjamin Slight Fonds papers, United Church of Canada Archives (hereafter UCA).

21. *The Christian Guardian* 40, no. 43 (17 August 1842).

22. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 136, 138. See also "Trouble among the Mormons," *Western Herald and Farmer's Magazine* 1, no. 33 (9 October 1838).

23. Anglican concerns over "seepage" were revealed in Curtis Fahey, *In His Name: The Anglican Experience in Upper Canada, 1791–1854* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991), 89–143. See also *The Church* 3, no. 15 (12 October 1839); 3, no. 31 (1 February 1840); 4, no. 45 (15 May 1841); 5, no. 13 (2 October 1841).

24. George Ferguson, Journal of Reverend George Ferguson, 156–57, Phoebe L. Haney Fonds Papers, UCA; *The Christian Guardian* 7, no. 38 (27 July 1837). See also S. D. Clark, *Church and Sect and Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), 308; and Landon, *Western Ontario and the American Frontier*, 119–20.

25. See John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: The Bryant Press, 1975), 81–95; and *The Canadian Christian Examiner* 1 no. 9 (November 1837): 327–34. See also "Dr. Strachan's Charges Against the Presbyterians of Canada Examined," *The Canadian Christian Examiner* 2, no. 1 (January 1838); and "The Claims and Proceedings of the Presbyterians Vindicated," 2, no. 3 (March 1838).

26. "Report of the Traveling Agent to the Committee of the Perth Auxiliary Bible Society," Reverend William Bell Papers, AO.

27. "Note on Mormonism," *The Canadian Christian Examiner* 2, no. 10 (October 1838); 3, no. 6 (June 1839).