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The Failure of Religious Conversion:
Mormon Missionaries in Ireland between 1850 and 1870

Hadleigh Weber

History 797 - Spring 2022

Professor N. Gullace

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Introduction:

Ireland in 1850 was full of empty potato fields and people that were closer to death than their next meal. The country was in the throes of one of the worst famines in history. The Irish Potato Famine decreased the population of Ireland by 20-25% between 1845 and 1851.¹ Despite the bleak time in the country's history, missionaries of different religions continued to flock to Ireland in hopes of converting the dwindling population. Missionaries were almost always met with resistance from both the largely Catholic population and the minority Protestant population. These denominations had a long history of conflict with one another and did not want to lose followers to foreign missionaries. Religion was also deeply rooted in the culture and daily lives of the Irish people, so conversion was no easy task. It often meant losing family, friends, neighbors, and the respect of the community. These were the type of obstacles Mormon missionaries faced when they arrived in Ireland during the late 1830s. Despite the persistence of these missionaries, they were ultimately unsuccessful in converting the Irish population to the Mormon church. This paper argues that the low conversion rates among the Irish can be attributed to deep social ties to the Catholic Church, the failure to offer spiritual or material aid during the recent potato famine, and the emigration of converts to the United States.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) began to send missionaries to the British Isles not long after their founding in 1830. The Church believed (and continued to believe) that "the missionary effort is based on the New Testament pattern of missionaries serving in pairs, teaching the gospel and baptizing believers in the name of Jesus Christ (see, for example, the work of Peter and John in

the book of Acts)".² They also believe that preaching their version of the gospel will allow more people to reach the highest level of heaven in the afterlife. The current LDS website also goes as far as saying "Imagine you found a cure for cancer. How urgently would you spread the news of your discovery? Who would you tell? The gospel of Jesus Christ is the cure for so many of life's ills that Mormons want to share the good news of eternal life with the same urgency".³ This focus on spreading the gospel is what led the missionaries to Ireland, and across the world shortly after the founding of the Mormon Church in New York, USA in 1830.

The missionaries sent out by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the early days of the church were generally young men, but men of all ages participated in the various missions across the world. These men would generally spend two years preaching the gospel to people across the globe, changing location regularly. Women would not be allowed to become missionaries until 1898. The missionaries lived by the following idea summarized in a gospel essay from the church:

Missionary work is necessary in order to give the people of the world an opportunity to hear and accept the gospel. They need to learn the truth, turn to God, and receive forgiveness from their sins. Many of our brothers and sisters on earth are blinded by false teachings and 'are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it' (D&C 123:12). Through missionary work we can bring them the truth.⁴

After arriving at their assigned mission location, the young men would travel door to door asking to speak with people about Jesus Christ, a technique that they still employ today. People were almost always unfamiliar with Mormon beliefs, so reactions to their

arrival varied, however after learning of their beliefs many of the Irish people rejected their ideas.

Religious Beliefs; Catholicism and Protestantism vs. Mormonism:

A major difficulty in finding converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was in part due to the unorthodox version of Christianity that Mormon missionaries presented. Although Mormons (members of the LDS Church) consider themselves to be Christians, not everyone agrees.⁵ While the Mormon religion centers around their belief in Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon deviates significantly from the Bible. The most obvious deviations from traditional Christian beliefs is the Mormon belief in modern day prophets, the Angel Moroni and their use of the Temples.⁶ The Angel Moroni is a part of the foundational beliefs of the Mormon church, as “In 1823 an angel named Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith and told him of the existence of an ancient record engraved on plates, buried in a hill near his home”.⁷ Joseph Smith finding these golden plates was what led to the translation of the plates into the Book of Mormon. While Protestants and Catholics (and many other Christians) believe in angels, the specific apparition of an angel to a person seemed unlikely to many. Due to this skepticism, many missionaries used the Angel Moroni “to symbolize the Restoration” of the one true church.⁸ The Angel Moroni also helped the missionaries introduce the Mormon temple, as “the angel Moroni now grace[s] the spires of most Latter-day Saint temples”.⁹

Latter Day Saints believe that there were temples at the time of Jesus on earth, but they were then destroyed, and the current LDS church was (and is) responsible for “restoring the full gospel upon the earth”.¹⁰ While there are currently a large number of

temples across the world, there were only six built and dedicated before 1860.¹¹ A Temple is a holy building that the LDS Church believes to be the true, holy, house of God. In the Mormon scripture “Doctrine and Covenants” it states that “my people are always commanded to build [temples] unto my [God’s] holy name”.¹² This commandment of building temples is something that Mormons take incredibly seriously, and the temples are seen as a pillar of the Mormon religion. Temples serve as places to conduct the most sacred LDS rituals such as marriage, sealing, baptism, and a number of sacred ordinances required of members of the church if they want to reach the highest level of heaven.

The belief in Temples and the Angel Moroni all rely on the core Mormon belief of modern-day prophets. Mormon scripture states that “like the prophets of old, prophets today testify of Jesus Christ and teach His gospel”.¹³ Members of the church believe that Joseph Smith was the first of the new age prophets and that is why the Angel Moroni chose to appear before him and lead him to the gold plates that became the Book of Mormon. They also believe that Prophets will continue to reside on earth and speak directly to God and Jesus Christ. The official church doctrine teaches that;

We can always trust the living prophets. Their teachings reflect the will of the Lord, who declared: “What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:38).¹⁴

While the idea of prophets was starkly different from the general Christian belief that the Bible is the final and full word of God, many converts found the idea of modern-day

prophets to be comforting and a natural extension of their previous beliefs. Stephen Kenny, a Mormon Convert from Ireland, stated that the idea of prophets and their prevalence in the Irish folklore was the reason why he converted to the LDS Church.¹⁵ Other potential converts struggled with the addition of scriptures like The Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants, to the Bible which limited the success of missionaries to convert the Irishmen. The belief that the Book of Mormon is the foundational text of the religion put the missionaries at odds with their Irish Catholic and Protestant neighbors.

During the 19th century, most of the Irish population identified as either Roman Catholic or Protestant (Anglicans and Presbyterians).¹⁶ Although the Roman Catholic population was much larger than the Protestant population, missionaries for the Mormon church encountered people from both faiths. While Catholics and Protestants had different beliefs from each other, they were both at odds with the Mormon faith that was being preached by the missionaries.

Traditional Christianity, including Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, regards the Bible as the foundational holy text, has a different pantheon of saints and angels, and holds a Trinitarian view of God that contrasts with that of Mormonism. Catholics believe in a “Trinitarian God who does not have a body”¹⁷ but is expressed in three different ways: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Holy Trinity).¹⁸ Conversely, Mormons believe in a God with a “Physical body” and they believe that the Holy Trinity is three separate individuals or beings.¹⁹ Although these are important distinctions, the Mormon belief in modern-day prophets and The Book of Mormon as scripture would have been regarded by the Catholic Church as no less than heresy, making conversion

efforts difficult.²⁰ Remarkably, the church continued to send missionaries to preach the gospel in mid-Victorian Ireland but made little headway in acquiring converts. There are several other beliefs in Catholicism and Protestantism that disagree with or challenge beliefs in Mormonism including views of the afterlife, heaven, hell, and the role of the family in someone's life.

Despite the obvious similarities between Catholicism and Protestantism, they have different religious beliefs as well as stark differences in traditions and social norms. Traditions, including ceremonies, are central to the Catholic church and the Catechism states that the Catholic Church "...does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both scripture and tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence".²¹ This is different from the Protestant belief that scripture alone is sufficient, and traditions/ceremonies are not necessary for worship. Another key difference between Protestants and Catholics is their belief in how someone attains salvation. Protestants generally believe that you can attain salvation by "faith alone" whereas Catholics "view justification [salvation] as a process" that someone must complete in order to achieve salvation.²² Yet another stark difference between the groups is the role, and existence of clergy members and church leaders. The Catholic Church believes in a clearly defined group of church leaders including the Pope, Cardinals, and Priests. They believe that the members of the church do not speak directly to God, but speak to God through these leaders.²³ In contrast, Protestants believe in the "priesthood of all believers" which states that anyone can speak directly to God and they do not need to be in a Church with a traditional Church leader.²⁴ These different beliefs and practices

led to the Mormon missionaries being more successful in converting Protestants due to their more flexible worship practices.

Mormon Absence During the Irish Potato Blight:

Although there were several famines throughout Irish history, the famine that we will be discussing is the famine that occurred in the 1840s, and most severely between 1845 and 1848. Prior to the famine the Irish population was around 8 million people and over 40% of them relied on the potato crop as the main substance of their diet.²⁵ Most of the population identified as rural farm workers who paid rent to landlords, and lived just above, or below the poverty line. In 1842 and 1843 new laws were passed in Ireland that “encourage[d] landlords to consolidate their estates” and alter the status of poor houses.²⁶ Poor houses served as places for the poor to live, work and receive limited medical care. This change in law was followed by the first reports of the potato blight in 1844 and 1855. By October of 1845 over 50% of the Irish potato crops had been destroyed and “Robert Peel privately acknowledged that Ireland was on the brink of disaster”.²⁷ The poor and workhouses exploded with people who could no longer afford rent, food, clothes, and other necessities due to the destruction of their crops. In November of 1845, the government was working to import corn to Ireland and “a Temporary Relief Commission was established to organize food depots and co-ordinate the efforts of local relief committees”.²⁸ Throughout the rest of 1845 and 1846, the government neglected to send the required amount of aid to the Irish people and instead relied on soup kitchens, local efforts, and the efforts of religious organizations.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has had a presence in Ireland since the late 1830s; but in 2022 the membership is still only 3,985 people, totaling just

0.08% of the population. While Mormons served in Ireland almost continuously from 1837, the church paused its missionary work during the famine in the 1840s, with fatal consequences for its mission of religious conversion. Although the Mormons returned almost a decade later in 1850, the absence of Mormon missionaries in the country during the worst years of the famine did not go unnoticed.²⁹ While both the Catholic clergy and Protestant Quakers provided aid amid the famine of the 1840s, the Mormons were nowhere to be seen. The population thus gravitated towards religious institutions that were active in their communities during this dismal time and generally turned their backs on those Mormon missionaries who returned only after the famine.

The number of Catholic Clergy members residing in Ireland during the famine declined substantially due to the hardships encountered including poverty and hunger. Despite the decreased number of clergy members, church attendance by the lay people actually increased.³⁰ This increased attendance was likely due to the fact that the limited relief provided by the Catholic Church was reserved for people who were members of the church and who regularly attended and participated in services.³¹ The relief that the church was able to provide was in large part due to their extensive overseas network including one example where, “by March 1847 Bishop Fitzpatrick in Boston had raised almost \$20,000” which would be equivalent to over \$700,000 in 2022.³² The Pope also donated some of his own personal funds to the Irish for famine relief, and this sparked a large number of Catholic clergy members, and an even larger number of lay people, to make donations to the Irish.³³ Despite these impressive donations, the biggest relief that the Catholic church could afford to the Irish was protection from their landlords. Many landlords threatened “immediate expulsion from their tenanted homes if they ventured

to change their religious opinions” to something other than the Catholic church.³⁴ The Catholic church was responsible for providing proof of church membership to the landlords. These donations and the subsequent relief efforts undoubtedly drew people into the Catholic Church and encouraged people to continue attending religious services to receive some of the relief.

The Protestant Church (and Quakers) were also active in providing relief to the people of Ireland during the famine. They distributed grants of different amounts to the people of Ireland to help them buy necessary supplies, as well as working to provide more long-term assistance through “supplying fishing tackle, seeds and farm implements” to the Irish people.³⁵ In just under a year, the Quakers distributed over \$200,000 in aid to the Irish people which would be equal to over \$7 million in 2022. A few of the most involved aid workers died during the famine, but this did not discourage them from continuing to provide aid.³⁶ On top of providing monetary relief and supplies, the Protestant Churches worked to provide outlets for the Irish people to distract themselves from their situations. On March 24th, 1847, they organized a national day of fasting in England and many Irish people chose to participate. The Irish described it as an escape from the forced famine, and allowed them to choose their situation, at least for a day.³⁷ The day was used to promote donations to the Irish as well as a day of reflection on one's recent actions or sins.³⁸ It was one of the most successful days for donations throughout the Protestant relief effort.

Noticeably absent during the worst years of the famine were the Mormon missionaries and relief efforts from the Mormon church.³⁹ Although the first Mormon missionaries began their quest to convert the Irish in 1837, they left shortly after the

potato blight began to spread across the country in 1840, and they did not return in full force until 1850. Despite the desperate cries for help from the Irish people, the LDS church did not send aid, people, or money to help provide much-needed relief. Although most of the Mormon missionaries were pulled out of Ireland, there were a few who attempted to continue their work of converting the population of Ireland and Scotland.

One of the missionaries who had been in Ireland and Scotland prior to the departure due to the famine was George D. Watt, who, coincidentally, was also the first Mormon convert to be baptized in the British Isles.⁴⁰ He left his post in Scotland to return to England in 1829, returned to Scotland as a missionary from 1840-1842, returned to England due to the famine, and then finally returned to Ireland to serve as a missionary from 1846 to 1850.⁴¹ After Watt's experience of poverty and hunger in Scotland as a result of famine and poverty, he made a "radical proposal" for how members of the church could help support missionaries.⁴²

He [Watt] gave a talk on charity and proposed a scheme to support himself and Dunbar, his second counselor. His plan was for each Mormon family in the Glasgow Conference [congregation] to subsidize him and his counselor by sending a penny a week to the conference office. Up to this point, the missionaries had been supported by the largess of the members, not by a paid subscription that smacked to some of the tithe [donations] collected by the state church. The Glasgow Conference, however, voted unanimously to accept this plan, but William Gibson, who was the conference president in Edinburgh, objected to it.⁴³

Despite the ultimate failure of Watt's proposal, this idea opened the discussion around sending missionaries to areas of famine and how the church should go about supporting the missionaries work in these poor areas, and specifically in Scotland and Ireland. The Scottish and Irish missions were ultimately placed under the control of the larger British mission to provide adequate funds, supplies, and missionaries.

Mormon Missionaries Return to Ireland:

Over the next twenty years, Mormon missionaries would continue to arrive in Ireland to spread the word of the gospel and they would continue to be met with stark opposition. The British mission presidents, Franklin D. Richards, and S.W. Richards oversaw the Irish missionaries during the transformative years of 1850 to 1870. Elders Gilbert Clements and John Lindsay were the first missionaries called to serve in the Belfast area of Ireland in June 1850. Elders Southerland and Bowering were also sent to Ireland in June of 1850, but they were sent to the Dublin area.⁴⁴ Both groups of missionaries were met with opposition from Protestant students at Trinity College, Catholic clergy members, and citizens alike. Despite this opposition, they continued their work and established the first Mormon church buildings in Ireland in the early 1850s.⁴⁵ However, their work did little to change the hearts and minds of the Irish. Church buildings were burned down, violent outbursts at meetings were common, and the church membership in Ireland never exceeded 400 people.⁴⁶

Although the first Mormon baptism occurred only two days after Gilbert Clements and John Lindsay returned to Ireland in 1850, very little successes would follow. While missionaries enjoyed some success in the Protestant North, most Irish Catholics were dead set against converting to Mormonism. In 1850, the Mormon church was thought of

“as an oddity, as a non-Christian cult, as a polygamist group still sending young men out seeking brides for Utah harems,” and the missionaries were treated as a threat to the Irish Catholic and Protestant traditions.⁴⁷ This distaste and opposition towards the missionaries continued throughout their time in Ireland. A newspaper article published in an Irish Protestant newspaper in October of 1855 described the Mormon Missionaries as “easily persuading those who could barely give to one wife the commonest necessities of existence, that peace and plenty, happiness and salvation, to say nothing of a dozen wives awaiting them, in the Mormon Paradise of Utah.”⁴⁸ Although the distaste for the Mormons and their beliefs was obvious, the missionaries continued with their efforts to convert the Irish people.

The more intense opposition to the Mormons began with landlords threatening tenants with eviction and Catholic clergy members threatening people with excommunication if they were found to be associating with anyone who identified as Mormon, missionary or otherwise. With a large number of the Irish people already homeless or in poor/workhouses due to the famine, they were not eager to hear what the Mormons had to say for fear they would lose what little they had left.⁴⁹ This was made worse by the threat of excommunication from the Catholic Church which would leave the Irish people without access to large amounts of aid that the Catholic Church was still providing.

On top of these already difficult obstacles, when the missionaries arrived, they found no official place of worship for the Mormons in Ireland. In response, the missionaries and higher up members of the church worked diligently to secure places for meetings, but “they were at the mercy of others for a place to meet which was often

a great disadvantage”.⁵⁰ Disadvantage was quite an understatement as in 1853, the “book depot” that the Mormons had been using as a meeting place was burned to the ground.⁵¹ Only one month prior to the burning of their bookstore in March of 1853, the Dublin missionaries wrote home and said, “The public mind is much embittered against us; so much so that every place we have hitherto occupied has been taken from us through the influence of our enemies this is been a great drawback to the work of God in this city”.⁵² The missionaries were obviously aware of the dislike and hatred pointed towards them from almost everyone in Ireland, however the efforts to “run them out of town” would go even further when physical violence began to take place.

Opposition from Students at Trinity College:

The (largely Protestant) students at Trinity College made up a large group of those who met the Mormon missionaries with physical violence. Their opposition began innocently enough when they attended a Mormon service and loudly interrupted while the missionaries spoke. Missionary Sutherland stated that “We should be surprised if they were to keep quiet,” when discussing the Trinity students.⁵³ In the same comment Sutherland asserted that after the service, he and Missionary Bowering were able to have a civil conversation with the students and “they [the students] soon found out that there was more truth in ‘Mormonism’ than they were aware of.”⁵⁴ This made the missionaries hopeful that they might be able to have a larger public discussion with students and community members to promote acceptance and, hopefully, conversion. Despite the original hopefulness of the missionaries, the Trinity students continued to attend the Mormon services and disrupt them. Missionary Sutherland stated that at

times the students got so angry that they “could only be appeased by tearing me to pieces”.⁵⁵ This was the first formal indication that violence was on the horizon.

The same month that the book depot was burned, a violent mob came to break up a Mormon service. The “ringleader” was an undergraduate student from Trinity college, and although the police were called, they were unable to arrest him amidst the craziness of the mob.⁵⁶ A number of people left the encounter with injuries including a “young man... [who] got his mouth severely cut, because he spoke out against the conduct of these ruffians [the Trinity students]”.⁵⁷ Following the event, one of the students “informed [Missionary] Clements that a committee had been organized in Dublin expressly for the purpose of driving the Mormons out of the city,” and that there were other groups in England, Scotland and Wales that had the same goal.⁵⁸ After this encounter, many of the missionaries involved chose to return home to America later in 1853 and left the mission under the control of the Mission President and local members of the Mormon church.

Immigration to the United States:

The Mormon Missionaries in Ireland were able to convert a few hundred Irish to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, but as soon as they converted, many chose to leave Ireland. In 1846, many Mormons chose to relocate to Salt Lake City, Utah as they saw it as “Zion.”⁵⁹ Following this move, Samuel W. Richards, former British mission president, began chartering ships to help church members immigrate to the promised land of Zion.⁶⁰ ⁶¹An enormous amount of people chose to emigrate and as a result; “during the 19th century, about 55,000 British Latter-day Saints immigrated to

North America”.⁶² ⁶³This left even fewer members to continue preaching the gospel in England and Ireland.

Church leaders continually emphasized the importance of British converts remaining in their native homeland and building up the Church throughout the duration of the 20th century. However, some of these converts were not content with staying in their country until they were able to receive the full blessings of Church membership made available for the first time in the UK through the erection and dedication of the LDS London Temple in 1958.⁶⁴

The idea of “full blessings of Church membership” being tied to the Temple is one that was shared by almost all Mormons.⁶⁵ As discussed in the *Religious Beliefs; Catholicism and Protestantism vs. Mormonism* section, the Mormon temple is seen as the holy house of God. The Temples also serve as places for the most sacred Mormon ordinances to take place, so not being able to take place in these was extremely limiting to members. The consistent attacks on Mormon places of worship and the limited funds that the church was able to collect in Ireland made it unthinkable to build a temple in the country. If you were not able to attend a temple, you would not be able to be sealed for eternity to your family, get married, make important commandments with God, be baptized, or achieve the highest level of heaven.⁶⁶ A smaller, but still important driving factor for emigration to the United States and Utah was that Utah was, and still is, seen as “Zion” for the Mormon religion. Zion is not explicitly defined, but it is generally seen as a promised land or the most holy place to reside in.⁶⁷ These limitations on the faith of Mormons in England, Ireland and Scotland as well as the draw of Zion were the biggest driving factors for their ultimate immigration to the United States.

Conclusion:

Although the Church of Latter-Day Saints and the Mormon religion are often left out of Irish history, their story showcases the commitment of the Irish people to their history, culture, the memory of the famine, as well as the control that more orthodox versions of Christianity had over the Irish people.

The absence of Mormon missionaries and Mormon financial assistance during the Irish Famine of the 1840's established general distrust of the Mormons in Ireland. In conjunction with the immense amount of aid, both monetary and spiritual, provided by Catholic and Protestant churches in Ireland during the famine, the Irish people were much less likely to choose to convert to Mormonism. This strengthened the Irish ties to Catholicism and Protestantism and allowed the Irish culture and traditions to grow with these religions as large influences in daily life.

The violent opposition to the missionaries from students at Trinity College caused many missionaries to leave Ireland and return home early. This further inhibited the growth of the Church in Ireland and made the Mormons feel even less welcome than they already did. The destruction of their church buildings and book depot also made it incredibly difficult for members of the church to worship and prevented the Mormons from constructing a temple in Ireland, which is crucial to the faith.

The significance of temples in the Mormon religion should not be understated. It is essential to the full participation in the religion and is crucial in a member's journey to salvation. The absence of a temple in England, Ireland and Scotland served as a push for Mormons to immigrate to the United States where temples were accessible and becoming more abundant in the Utah territory. A temple would not be dedicated in

Europe until 1958 when the London Temple was dedicated and opened for Mormon ordinances.⁶⁸ The continued immigration of the few converts that lived in Ireland made it impossible for the Mormon church to sustain communities in Ireland and further pushed Irish Mormons to move elsewhere to find communities of people in the LDS church. The Irish Mormons were fighting a losing battle to build a community in a country with no temple, few places for worship, distrust from the public, strong and established religions, and a congregation that continuously moved away which ultimately made their conversion efforts unsuccessful.

The study of Mormon missionaries and their failure to convert the Irish population helps bridge a gap in modern research. The Mormon Church has an extensive collection of primary source documents from all areas and time periods of church history, but they are rarely used by scholars outside of the religion. Using these documents to piece together the history of missionaries in Ireland gives important insight into Mormonism outside the usual walls of Utah and the United States. The documents from the Church give first-hand accounts of the reception of a new religion in a foreign country, from the missionaries and the lay people of Ireland. This research can serve as a modern-day example of the failure and limited success of the introduction of a new religion to people who already have deep ties to a different, pre-existing religion. With more research, this study can serve as a starting point to help scholars begin to understand how religions work to extend their reach to new areas of the world. This could also be used to examine the least effective religious conversion tactics. Despite the variety of uses for this research, this paper alone will help introduce readers to new archives and to a rarely explored aspect of Irish and Mormon history.

Notes

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