

The Ezra Booth Letters

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BOTH EZRA BOOTH, a Methodist cleric from Mantua, Ohio, and the Booth letters are familiar to students of early Mormon history. Booth was the first apostate to write publicly against the new Church, and most standard histories include an account of his conversion and almost immediate apostacy.¹ He joined the Church in June 1831 after seeing Joseph Smith miraculously heal the paralyzed arm of his neighbor, Mrs. John Johnson. He left on a mission to Missouri with Joseph Smith and twenty-six others later that summer. Apparently, he expected to convert many people and perform miracles similar to Joseph's through the power of the priesthood to which he had been newly ordained. When neither converts nor miracles were readily forthcoming and when he began to see frailties in Joseph Smith and other Church leaders (including seeming inconsistencies in some of the Prophet's teachings), he became disaffected from the Church.

On 6 September 1831, shortly after Booth returned to Ohio from his Missouri mission, a Church conference barred him from preaching as an elder.² Shortly thereafter, he shared some of his negative feelings in a letter to the Reverend Ira Eddy, a presiding elder in the Methodist Circuit of Portage County, Ohio, and sent a second letter to Edward Partridge, attempting to dissuade him from further affiliation with the Mormons. During the months of October, November, and December 1831, Booth's initial letter to Eddy, his letter to Partridge, and an additional eight letters to Eddy, were published in a weekly newspaper, the *Ohio Star*, of Ravenna.

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¹ The most detailed analysis of Booth and his letters is in Max Parkin, "The Nature and Cause of Internal and External Conflict of the Mormons in Ohio Between 1830 and 1838," (M.A. Thesis, BYU, 1966), pp. 101-120. See also Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 143-46.

² Hill, *Joseph Smith*, p. 143.

In the 20 October 1831, issue of the *Ohio Star*, in which Booth's second letter appeared, the editor stated that Booth had written him a note giving his reasons for writing the letters. They were as follows: "1st. To discharge a duty which I owe to God and the public. 2d. To rescue, if possible, the honest and conscientious who are involved in it. 3d. To prevent others from falling into it. 4th. To comply with the request of a number who have solicited an exposure of Mormonism."³ Booth's "exposure," if it can be called such, consisted of little more than a recounting of some of the apparent supernatural events occurring within the Mormon Church in the months since his conversion. His objections and criticisms fell into three broad categories: the inconsistencies he saw in the revelations of Joseph Smith, what he called the "despotic" tendencies of the Church, and the "manifest weakness" in the personality of Joseph Smith and other leaders.⁴

The letters seem to have had considerable local impact. One week before the ninth letter was published 8 December, Joseph Smith received a revelation calling him and Sidney Rigdon to interrupt their labors on a new translation of the Bible, leave Hiram, Ohio (thirty miles southeast of Kirtland), and travel through northeast Ohio preaching against the letters.⁵ During December and January, with the assistance of several others, they "did much towards allaying the excited feelings which were growing out of the scandalous letters then being published."⁶ These letters, furthermore, would consistently be used as a source for anti-Mormon writers. They were reprinted in E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* . . . and in at least one anti-Mormon tract in 1901. Howe was heavily used by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers and by Fawn Brodie in 1945.⁷

Beyond this, however, we know little. Although most historians would doubtless agree with the assessment that "these nine letters had extensive circulation and imposing effect upon the public mind for a time,"⁸ little or no evidence helps us understand the extent of their circulation and the nature of their "imposing effect."

Recently, a single letter has come to light which adds to our understanding of the impact of the Booth letters and the public view of Mormonism and religion in northeast Ohio.⁹ Written early in 1832 by Wesley Perkins¹⁰ of Lorain

³ *Ohio Star*, 20 Oct. 1831, p. 3.

⁴ Parkin, "Internal and External Conflict," p. 105.

⁵ Now Doctrine and Covenants 71.

⁶ B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1951), 1:241.

⁷ Parkin, pp. 120-28; R. B. Neal, "Smithianity; or Mormonism Refuted by Mormons." *Anti-Mormon Tracts*, No. 6 (Cincinnati, Ohio: Christian Leader Print, 1901); and Thomas G. Alexander, "The Place of Joseph Smith in the Development of American Religion: A Historiographical Inquiry," *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978): 3-17.

⁸ Parkin, "Internal and External Conflict," p. 104.

⁹ This letter was acquired by the Brigham Young University Library in 1975 from Jenkins Book Company of Austin, Texas. Jenkins had obtained it from the Eberstadt Sale.

¹⁰ Wesley Perkins was born in Orwell in 1805. Sometime in his early adulthood, he established a leather manufacturing company in nearby Pawlet, Vermont. From Benson,

County, Ohio, the letter is addressed to his brother, Jacob, of Orwell, Vermont. It is written in ink, three pages long, and describes social and economic conditions in Lorain County. Periods have been added at the ends of sentences and new sentences have been started with capital letters where necessary.

Amherst¹¹ Feb. 11 1832

Respected Brother & Sister I Sit down this evening to address a few lines to you to inform of my wellfare which is verry good at present although I have been quite out of health. the Summer past I was taken Sick the Seventeenth of August with the intermitting feaver which lasted four Weeks & then the fever & ague Set in & give me a thorough Shaking for Eight Weeks & then left me in rather a poor State of health So that I hav not been able to do but little work as yet, the rest of my family has enjoyed good health Since I wrote to you last, you must excuse me for not writing to you before. I have thought of writing a number of times to let you know whare I was & what I was about, I [am] most likely like other men trying to get a living and to raise the wind¹² if possible, but it gose rather hard with me at present being Sick & not able to pay for my land down. But as long as I can get enough to eat drink & ware & that to as good as my neighbors I dount mean to complain, but that wont always answer the contract.¹³ I must look out for the ups & downs in this Country, I have located my Self in the Town of Amherst Lorane County. I have Bought 72 1/2 acres of land in the Centre of the Township. It lies on the Rodde leading from Cleveland to Detroit Eight miles from the mouth of Black River where Stembotes and Schooners land Pasiongers & only the wharf at the mouth of this River cost about twenty thousand Dollars. This River is about as large as Poultney River¹⁴ and is verry Raped in high water. The water has don considerable damage on this River this winter. Yester day the large Grist Mill in Elyria the County Town¹⁵ was carrid of down the Falls with \$3000 Bushels of wheat & Several others very much Damaged one turned bottom Side up, there is in this Town six Sawmills & one grist mill two stores & a number of mechanics of all kinds. Thare will be a Steem grist mill and a Saw mill [and a] cardin machine¹⁶ built in this Town Next Summer one mile from my hous which will be of grate utility to this place all so two or three furnises within Eight miles of this place. I like this place fare better than I did in Windham.¹⁷ Windham lies 40 miles from the lake so that we have grater privileges than those that live so far from the lake, for there is no other market so near as the Lake market. I should like to have you visit this Country & See for your Self & I am sure you would be pleased with the Country & with the situation of it. As to the Land it Rates first. 2nd the Soil it is

the town he mentions in his letter, Orwell, now in Addison County, was about ten miles due north and Pawlett was about thirty miles southeast. In 1830, Perkins moved to Amherst, Ohio, where he opened a shop "in which for many years he pursued his trade of wagon making." He also spent "much time nursing the sick." See *History of Lorain County, Ohio* (Philadelphia: Williams Bros., 1879), p. 330.

¹¹ A conference of the Church was held in Amherst, Ohio, 25 January 1832.

¹² "Raise the wind" probably meant to make progress, as in sailing.

¹³ Either a reference to payment due on his land or to a crop he had committed himself to harvest and deliver.

¹⁴ A river in Rutland County, Vermont.

¹⁵ Elyria was the county seat of Lorain County.

¹⁶ A "cardin[g] machine" was used to prepare wool and other fibers for spinning.

¹⁷ Probably Windham, Ohio, which was approximately forty miles south of Lake Erie in Portage County.

principle Black Sand & what you would call muck. it Brings Greate corn not so good for wheet as Clay land. The timber on the Ridges is principally Chesnut White wood. The flat land is mixer of almost all kinds, no Pine in this Country, Priess Current for produce is as followes Wheet from 75 to \$1.00 (Per) bushel Rye \$0.50 Corn 37¢ Per bushel. Porke from ten to twelve dollars a Barrel other things in propotion, it has been verry Sickly in this parte of the Country the Summer past. al though But very few deaths hear only three in this Town, As it Respects Religion in this Town thare is Considerable Stir at Present. The Mormon Religion (is the) excites the greatest couriosity at Present. Joseph Smith & Sidney Rigden is the head men in this business. There god is the Devil. None but the Simple will embrace there Doctrin. if you Could tend one of there meetings & see the young girls have visions (it would) it would put you in mind of the [Doggy Story?]¹⁸ I herd you tell, it is paid no attention to only By those that are possessed of weak minds. I understood that Jared Carter¹⁹ was in Benson²⁰ & had Baptised A number and would Starte for the Promust land in the Spring. it is nothing mor than I Should expet of the Carters & some oths in that part of Town of Benson. Whoever joins them will become A Prest or prophet or prophettess. I would Send you A paper that Contains A letter written by the Rev. E. Booth.²¹ I will Send you the letters & you may survie them and Sattisfy your Silf. Mr. Booth went to the Promust land, Jacob I heard from Wildham last week all our friends ware well at present. I have not herd from Vermont in 18 months I wisth you would write to me as soon as you Recd these few imperfect lines without Delay. Pleas to write all the news The deaths, tc. tell Sister Harret I want to now how to get along with all her Children. I have not herd nothing from her Since Cousin Roswell Bottom wrote to [Therman?]. Give my love to all friends & Relation. Jacob if you take A news Paper Please to Send it to me after you have Don with it & I will send you one from this Country I remain your Brother

Wesley Perkins

P.S. please to direct your letters and paper to Plato Post office Lorane County Ohio

In addition to providing a useful description of conditions in Lorain County in 1832 and an interesting commentary on the spirit of the westward movement in American history, the letter's chief value lies in Perkins's reaction to Mormonism and to the Booth letters. It is a solid piece of evidence of the extent of the circulation of those letters even though Perkins fails either to specify the form of the letters in his possession or to indicate how he obtained them. While Perkins's letter does not show whether he had anti-Mormon feelings before reading the Booth letters, it does indicate that he also knew of

¹⁸ Apparently a private joke.

¹⁹ His comments about ne'er-do-wells such as the Carters from "that part" of the town of Benson reveal a bias about the structure of society which he had carried with him to Amherst, also the home of Jared Carter beginning in 1831, the same year he became a Mormon. Carter served two short-term missions to the east while he resided in Amherst, one from 22 September 1831 to 29 February 1832, and a second from 25 April 1832 to 19 October 1832. During Jared Carter's Church career until his death in Illinois in 1850, he was disfellowshipped once and tried before a Church court once. But his overall record, including four short-term missions, was one of loyal service. See Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1981), pp. 73-74.

²⁰ A town in western Vermont (Rutland County) about four miles east of the southern part of Lake Champlain.

²¹ Ezra Booth.

local Mormon events — the Amherst Conference of the Church, held on 25 January 1832, a scant two weeks before he wrote his letter, for example. Perhaps it was the conference which prompted his comment about Mormon girls having visions. He may have attended out of curiosity despite the poor state of his health. Also, he would have known about local missionary work and the Mormons' move into the area, especially if converts in either category were former friends or neighbors from Vermont. All this was part of what he termed a "considerable stir" about religion and was undoubtedly a familiar topic of conversation.

The historical value of the Perkins letter would increase if we had a better idea of how typical his reactions to the Booth letters were and his degree of neutrality prior to reading the letters. It would take many similar letters and more related information to suggest an answer to such a question, but this letter encourages those inclined to pursue the matter.

The letter also provides interesting evidence for transitions between one geographic area and another. That Mormons would be a topic of conversation for a westering Vermonter in Ohio in 1832 and the folks back home suggests that we have not given enough consideration to the impact of Mormonism on non-Mormon society in those instances when the entire body of the Church moved from one locality to another.

UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

Among the manuscripts recently acquired by the Marriott Library are:

RICHARD F. BECK PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

Eighty-one significant photographs of placer mining and mining areas in southern Utah have been donated by Mr. Beck. The pre-1900 photographs were taken just before the turn of the century by Charles Goodman, a photographer from Bluff, Utah.

FAWN M. BRODIE PAPERS

Fawn M. Brodie died 10 January 1982 shortly after completing work on her book *Richard Nixon: The Child and the Man*. Since that time the University of Utah has received her manuscript and research files as a gift from her children.

Materials received this year were added to the existing collection which consisted mainly of correspondence, book reviews, and articles regarding her controversial work of 1945, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, along with other materials on early Mormonism and a typed manuscript of *Thaddeus Stevens, Scourge of the South*.

The new items received include drafts and manuscripts of her Nixon and Thomas Jefferson biographies. The vast amount of notes, newspaper clippings, reviews, and articles which comprised the research material necessary for com-

pletion of her biographies of Nixon, Jefferson, and Sir Richard Burton were also given to the library. The research material for her biography of Nixon is supplemented by numerous taped interviews which were also donated with the collection. Along with the manuscript material were approximately four hundred books, many with Brodie's marginal notes, supplementing her other research material on Nixon, Jefferson, and Burton. Also included in the collection are research notes on other subjects, speeches, articles, lectures, and correspondence.

GEORGE T. BROOKS PAPERS

This collection, donated by Mr. Brooks, includes fourteen issues dated between 1881 and 1883 of the handwritten monthly newspaper, "The Home Writer," representing the Young Men's and Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association of Manti, Utah. There are also written accounts and memoranda from 1878 about the building of the Saint George LDS Temple by Edward L. Parry, chief mason for the project, including the time book for the quarry. Also included with the collection is a manuscript hymn book copied by John Johnson Davies in 1897.

LUCY MAY VAN COTT PAPERS

Lucy May Van Cott was dean of women at the University of Utah from 1908 until her retirement in 1931. These materials, donated by a niece, Helen Hinckley Jones, include notes, correspondence, articles, and biographical notes and sketches. 1917-1955, ¼ lin. ft.

HAROLD DALGLIESH COLLECTION

This collection, donated by Mrs. Harold Dalgliesh, includes a number of valuable books, and twenty photographs of Salt Lake City, Utah. The photographs date from 1894 to 1896 with one from 1914.

EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF UTAH PAPERS

The papers from the Episcopal Diocese of Utah came to the University through the efforts of Dr. Harold Dalgliesh, archivist for the diocese. The collection covers 1866 to 1980. A great deal of the material is associated with ten individual bishops, including letterpress books from Bishop Leonard (1888-1903), journals written by Bishop Spalding (1905, 1910), and record books of work performed by Bishop Henrique (1907-1944). Also included is a great deal of correspondence; church registers; parochial, parish and bishop's reports; and parish publications and histories. Other information covers the Episcopal Church missionary program in Utah, financial records, and various materials on the churches and parishes. 13 lin. ft.

JOSEPH E. JOHNSON PAPERS

New materials have recently been added to the Johnson collection. These come from Mrs. J. H. Hutchinson who previously donated the Charles E. John-

son and Joseph E. Johnson diaries, and include newspapers edited and published by Joseph E. Johnson along the pioneer route to Utah and in Utah (1853-93) and other newspapers published in Salt Lake City. Aside from the newspapers there are record books, receipt books, copies of the *Times and Seasons* (1839, 1841, 1843), bank drafts, handbills, and certificates. Also included is a letterpress book of Charles E. Johnson's dated 1906 to 1907.

PRESTON NUTTER CORPORATION PAPERS AND HOWARD C. PRICE, JR., PAPERS

The Preston Nutter Corporation Papers and Howard C. Price, Jr., Papers involve both corporate records and personal papers of the Nutter and Price families. Preston Nutter was involved in ranching and freighting in the Utah, Colorado, and Arizona area from the 1890s until 1936. His family, including his son-in-law Howard C. Price, Jr., carried on the corporation until its sale in 1981. The collection, donated by Price, contains many records including personal diaries and daybooks; personal, legal, and business correspondence; business records such as ledgers, bills, income tax returns and bank statements; and a collection of photographs. 1880-1980, 46 lin. ft.

GAIL PLUMMER PAPERS

Gail Plummer, a University of Utah professor of speech (1941-64), was also director of Kingsbury Hall (1930-57) and the director of the University Theatre (1943-57). The collection which was given to the University by Mrs. Gail Plummer, consists of scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, programs, and publicity items organized by subject, including the summer festivals, the Salt Lake Theatre, the Utah Symphony, and Kingsbury Hall. Also included are scrapbooks about Maud May Babcock and a collection of photographs of performers. 1901-57, 13 lin. ft.

WARE AND TREGANZA ARCHITECTURAL RECORDS COLLECTION

The Ware and Treganza collection, a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard R. Clawson, consists of 539 ink-on-linen drawings from the firms of Walter E. Ware, and Ware and Treganza. The sixty projects in the collection represent Ware's practice dating from his earliest works in the 1890s through his partnership with Alberto O. Treganza, 1904 to 1922. The firm of Ware and Treganza was one of the most prolific in Salt Lake City. Some of the more well-known designs in this collection include the A. C. Ellis and Thomas Weir residences in Salt Lake City and the Jesse Knight residence in Provo.