

The Rise of Mormonism in the Burned-over District: Another View

By MARVIN S. HILL

Was the Burned-over District unique, or was it simply one section of an incubator of enthusiasms that stretched across the northern United States? Marvin Hill is a member of the Department of History at Brigham Young University.

FOR MANY YEARS IT has been customary for most historians to depict the origin of Mormonism as a product of the social and religious forces at work in the Burned-over District, that "psychic highway" of democratic ferment in western New York sketched nostalgically in 1936 by Carl Carmer, and explicated exhaustively in a study by Whitney Cross in 1950.¹ Cross's work has been widely employed by students of American reform and American religion, and remains a standard of socio-historical analysis.²

Cross begins his explanation of the causes of ferment in western New York with a detailed narrative of the concentrated missionary effort by those of evangelical persuasion, which stimulated revivals, sectarian conflict and millennial fervor. He states that the "rage of evangelical fervor surging toward a peak in the mid-twenties probably constitutes the

1. To go back no further, see Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York, 1945), pp. 12-15; Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago, 1957), pp. 8-13; James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1976), p. 46; Carl Carmer, *Listen for a Lonesome Drum* (New York, 1936).

2. Whitney Cross, *The Burned-over District* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1950). Some important works that make substantial use of Cross are David Brion Davis, *Ante-Bellum Reform* (New York, 1967), p. 4; C. S. Griffin, *The Ferment of Reform* (New York, 1967), p. 13; Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York, 1973), p. 187; and Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), p. 477.



A view of Hill Cumorah as it appeared in the 1920s. From Roberts, Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

major explanation of the religious peculiarities which followed." Taking issue with Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis as an explanation of extraordinary religious excitement, Cross argues that the growth of isms flourished when the Erie Canal "introduced western New York into a period of relatively stable agrarian maturity." He maintains that "mapping the concentration points of all the enthusiasms within the Burned-over District demonstrates that such excitements were chiefly rural," adding that "areas whose prosperity failed to approximate advance expectations . . . provided a fertile soil for isms." Elsewhere he states that those places where "subsistence farming passed and household production of yard goods suffered its steepest decline were most susceptible to isms," but concludes that "radical movements were concomitants of a fully developed agrarian society."

One senses here some uncertainty as to whether stable ruralness or sharp economic change was the principal factor in creating the climate for religious radicalism. Cross's ambivalence extends beyond this particular point, however, for there is hardly an explanatory concept that he does not employ someplace—New England moral values, Yankee immigration, missionary activity, revivalism, sectarian conflict, social and economic change, the rise of women, rural stability and instability, newspapers, and the influence of “portents” and “premonitions” like those of Charles G. Finney and Joseph Smith who are introduced as causes as much as they are as consequences.³

The Mormons, Cross argues, were not products of Turner's frontier because western New York was no frontier, and because the missionaries made continuous trips eastward rather than westward to gather their converts from the longest settled areas of the region. He comes closest to identifying what made the Mormons Mormons when he asks what ideas Latter-day Saints employed that appealed to converts from the same environment as themselves. He says that the new sect provided an authoritative formulation for what had been a Burned District legend—that a gigantic battle had been fought around the Hill Cumorah and a pre-Indian civilization exterminated, that it gave expression to the anticlericalism of the region by organizing a lay priesthood, that its communism gave promise of physical comfort, and that the Book of Mormon provided a “definitive answer to every issue of orthodox evangelical religion.”⁴

Despite the depth of scholarship and general perceptiveness of Cross's monograph, it does present some difficulties. There has been lack of agreement among scholars as to the precise location of the Burned District, and lack of agreement as to which movements actually started there. Cross has not altogether clarified these matters. In the last dozen years Cross has drawn serious criticism from two perceptive scholars. New studies of revivalism and of the origin of new sects also raise some fresh questions about Cross's interpretation. In addition, Mormonism in recent years has been studied at a depth unknown to Cross, and more and more scholars of

3. Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 477. These points require a thorough reading of the whole book, but see pp. 3-7, 14-29, 55, 75, 78, 83, 89, 93, 98, 211-359.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-109, 144-50.

Mormonism are minimizing or disregarding his perspective. The time has come when it is necessary to ask, how much of Cross is still valid for the study of Mormonism and how much needs revision?

Cross borrowed the title for his work from Charles G. Finney, but he used it in a way that Finney did not. Finney described a "burnt-district" between Evans Mills and Antwerp where an earlier "wild religious enthusiasm" had resulted in a severe reaction that had left many skeptical of religion. Finney used the term to mean irreligion, not religious enthusiasm.⁵ Carl Carmer, the first writer to call attention to the Burned-over District, called it a psychic highway that stretched "across the entire breadth of York State, undeviating, a hilly strip scarcely twenty-five miles wide." Alice Felt Tyler said the district ran "through the western part of upstate Vermont and westward across New York from Albany to Buffalo." Louis Filler, in his *Crusade Against Slavery*, said it was an "area in the vicinity of Rochester." Probably most historians think of it as the region designated "western New York" by James H. Hotchkin, which includes Broome, Chenango and Madison counties on the east, and Onondaga County and the southern shore of Lake Ontario on the north, running all the way to Lake Erie. This is pretty much the area Cross identified, but an influential non-Mormon scholar of Mormonism, Mario DePillis, seems to believe that it extended from Maine into Ohio, Missouri and even Illinois.⁶

What groups are supposed to have originated or achieved such eminence in the Burned-over District that their origin there is implied? Carl Carmer, who must be mentioned because of his role in popularizing the topic, includes Mother Anne Lee's Shakers, the Millerites, the followers of Jemima Wilkinson, the Fox sisters, the Spiritualists, the Oneida Community and the Mormons. Cross includes Charles

5. *Ibid.*, p. 3, and compare *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York, 1876), p. 78.

6. Carmer, *Lonesome Drum*, p. 115; Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (New York, 1944), pp. 68-69; Louis Filler, *Crusade Against Slavery* (New York, 1960), p. 33; James H. Hotchkin, *A History of the Purchase and Settlement of Western New York* (New York, 1848), p. viii; Cross, *Burned-over District*, p. 4; and Mario DePillis, "The Social Sources of Mormonism," *Church History* 37 (March, 1968), 77.

Finney, the Oneida Community, the Fox sisters, the Shakers, the Mormons, the Swedenborgians, and the anti-Masons,⁷ although he does recognize that not all these movements began in the Burned-over District. (Which raises the question, why were they included to advance the thesis that this particular region in New York State was an incubator of enthusiasms?)

William Miller's career began in Vermont, where he got his strange ideas. The Shakers originated in England. John Humphrey Noyes was a New Englander, a Dartmouth graduate, who toured New England gathering ideas for a dozen years before launching his experiment in Putney, Vermont. He went to western New York not to find a harmonious social environment, but empty space. Many of the early Mormon doctrines also started with the Smiths in New England. The Fox sisters were native Yorkers, but did not appear until 1848 when the Burned-over District was burned out. Anti-Masonry began in the area, but was a political, not

7. Carmer, *Lonesome Drum*, pp. 115ff; Cross, *Burned-over District*, pp. 30, 113ff.

Charles Grandison Finney. From Finney, Sermons on Important Subjects (1836).



a religious movement. Perhaps Alice Felt Tyler was more correct than Cross in seeing religious radicalism as related to a nationwide "Freedom's Ferment," and in distinguishing carefully between utopians of European and American origin. Certainly many sects found nourishment in western New York but as Mario DePillis suggests, more Mormons may have come, ultimately, from points further west.⁸

In "The Social Sources of Mormonism," an article that appeared in *Church History* in 1968, DePillis takes Cross to task, maintaining that Mormonism was more a western than an eastern movement, that its unique institutions and ideas developed after the Saints reached Ohio and points west. DePillis questions whether Mormonism made its converts primarily in the East, noting that Joseph Smith and the early missionaries headed in all directions—east, west, north and south. He states that the frontier which gave birth to Mormonism was a fluid psychological environment where Emile Durkheim's anomie occurred. Social dislocation gave birth to the Mormon *ism*. The Mormon movement was an attempt to reestablish values in a backwoods area where new immigrants had washed them out. DePillis says that there was nothing exceptional about the Burned-over District that could not be found in the "socially disoriented areas of primitive schooling, isolation of families, perfervid evangelical religion" in Ohio, Missouri and Illinois.⁹

Using evidence compiled by George Ellsworth, but drawing some opposite conclusions from it, DePillis affirms that Mormonism was decidedly rural, that 171 Mormon centers of conversion between 1830 and 1839 were located in areas where population was more dense. The years 1840–1846, he says, show drastic movement of missionary centers westward and southward. This contradicts Ellsworth who has tried to show that Mormon centers were well populated and that the South and West received only one-third the attention that the missionaries gave to the East.¹⁰

8. Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment*, pp. 69–73, 108–95, 141–43, 185–87. A recent biographer of Noyes confirms that he formulated his ideas prior to New York. See Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would Be Perfect* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 23–28. Marvin S. Hill, "The Shaping of the Mormon Mind in New England and New York," *Brigham Young University Studies* 9 (Spring, 1969), 351–72; DePillis, "Social Sources," pp. 74–75.

9. DePillis, "Social Sources," pp. 51, 59–60, 78–79.

It seems that DePillis's quarrel with Cross centers in a disagreement about what constitutes a frontier, Cross interpreting it to mean a sparsely settled area, and DePillis seeing it as a newly settled, socially disoriented region. Cross's definition is that of a geographer, DePillis's that of a sociologist. Since Turner's definition was ambivalent in the first place, this issue may never be settled.¹¹ The term frontier with all its connotations is more a barrier than a help to understanding. But DePillis is right in suggesting that social disorientation is important.

Although Cross and DePillis both see Mormonism as a rural movement, Cross does not indicate what is to be concluded from this, whereas DePillis says limited education accompanied this rural condition. Cross, of course, holds that literacy was high among the migrant New Englanders, and that schools and libraries were well provided for in western New York.¹² Perhaps DePillis has not adequately countered Ellsworth in holding that Mormons concentrated their missionary efforts in rural areas. Even DePillis's interpretation of the figures suggests that 87 of 258, or 38 percent of the converts came from more heavily populated areas. DePillis is correct in saying that much of Vermont was rural. What does he mean, however, when he isolates ruralness as a distinctive Mormon trait? Does he mean that a higher percentage of Mormons came from rural areas than did converts to other denominations? He does not demonstrate this. Does he mean that Mormons were country folk compared to 1968 standards? If Mormons were not more rural than others of the time, how can this help us to identify what made the Mormons different?

Missionary correspondence published in early Mormon periodicals indicates that the missionaries made broad sweeps through rural areas, but also visited villages, towns and cities and set themselves up wherever they had a hearing. By 1844 there were significant congregations in Boston,

10. George Ellsworth, "A History of Mormon Missions in the United States and Canada, 1830-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1951), pp. 331-32; DePillis, "Social Sources," pp. 73-76.

11. See George Wilson Pierson, "The Frontier and Frontiersmen of Turner's Essays," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* LXIV (October, 1940), 462-65 for an analysis of the contradictions in Turner's definition.

12. DePillis, "Social Sources," p. 79; Cross, *Burned-over District*, pp. 88-109.



Pioneer farmstead. From Turner, Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase of Western New York (1850).

Philadelphia and New York, as well as other cities.¹³ DePillis, somewhat uncertain in this area, acknowledges that Mormons made converts in urban areas, adding parenthetically that social dislocations give rise to isms in rural and urban areas. DePillis nonetheless stresses the rural beginnings of Mormonism. P. A. M. Taylor has shown that Mormons made 42 percent of the English converts in towns of 50,000 or more population and nearly 75 percent in towns above 10,000. DePillis fails to give sufficient weight to the missionary success in English cities, holding that it came in a “socially disoriented, evangelical population similar to that of the

13. Elder Benjamin Winchester noted missionary success in Philadelphia as early as December, 1839. “From the Elders Abroad,” *Times and Seasons* I (December, 1839), 26; John E. Page had baptized 200 in New York and Philadelphia, and said that in Philadelphia “there are many additions made to the Branch every week.” His letter to Joseph Smith, September 1, 1841, is in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Archives, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives). Minutes of a Conference in New York City, September, 1844, show a membership of 194. *Times and Seasons* V (October 15, 1844), 681. George Adams commented on a number of baptisms in Pittsburgh in *Times and Seasons* V (January 1, 1844), 387–88. Elder McClain reported a “prosperity of the cause” in Boston, Lowell and Salem, Massachusetts in *Times and Seasons* V (May 1, 1844), 525.

American frontier." Certainly DePillis does not mean to say they were exactly alike, for the English converts were of the working class, and more urban.¹⁴

It may be that the Cross and DePillis stress on rural origins for Mormonism is a residue of the idea long held by religious historians that the agrarian frontier bred revivals, which in turn bred Mormonism.¹⁵ There is evidence that revivals were an important catalyst for Mormonism, but these were not exclusive to the frontier or to rural areas. A reading of the memoirs of Charles G. Finney provides evidence that he successfully promoted revivals in Wilmington, Boston, Philadelphia and New York, to name the largest cities.¹⁶

Martin E. Marty notes in his recent study, *Righteous Empire*, that by 1828 Finney had adapted his approach to urban conditions. Richard Carwardine makes a similar point, observing that by the late 1820s revivalism had caught on in the American cities. He notes, too, that revivalism flourished in English cities, and Malcolm Thorp, a student of English Mormonism, informs me that the Mormons had much success in English urban areas.¹⁷

A recent study of Rochester, New York, by Paul E. Johnson shows that revivalism thrived in that Burned-over city, but that it had nothing to do with ruralness or rural maturation. Johnson maintains that it was the ruling business elite in Rochester—the master builders, shoemakers, and shopkeepers who felt that they were losing control over the working class—that preached up the revival. During the putting out stage of woollens production the workers had lived in the homes of the businessmen, but with the coming of the factory they had moved into their own houses across town, out of close supervision of community leaders.¹⁸

14. DePillis, "Social Sources," pp. 72, 78-79; and Philip A. M. Taylor, "Why Did British Mormons Emigrate?" *Utah Historical Quarterly* 22 (July, 1954), 260.

15. William Warren Sweet is typical of the old view, as he describes the rise of frontier utopias in a revivalistic setting. Sweet said that Joseph Smith came from a family of frontier drifters and that Mormonism was the "most completely indigenous of these movements." See *Religion in the Development of American Culture* (New York, 1952), pp. 282-85.

16. Finney, *Memoirs*, pp. 234-53, 275-83, 315-19.

17. Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York, 1970), pp. 104-05, 162; Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Westport, Conn.: 1978), pp. 18, 59-133.

But it is not necessary to belabor this point since to a considerable extent DePillis and I are in agreement. A majority of Mormons born in the United States probably came from rural areas, but so did the rest of Americans. It is a matter of emphasis.

Regarding Cross's rural maturation thesis, recent anthropological studies argue that new religions start under unstable social conditions.¹⁹ A great deal of evidence in Cross's own work suggests that social dislocation and *change* is a key factor—Cross shows that the coming of the Erie Canal broke down the self-sufficient farming, and undermined home-centered production of woollens. John Whitworth of the University of British Columbia, a sociologist, argues in *God's Blueprints* that "utopian vision of the deliberate and almost total displacement of the existing social structure" intended by so many communitarians "is almost inconceivable in settled societies."²⁰

In a recent study of a modern religious sect, John Lofland argues that sects begin among the dissatisfied who face tensions and crisis. This may be due to marital problems, failures in school or otherwise, but conversions come only when certain preconditions are met. First there must be enduring, acutely felt tensions, and these must be perceived in a religious context which leads one to become a seeker. Attachments outside the sect must be minimized, and a process of fellowship begun where the convert makes sacrifices for the new group.²¹ Such a situation does not require rural maturation, nor a Burned-over District for that matter, but a certain amount of disorientation and a desire for stabilization.

In 1978 another scholar, David L. Rowe, took direct issue with Cross, affirming that Cross has not told us what it was specifically that the new sects reacted against. Looking at the Millerites, Rowe asks how rural maturation affected the Adventists. He argues that they were reacting against the

18. Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York, 1978), pp. 32-61, 136-41.

19. Some of these are cited below, but see especially Weston LaBarre, "Materials for a History of Studies of Crisis Cults: A Bibliographic Essay," *Current Anthropology* 12 (February, 1971), 3-44.

20. Cross, *Burned-over District*, pp. 55-57, 65, 83; John Whitworth, *God's Blueprints* (London, 1975), p. 212.

21. John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult* (Edgewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), pp. 7-8.

more formal organization of religion which occurred after the Second Great Awakening. Rowe also argues that the Millerites formed a radical reform movement since they were extremely critical of the churches and society too. He indicates that they appealed to a broad spectrum of people. My own studies suggest that Mormons and Millerites had similar complaints about society. It may be that the two movements had similar appeal and similar constituents, and that the Millerites took up the message when the Mormons moved out. I agree with Rowe that "the question of why New York state produced so many religious experiments" was not answered by Cross, especially in regard to the new sects.²²

On this point, it would seem that Cross approached Mormonism in the Burned-over District from the wrong end, that he was more concerned about the District and not enough about the Mormons themselves. What was it about rural maturation that made them Mormons? Cross does not say. Perhaps if we looked more closely at what the Mormons said about themselves we would have a better idea of what was bothering them. A reading of a great many Mormon diaries indicates that the revivals were a central factor. But how? I would make the following suggestions:

First, the revivals stirred a perfectionist quest—a desire to bring Christ into every aspect of life, to make one's consecration and dedication to God absolute.²³ Sidney Ahlstrom notes a close connection between revivalism, perfectionism and millennialism in this period, and notes also how these encouraged communitarianism.²⁴ Something of the perfectionist spirit is evident in Mormonism, and is illustrated in Oliver Cowdery's exclamation that "all of our labors we are

22. David L. Rowe, "A New Perspective on the Burned-over District: Millerites in Upstate New York," *Church History* 47 (December, 1978), 408-20; and "Thunder and Trumpets: The Millerite Movement and Apocalyptic Thought in Upstate New York, 1800-1845" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1974), pp. iv, 157-85. The Mormons were more post-millennial and introduced a new scripture, but the two sects appealed to similar groups and on a somewhat comparable basis. See Marvin S. Hill, "Quest for Refuge: An Hypothesis as to the Social Origins and Nature of the Mormon Political Kingdom," *Journal of Mormon History* II (1975), 3-20.

23. Thomas, *The Man*, pp. 23-28. While the perfectability of man is involved in this, and a cardinal principle of the Mormon faith, I am using it here more in the sense of a quest for holiness and total commitment to God, which I think is the prevailing thrust of the Mormon political kingdom.

24. Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, pp. 474-83, 491-509.



William Miller. From Harper's New Monthly Magazine, January 1880.

willing to consecrate to the service of the Lord.” It is apparent also when Sidney Rigdon and Cowdery told candidates for Zion’s Camp that “this is the last great act of love required in the law of Christ and is stronger than any earthly consideration.”²⁵ The perfectionist mood is reflected, too, in Joseph Smith’s admonition to the Saints that “the sacrifice required of Abraham in the offering up of Isaac, shows that if a man would attain to the keys of the kingdom of endless life, he must sacrifice all things.”²⁶ In this context Mormon communitarianism may have been more perfectionist than it was a class oriented example of anti-capitalism. This would explain why Joseph Smith could give it up so easily in Nauvoo.²⁷

Second, the revivals reminded a people on the move,

25. Letter from Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, October 30, 1833, Oliver Cowdery letters, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. The circular, undated, is also located in the Cowdery letters.

26. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1970), V, 555.

27. For a contrary view see Mark Leone, *The Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 1, 14, 226.

socially disoriented and unchurched, that they must belong to a church, a point about which they were already feeling guilty.²⁸ Franklin Littel argues that the inability of the old line churches to accommodate so many new converts during the revivals was an impetus to the growth of new sects, particularly the Mormons.²⁹ With respect to the Saints, one thinks of Joseph Smith's wanting to join the Methodist Church but being unable to convince himself it was right.³⁰ And one thinks of so many of the early converts who, as Laurence Yorgason shows, had belonged to no church or to several churches before deciding upon Mormonism.³¹

28. Hill, "Quest for Refuge," pp. 10-11.

29. Franklin Hamlin Littel, *From State Church to Pluralism: A Protestant Interpretation of Religion in American History* (New York, 1962), p. 100.

30. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origins, Rise and Progress of Mormonism* (New York, 1867), p. 18.

31. Laurence Yorgason, "Some Demographic Aspects of One Hundred Early Mor-

Contemporary sketch of a Millerite preparing for the Second Coming. From the collections of the New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown.



Third, the revivals told many, especially the youth, that they were not saved but had better be. Joseph F. Kett, in a study of adolescence in America, tells us that during the revivals of the early 1800s a tendency toward teen-age conversions developed. He quotes a North Haven, Connecticut, minister in 1819 that "this work like most awakenings was principally among the youth." He cites Bennett Tyler that in New England between 1797 and 1814 fifteen out of twenty-four revivals began among the youth. Kett concludes that most converts in the nineteenth century were in their teens or early twenties. These were often women. Throughout the nineteenth century women outnumbered the men in the churches 2 to 1.

Kett observes that ministers tried to whip up conversions by peer pressure, and says that many young people berated themselves for failing to feel what they were supposed to feel, or for lapsing after conversions.³² Joseph's lament that he wanted to "feel & shout like the rest" at the revivals but could not, and his frequent feelings of youthful unworthiness come to mind.³³ Conversions came generally after long periods of anxiety, not in an immediate moment of frenzy. Personal crisis preceded these youthful conversions, often while the young person was considering a lifetime vocation, such as becoming a minister.

It is clear from the diaries that revivals were a key ingredient in the making of a Mormon and that many of the above conditions prevailed among converts. William Smith states that his mother prevailed upon her family, newcomers to Palmyra, to attend the revivals, and that under her pressure almost all "got serious or was converted." William, who was a pre-teen, resisted the pressure but said "it became quite the fashion to get religion."³⁴

George Whitaker was a typical teen-ager who "at the age of seventeen or eighteen . . . began to think seriously about

mon Converts, 1830-1837" (M.A. thesis, Department of History, Brigham Young University, 1974), p. 43. Sixty-one of ninety-three converts were members of other churches before joining the Mormons, while thirty-one belonged to no church.

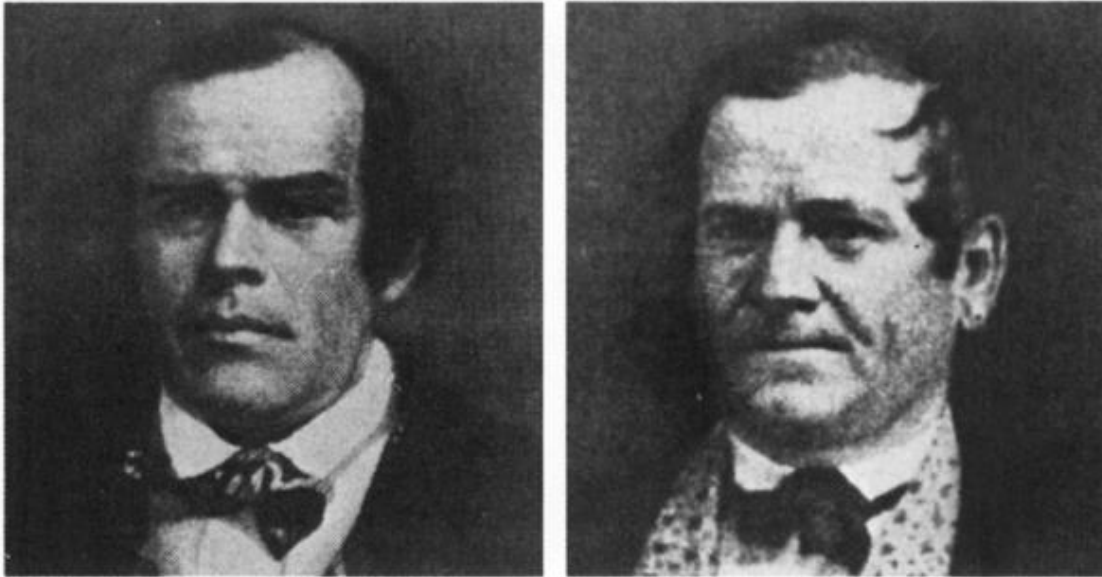
32. Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York, 1977), pp. 62-85.

33. "Journal of Alexander Neibaur," n.p., and "Kirtland Letter Book," LDS Church Archives.

34. William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, Iowa, 1883), pp. 6-7.

heaven and hell." Joel Hills Johnson said that as a boy of fifteen or sixteen he felt guilty, like a sinner, and his mind was greatly wrought up. Warren Foote said that in Steuben, New York, he often went to Methodist revivals, that he wanted to be a preacher, but seeing them "jump" and hearing them shout and sing disgusted him, and he became a religious seeker. George A. Smith, after joining the Congregational Church, said he still felt guilty. He went to many revivals, but after he was the only one not converted and was sealed up to damnation, he was in despair. Willard Richards had a similar experience when he was rejected by the local Congregational Church; he wrote later that revivals stir up "unnecessary fears and torture the mind." Oliver Cowdery said in 1829 that he thanked God for his redemption—"I was rushing on in sin." Orson Hyde, having left home at an early age, was converted at a Methodist camp meeting as a teenager, but was not entirely satisfied. Lewis Shurtliff drifted from Baptist to Campbellite but still did not feel saved, having had no conversion experience. He said that in the summer of 1836 he was "fast approaching a state of infidelity and had but little confidence in anything and believed nothing." Lorenzo Dow Young went to a Methodist revival and saw everyone but himself experience a change of heart. He wrote that "when I failed to come to the 'anxious seat' Elder Gilmore told me I had sinned away the day of grace and my damnation was sure." Parley P. Pratt, age sixteen and on his own for the first time, "felt deeply anxious to be saved from my sins and to secure an interest in that world 'where the wicked cease from troubling.'" Parley attended Baptist meetings but was unable to "tell them of any particular experience of religion." When the society decided to accept him as a member anyway, Parley said he was "aware that all was not right." Jacob Gibson said that at about age eighteen he went to revival, "there I got converted and I believe changed as I was very powerfully raught uppon [sic] and I think if I only had the right sort of teachers I wood of done first rate." He joined the Mormons a few years later.³⁵

35. "Life of George Whitaker a Utah Pioneer as Written by Himself," p. 1. Southern Illinois University has a microfilm copy; "Diary of Joel Hills Johnson 1802-1882," Vol. 1, p. 2. A copy is at Brigham Young University Library; "Autobiography of Warren Foote," LDS Church Archives; "Autobiography of George A. Smith," *Millennial Star* XXVII (July 15, 1865), 407-08, 438; Claire Noall, *Intimate Disciple*



Parley P. Pratt, left, and Orson Hyde. From Evans, Joseph Smith: An American Prophet.

There is a pattern here. These Mormons were casualties of the Protestant conversion process, of sectarianism, and especially of revivalism. Some had sought to receive saving grace in a Calvinistic context but could not, and moved west. Others were tormented by the revivals, much as Joseph Smith had been, but could find no ease for their anguish in the existing sectarian confusion. Like the Smiths, they were transients, seeking a stopping place and a life style.

James B. Allen and Leonard Arrington have noted that the early Mormons were young.³⁶ An examination of Davis

(Salt Lake City, 1957), pp. vii, 65, 69, 71; "History of Willard Richards," *Millennial Star* XXVII (February, 1865), 118-19; Oliver Cowdery's letter of November 6, 1829 in Joseph Smith's "Letter Book," LDS Church Archives; "History of Orson Hyde," *Millennial Star* XXVI (1864), 742; Paul M. Hokanson, "Lewis Warren Shurtliff: A Great Man in Israel" (M.A. thesis, History Department, Brigham Young University, 1979), pp. 8-11; Young is quoted in I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism* (New York, 1902), p. 47; Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City, 1961), pp. 24-26; "Journal of Jacob Gibson," LDS Church Archives.

36. James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington, "Mormon Origins in New York: An Introductory Analysis," *Brigham Young University Studies* 9 (Spring, 1969), 268. They indicate that the average age of New York converts was 31. However, the median age in the United States was 16 in 1800, owing to the high mortality rate at birth. See Kett, *Rites of Passage*, p. 38. What seems critical is that they were young enough to have experienced heavy revivalism as teen-agers or young adults.

Bitton's *Guide to Mormon Diaries* reveals that among 229 Mormons who were converted in the United States or Canada prior to 1846, and whose birth and conversion dates are given, 211 or 92 percent were under forty at the time of baptism. The median age of these converts was between twenty and twenty-five, but closer to twenty; more than a third were twenty or under; and more than 80 percent (182) were thirty or under. Thus these new members came among ages susceptible to revivalism.

Another point of interest is that 277 of 374 converts were males.³⁷ Allen and Arrington have shown that a number of females joined the early church, but many of these only joined when their husbands or fathers did.³⁸ Thus it may be worth considering whether early Mormonism was not preponderantly a male movement, whether it did not begin mostly among those males who in their teens and twenties could not have the conversion experience, or who after having a change of heart, felt alienated toward the denominations. Most of the examples of Mormon seekers in my files are males, and all of the above who were disturbed by the revivals were males. Could it be that Mormonism was a *male ordered* religion from the start? What Kett and Lofland have said also may have bearing, since so many Mormons were uprooted, had moved to a new location, or made a change in status.³⁹ The revivals made their quest for permanent status more urgent.⁴⁰ The kingdom often offered the males an occupation, social status, and a world view that met their intellectual needs.⁴¹ Perhaps it was the male orientation and dominance that set

37. Davis Bitton, *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies* (Provo, Utah, 1977). It could be that the diaries are not a representative sample of Mormon converts since so many males went on missions and kept diaries as a result. After eliminating all missionary diaries the results are still striking. Of 300 converts, 207 (69 percent) were male.

38. Allen and Arrington, "Mormon Origins in New York," pp. 268-69. Mormon diaries suggest that the missionaries usually went to the head of the household first.

39. Yorgason, "Demographic Aspects," pp. 49-53 shows a high correlation between migration and changing of sectarian allegiance. See Andrew Jensen, ed., *The Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City, 1914), pp. 71, 111, 116, 388; and Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 7-82, for converts who migrated more than once before joining the church.

40. Kett, *Rites of Passage*, p. 70.

41. See Marvin S. Hill, "Note on Joseph Smith's First Vision and Its Importance in the Shaping of Early Mormonism," *Dialogue* XII (Spring, 1979), 90-97.

Mormons apart from the other evangelical churches which, if Kett is right, appealed largely to women in the nineteenth century.

Two other ways that the revivals affected the Mormons can be mentioned. As scholars have long recognized, the revivals gave strong impetus to the revolt against Calvinism, and the increasing emphasis upon the doctrine of free will.⁴² Needless to say, such Mormon doctrines as free agency, universal salvation and degrees of glory, reflect this revolt against Calvinism that swept through America from the Great Awakening onward.⁴³

Finally, and this has been stressed before, revivalism promoted sectarian conflict and led to a reaction to religious pluralism.⁴⁴ The political Kingdom of God, among other things, had its roots here, at least in part.

There are some new economic studies that bear indirectly or directly upon Cross's *Burned-over District*. As with the religious forces so with the economic, Cross does not tell us what exactly the Mormons were reacting to. How did changing economic conditions affect individual Mormons? A recent study by Robert Doherty of five New England towns which underwent industrialization in this period shows that the rate of change varied between the towns even in a relatively small region. One of these towns, Pellam, was hardly affected at all. Doherty indicates that transients did not fare well in these towns as there was little opportunity for them.⁴⁵ We need to know how much Palmyra changed, and whether there was much upward mobility in the Burned-over District. This would help us to understand whether the Smiths, who were transients, faced an equally bleak future.

In a study of Kingston, on the Hudson River, about two hundred miles from Palmyra, Stuart Blumin indicates that the construction of a canal broke down the rural life-style, that the general store with its farm merchandise and farm implements was replaced by more specialized retail stores. New occupations developed, more newspapers were pub-

42. Sweet, *Religion*, pp. 193-98, 203-33.

43. See *Doctrine and Covenants* (1921), sec. 101, vs. 78; sec. 19, vss. 7-12; sec. 76, vss. 50-85, and compare Hill, "Shaping of the Mormon Mind," pp. 363, 84.

44. Hill, "Quest for Refuge," p. 14.

45. Robert Doherty, *Society and Power* (Amherst, Mass., 1977).

lished, and immigrants of ethnic variety moved in.⁴⁶ How much of this type of change did the Erie Canal or industrialism bring to Palmyra, Manchester, Colesville, Fayette? Cross shows us some general patterns but again he may not be specific enough.

Roberta Balstad Miller finds that in Onondaga County, within Cross's Burned-District, there was considerable commerce on the turnpike road before the Erie Canal was built. The Canal undermined this, and such industries as distilling and home manufacture of textiles were destroyed.⁴⁷ How much of this happened in Palmyra? What about Chenango County, far from the canal? Further, how did economic change affect individual Mormons, if at all? Did the decline of grist milling and carding hurt Joseph Knight or Martin Harris?⁴⁸ Nobody has bothered to ask.

In light of a renaissance in Mormon studies in the last twenty years, it seems somewhat strange that Cross is still cited in every general text on religion and reform that includes Mormonism. Cross says nothing about the political kingdom of God as an interpretive concept, nothing of Mormonism's theocratic tendencies and elitism in institutions. All of this has been explored in recent years since Cross did his work. It is perhaps because the specialized studies on Mormonism up to that time were quite general in nature that Cross himself was unable to be very specific about what the Mormons were after. This vagueness in Cross may be the reason why, in the last few years, specialists in the study of Mormonism seem to have ignored him to a considerable extent. Klaus Hansen and Robert Flanders make minimal use of Cross, while Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton ignore him, maintaining that Mormon roots were geographically much broader. Mark Leone totally neglects Cross.⁴⁹

46. Stuart M. Blumin, *The Urban Threshold* (Chicago, 1976).

47. Roberta Balstad Miller, *City and Hinterland* (Westport, Conn., 1979).

48. Joseph Knight had a carding machine in his home. See "Newell Knight's Journal" *Tenth Book of the Faith Promoting Series* (Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), p. 46. Also, Martin Harris won prizes at the Ontario County Agricultural Society Fair in 1822, 1823 and 1824 for cloth manufacturing. He produced linen, cotton and woolen ticking, blankets, worsteds and flannels. See the *Wayne Sentinel*, November 6, 1822, November 19, 1823 and November 17, 1824.

49. Klaus Hansen, *Quest for Empire* (East Lansing, Mich., 1967), p. 25. Hansen cites Cross only once, very briefly. Robert Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana, Ill., 1965), pp. 1-2. Flanders also stresses religious enthusiasm,

Could it be that the Burned-over emphasis is declining? Leone's work focuses on late nineteenth-century Mormonism but asks why Mormonism continued to grow if its flourishing depended upon the narrow neck of Burned-over land. Some more intensive research in Mormon sources, and some demographic and economic studies more specific than Cross may help us to better evaluate the significance of the Burned-over District in explaining Mormon origins. Undeniably, there is much useful information in Cross; his account of evangelization and revivalism is an insightful analysis. Still, his conceptual framework is too narrow, and at times contradictory. We need to know more precisely what it was that the Mormons reacted against and why. David L. Rowe has begun to ask the right kinds of questions for the Millerites. We should seek answers to similar questions for the Mormons and other sects in western New York.

but says that rank and file Mormons were from New England, of Puritan ancestry. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (New York, 1979). Their emphasis is on ideas that appealed to Americans, the disinherited and confused, who were found everywhere. See pp. 3, 7, 23-43, and especially p. 42. Leone, *Modern Mormonism*.

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