

# Polygamy, Patrimony, and Prophecy: The Mormon Colonization of Cardston

*John C. Lehr*

IN THE SPRING OF 1887, CHARLES ORA CARD, president of the Cache Valley Stake of Zion, led a small group of polygamous Mormon families into Alberta, Canada. On the banks of Lee's Creek, a few miles north of the international boundary, they established the village of Cardston as the first Mormon settlement on Canadian soil.

Like settlements established earlier in Mexico, Cardston was a haven for polygamous Mormons fleeing prosecution in the United States. In the years before the 1890 Manifesto, vigorous enforcement of anti-polygamy laws drove many Mormon polygamists from their domains in the United States. Although this has been widely acknowledged as the genesis of Mormon settlement of Alberta, attempts to suppress polygamy did not make settlement in Canada inevitable (Dawson 1936, 196–98; Wilcox 1950; Lee 1968, 14). Indeed, the origins and destination of this northward migration can only be understood in the light of the personal circumstances of two men: Charles Ora Card and President John Taylor. The deciding factors were Card's dedication to the principle of plural marriage and his understanding of Mormon theology and prophecy and John Taylor's patrimony and Anglophile sympathies.

Polygamy began early in the Church. Joseph Smith secretly taught the doctrine as early as 1841 (Van Wagoner 1985, 75–77). What was later known as Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants was first secretly recorded 12 July 1843, stating that the Lord commanded Joseph Smith to restore the patriarchal order of Abraham, Jacob, and David, and that only those who participated could hope for the highest exaltation in the resurrection (O'Dea 1957, 62–63). From the beginning of settlement in Utah, polygamy was practiced openly. It was first announced to the general membership of the Church at a conference held in Salt Lake City on 28 August 1852 and broadcast in a

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*JOHN C. LEHR is associate professor of geography at the University of Winnipeg in Winnipeg, Canada. His research interests center on the settlement geography of western Canada.*

special edition of the *Deseret News* some three weeks later (O'Dea 1957, 104).

With the exception of a fifteen-year period during the presidency of Brigham Young, polygamy was illegal whenever and wherever Mormons practiced it (Quinn 1985, 15–16). Certainly it set the Mormons apart from Gentile society, polarized the Mormon community, and aroused the hostility of Gentiles already fearful of the social cohesion, political influence, and evangelical energy of this dynamic new church.

For much of the Church's history, Gentile attacks have focused on plural marriage, depicting polygamous Mormons as lustful and immoral. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe crusaded against polygamy, describing it as "a cruel slavery whose chains have cut into the very hearts of thousands . . . a slavery which debases and degrades womanhood, motherhood and the family" (in Stenhouse 1875, vi).

In Congress the Morrill Act of 1862 attacked plural marriage by outlawing bigamy in all U.S. territories; the Edmunds Act of 1882 targeted Mormon practices by disfranchising polygamists and making plural marriage a crime. In 1887 the Edmunds-Tucker Act attacked Mormon society and the Church itself by abolishing women's suffrage, dissolving the corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and demanding a more inclusive voter's registration oath, all in an attempt to stamp out the practice of polygamy (O'Dea 1957, 110; Quinn 1985, 16). The Church was shaken to its foundations.

Not all Mormons were polygamous. No matter how theologically desirable, plural marriage was not always economically possible. Indeed, members of the Church who embraced the law of Abraham and entered into plural marriage faced no easy lot. Not only did polygamy run counter to the social values of most, if not all, converts to Mormonism, but its practice required radical personal and familial adjustments (Mehr 1985, 84–85; Embry and Bradley 1985, 99–107). Those who accepted polygamy required a reconciliation of secular law and spiritual law as taught by Joseph Smith. Since it was a test of faith, polygamy was adopted by the more orthodox, or devout, members of the Church, who were usually the better established community leaders. Probably at no time were more than one in five Mormon families polygamous (Ivins 1956, 229–39). In the 1880s, to avoid the federal government's vigorous campaign of enforcement, polygamists lived with their plural wives secretly or went on the Mormon "underground," assuming false identities and affecting disguises. Others sought to circumvent federal law by contracting plural marriages on the high seas or beyond the borders of the country.

John Taylor, Brigham Young's successor as senior apostle and later third president of the Church from 1877 to 1887, ardently defended the principle of plural marriage (Quinn 1985, 27). In 1885 he openly defied the United States government by proclaiming that God's law transcended the law of the government; therefore, government could not abrogate the principle of plural marriage. To avoid arrest, he promptly went into hiding and lived on the Mormon underground until his death two years later (CHC 6:122–23; Jensen 1:19).

Because he knew the difficulties of life on the run, Taylor encouraged polygamists to establish a Mormon colony in Mexico. For even though polygamy was illegal there and certainly alien to Roman Catholic culture, Mexican authorities appeared to be willing to turn a blind eye so long as it remained clandestine (Hardy 1987).

Refuge in Mexico appealed to many fugitive Mormons including Charles Ora Card, president of the Cache Valley Stake (See Hudson 1963; Bates 1960; Godfrey 1987). Card, like Taylor, was pursued by U.S. marshals. His life was complicated by his first wife, who not only had apostatized but was attempting to obtain a divorce. At every opportunity she had revealed Card's whereabouts to the authorities. After being arrested and escaping from custody, Card was convinced that to remain in Utah was to court disaster (Wilcox 1950; 23–24; Hudson 1963, 82–83; Godfrey 1987). He resolved then to move to Mexico. Early in 1886 he met with President Taylor to seek his permission to leave Cache Valley. To his surprise, Taylor advised him to go instead to Canada and to find a place to establish a Mormon colony. British-born John Taylor had lived in Canada for several years before converting to Mormonism in 1836, and he believed that British justice would allow Latter-day Saints a fair hearing (Jenson 1:19).

Many believe that President Taylor "called" Card to serve a mission in Canada and establish a bridgehead for Mormon settlement. Although this interpretation has achieved wide currency among Latter-day Saints in Alberta, it is not supported by documentary evidence (Stutz 1987). But what is certain is that Card heeded his prophet's advice and turned his sights toward Canada, specifically toward the southern area of British Columbia and Alberta (then the Northwest Territories) immediately north of the international boundary.

Unlike President Taylor, Card had no affinity for the British. He was of Yankee stock, from the "Burned-Over District" of New York State, and his family had lived in New England for several generations. Card had no real experience of Canada, the British, or Canadians. When John Taylor advised him to look to Canada, Card was forty-seven, a respected community and church leader who had played an important role in developing Utah's Cache Valley. He was an experienced pioneer, a veteran of a handcart trek from Iowa to the Salt Lake Valley, and a sawyer by trade. He had been called to be president of the Cache Valley Stake in 1884 (Godfrey 1981, vii–xi). And as a high-profile Church leader with three wives and an ex-wife bent on his downfall, Card was a prime target for prosecution under the Edmunds Act.

Card did not undertake his journey of exploration alone. President Taylor assigned two other Mormon fugitives to accompany him: James W. Hendricks and Isaac E. D. Zundel (Card, 14 Sept. 1886). Like Card, both were wanted for "unlawful cohabitation" and stood to benefit if a refuge from prosecution could be established in Canada.

Card and his companions went by wagon and train from Utah, through Oregon, to Spokane, where they purchased horses and equipped themselves to explore Canadian territory. On Wednesday, 29 September 1886, the party crossed into Canada. Card recorded in his diary that day: "[I] crossed the

British line and for the first time in my life, placed my foot on the sod of British Columbia and in fact, it is the first time on British soil for any length of time. Only crossed Canada in the night from Buffalo to Detroit in the spring of 1872." As he passed the boundary marker, Card recorded that he took off his hat, swung it around, and shouted, "In [British] Columbia we are free!"

Unable to find a tract of land in British Columbia large enough to accommodate a Mormon settlement, Card's party went by train to Calgary and explored the southern part of Alberta before returning to Utah. Card was impressed with this country. In his journal he commented favorably upon the soil, vegetation, and climate. On 22 September he particularly noted the Indian population:

North of us and east of us are tribes that all speak Blackfoot language. Here would be a good place to establish a mission among the Lamanites, who in these parts seem to be of rather lighter complexion than we usually find them and seem intelligent for an uncivilized race, although they are much degraded by many lowlived White men that allure them to whoring.

Upon his arrival in the United States Card submitted a report to President Taylor and received permission to return to his home in Logan. There he busied himself preparing to lead a colonizing expedition to Canada, studying the geography of Alberta, and learning what he could about conditions in Canada (Card, 23 Nov. 1886). Despite his industry, it appears that Card had no great enthusiasm for settling in Canada, apart from respite from harassment and prosecution. Although in his journal entries of 16 and 24 December Card referred to Canada as "a land of refuge" or "our refuge in the north," subsequent bitter comments reflected his resentment at being forced to settle in a foreign land for loyally observing "the mandates of Heaven." As deputy marshals stepped up their harassment and Card's situation in Utah became daily more intolerable, he increasingly resented the prospect of exile: "I have been arrested for the observance of the laws of God, been in the hands of the law, have been exiled, have been on British soil to seek refuge for the oppressed and downtrodden of God's peoples" (31 Dec. 1886).

Nor was the irony of a republican Yankee seeking refuge in British territory lost on Card, who wrote: "It seems strange that my grandsires fought to establish religious liberty, and in that great struggle that stained our fair land with a deluge of blood to free from the rule of a tyrant King, that now it seems their grandchildren should be obliged to gather into the domains of a government that is ruled by a queen" (1 Jan. 1887).

Nowhere in Card's diary is there any direct indication that he was formally "called" by President Taylor to establish a Canadian settlement as a mission for the Church.<sup>1</sup> Had this been so, Card would scarcely have lamented the injustice of this lot to the same extent, if, in fact, he would have complained at all.

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<sup>1</sup> On two occasions Card wrote of his intended settlement in Alberta as "the northern mission," but in both instances the context is ambiguous (Card, 19 Feb. and 17 March 1887). The term appears to be used in the conventional non-Mormon meaning of the word, rather than in the sense of a "mission" to which he received a "call" from the Church.

Early in 1887 Card's attitude toward the Canadian settlement project changed dramatically. When Samuel Smith of Brigham City visited Card on 21 January 1887, Card discussed his northern venture, arguing that "the land of refuge is the north." To his surprise, Smith related that he had been present at an 1843 priesthood meeting in the basement of the Nauvoo Temple when Joseph Smith prophesied that:

England or the nation of Great Britain, would be the last nation to go to pieces. She would be instrumental in aiding to crush other nations, even this nation of the United States, and she would only be overthrown by the ten Tribes from the north. She would never persecute the Saints as a nation. She would gather up great treasures of gold and yet we should seek refuge in her dominion (Card, 21 Jan. 1887).

This testimony clearly impressed Card. Thereafter entries in his daily journal changed dramatically from resentment to optimism. The "Canadian refuge" was cast in a new light. Since it had been prophesied that the Saints would seek refuge in British dominions, Card saw himself no longer as an exile from Zion, but as a pioneer whose destiny would be to fulfil Joseph Smith's prophecy.

It is debatable whether this prophecy was widely known among Mormon leadership, if, indeed, Joseph Smith did make such a statement. Card certainly appeared startled to learn of it. But two years later, after the Canadian settlement at Cardston was firmly established, Apostle John W. Taylor addressed a Cardston fast meeting and spoke of Cardston's destiny. Card was impressed and recorded in his journal on 4 July 1889:

Elder J. W. Taylor rose and spoke and bore a powerful testimony, stating he had beheld the Savior. He predicted that this would become a fruitful land and yet in time of need, it would be a haven of rest for those people who desired to serve God. Those who were seeking fame [to defame?] of our people, who flaunt so much about liberty in Utah, would be put to the fruit of the battle when the Negroes rise up against their masters, which soon would be the case. The Red Man would stalk through the land as the battle axe of the Lord, and after they had done their work, they would be changed to a skin of whiteness in a day.

Card incorporated Smith's prophecy in his formal address of welcome to Lord Stanley, Queen Victoria's representative in Canada, when Stanley visited Fort MacLeod, Alberta, in the fall of 1889:

Our Prophet Joseph hath discerned that [of] all the Kingdoms of this world, the British Principalities, by reason of their high integrity and their judicial purity, will be the last to fall, and it is for this reason, as well as from an affectionate admiration of her own womanly virtues, that we invoke the blessings of heaven upon the Sovereign of these vast realms (Card, 14 Oct. 1889).

Although Card eventually came to see his work as a colonizer from the perspective of millennialist theology, his journal entry on 25 February 1887 before his departure for Canada that spring, indicates that he still viewed the establishment of a Mormon colony in Canada as a short-term venture, noting that "I expect to make a short stay [in Canada] with other of my exiled brethren."

Even though Joseph Smith's prophecy had changed his outlook, Card was dismayed when he found it difficult to assemble a strong contingent of settlers to accompany him to Alberta. While forty-one men initially had promised to go with their families to Canada, only a few followed through. Some thought that it would be only a matter of time until the polygamy issue was resolved and the pursuit of polygamists terminated; they decided to stay "and run their chances." Others simply concluded they did not have the means to settle in Canada. Although Card was depressed, he remained committed. He recorded in his journal 4 March 1887, "I resolve to go it — I go alone."

When Card received word of the passage of the Edmunds-Tucker Act, he resolved to press ahead, decided which wife would accompany him, and purchased equipment for the move north. He received informal neighborly assistance from the Mormon community, and President John Taylor sent word that he "desired we make the northern mission a success and desired the brethren all to throw their influence in that direction" (Card, 17 March 1887). Nevertheless, Card's preparations for departure were hindered by "spotters" who kept a watch on known polygamists and their sympathizers and by U.S. deputy marshals who then raided their residences. To Card, his choices were limited:

. . . as our enemies are so bitter and there are so many traitors among the false brethren that it is with much precaution we can keep out of their clutches. But thus far, the Lord had prospered me and mine in that direction.

It gives me a variety of thought to either leave the city and valley I have helped to settle and made my home for 27 years and either exile myself or go to prison and have my substance wasted in fines by minions of the lowest type (20 March 1887).

Card also hoped that if polygamous Mormons moved to Canada, U.S. deputy marshals would decrease their harassment of the Church and Mormon community. Thus Card was motivated by several beliefs: that the Canadian refuge had been prophesied by Joseph Smith; that he would eventually be captured and imprisoned if he did not move north; that it was the duty of all fugitive Mormons to leave the Mormon heartland to reduce the pressure on their families and the Church; that there were opportunities for proselytizing among the Indians in Alberta; and that he had the blessing of President John Taylor.

After Card and his group of eight families established a new Mormon colony on Lee's Creek, Alberta, a steady trickle of fugitive Mormons immigrated, until the 1890 Manifesto suspended the practice of polygamy and removed the main reason for polygamist emigration to Canada. But by then other forces were in operation. A land shortage in Utah and Idaho made it increasingly difficult for young farmers there to acquire land. The new frontier in Canada offered opportunity to homestead under the terms of the Dominion Lands Act. A quarter-section of land could be acquired by paying a ten-dollar entry fee and by completing cultivation and residency requirements.

Demand for land also led the Church to conclude cooperative agreements with Canadian entrepreneurs to develop irrigation lands in southern Alberta. Church members would then have opportunities to enter farming. Utah busi-

nessman, Jesse Knight, entered into the sugar beet industry in Alberta with similar motives. He developed irrigation and also established the town of Raymond. The Church last attempted to provide agricultural land for purchase by Mormon settlers when it purchased the Cochrane Ranch in Alberta in 1910. The villages of Hillspring and Glenwood were established on this property. This marked the end of organized agricultural expansion by the Mormon community in Alberta, although independent migration by Mormon settlers continued to extend the bounds of Alberta's Mormon country until it came to embrace a huge tract of country lying south and west of Taber (Lehr 1974, 20-29).

Long before this, economic needs superseded theological concerns in the extension of Mormon domains. After 1890 polygamy was not a significant element in expanding the Mormon settlement in Alberta. And there is reason to doubt that it was of real importance after 1887.

In November 1888 Card and Apostles John W. Taylor and Francis M. Lyman traveled to Ottawa to appeal to the government for the right to practice polygamy in Canada. They met with a polite but firm refusal from Justice Minister Sir John Thompson and Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald (Card, 9-16 Nov. 1888; Champion 1987, 10-17). Some Mormons, contrary to law, secretly engaged in plural marriages in Canada, even after the Manifesto, but this was rare. After 1890 polygamy did not play a role in attracting Mormon settlers to Canada (Embry 1985, 108-16).<sup>2</sup>

Although polygamy was a major reason that Mormons initially migrated beyond the borders of the United States, the direction of that migration to Canada can only be explained by Charles Ora Card's circumstances and John Taylor's favorable disposition towards British justice. It was these two Mormon leaders, instrumental in channeling the migration of polygamists to Alberta, whose philosophies combined to shape part of the geography of Mormon settlement in North America. Card and Taylor, though of very different backgrounds, shared their faith and an unshakable determination to maintain the principle of polygamy.

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<sup>2</sup> The Canadian government consistently maintained that the Mormon settlers in Alberta understood that polygamy was illegal in Canada and "were in nowise disposed to attempt the practice" in Alberta. See Canada, 1888.

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