Who Came in Second?

Garth N. Jones

My late father-in-law, Anchor Luke Clegg, often told the following story at family gatherings: "My direct relative, and yours too, was the second convert in the British Isles. He would have been first, but he lost a footrace to a much younger man. His name was Henry Clegg, Sr. This progenitor never came to America but one of his sons did, Henry Clegg, Jr., who was my grandfather."

I've thought a lot about Henry Clegg, who came in second. Being first is pretty important in our culture — both American and Mormon. Family members go to great lengths to prove that a direct progenitor was the first person to enter Great Salt Lake Valley, the first to plow near City Creek, the first to plant potatoes in Cache Valley, the first to mine coal in Coalville, the first to plant ocean willow trees in Fairfield, the first to propagate single sugar-beet seed in St. George, or the first white child born in Heber Valley. Being second does not seem to be at all important.

In collecting material for a four-generation history of the Clegg line, I began researching this family tradition. It was harder than I thought. Oh, not finding the race to the River Ribble. In fact, missionary friends in the British Isles report that the story is widely repeated, and a Church-prepared film, frequently shown at British Mission Centers, features it. But the name of the second-place winner is not mentioned.

Henry Clegg was then fifty years of age. His home was in Walton-Le-Dale, a village three miles from Preston's market place. He was born into the working class and made clogs and shoes, but was literate and wrote with fine penmanship. Preston, located in the manufacturing area of Lancashire, was a provincial center of culture and social progress with debating groups, drama

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and musical associations, and many Christian denominations. Public schools were becoming available, society was in a ferment, and preachers proclaimed the day of the common man.

Family stories report that Henry and his son Jonathan attended the first sermons delivered by Heber C. Kimball and his companions at Vauxhall Chapel at the invitation of Nonconformist minister James Fielding, a brother of Joseph Fielding. Heber C. Kimball was the first speaker on Sunday afternoon, 23 July 1837, followed by Elders John Goodson and Joseph Fielding at the evening session.

On the following Wednesday evening, Elders Orson Hyde and Willard Richards delivered powerful messages; large numbers of the congregation sought to join the American church. Reverend Fielding, fearing a loss of prestige and income, closed his church to the Mormon missionaries, ruefully reporting, "Kimball bored the holes, Goodson drove the nails, and Hyde clinched them" (Kimball 1950, 2).

On Saturday evening, 29 July, the Mormon missionaries agreed to baptize fifteen of the eager investigators the following morning in the River Ribble near the tram bridge. There the small but tempestuous rapids on one side of the river partly swirled into a quiet eddy, creating a beautiful pool, edged by a grassy slope. Farther back were large weeping willows and bushes.

Word of the forthcoming baptisms quickly spread throughout Preston. The river here ran near the Preston market center, a popular place of recreation on pleasant Sundays and holidays. Kimball estimated that between seven and nine thousand people were sitting and standing on the bank, watching the open-air baptisms. Later in the afternoon, some five thousand assembled in the market place to hear the missionaries preach (Whitney 1967, 135).

Accounts are not clear as to how the missionaries would select the first person to be baptized. Heber C. Kimball records:

> A circumstance took place which I cannot refrain from mentioning, for it will show the eagerness and the anxiety of some in that land to obey the gospel. Two of the male candidates, when they changed their clothes at a distance of several rods from the place where I was standing in the water, were so anxious to obey the Gospel that they ran with all their might to the water, each wishing to be baptized first. The younger, George D. Watt, being quicker of foot than the older, outran him, and came first into the water (in Whitney 1967, 135).

George D. Watt was twenty-two years old, lean, and competitive. He had believed in the new gospel from the first time he heard his pastor, Reverend Fielding, mention Joseph Smith in the fall of 1836 (Terry 1980, 23–25). Kimball continues: "Thus was a miracle wrought that day, and nine souls initiated into the kingdom of God; the first fruits of the Gospel in a foreign land. The names of the baptized were George D. Watt, Charles Miller, Thomas Walmesly, Ann Elizabeth Walmesly, Miles Hodgen, George Wate, Henry Billsbury, Mary Ann Brown and Ann Dawson" (Whitney 1967, 136).

The name of Henry Clegg does not appear in this notable group! Is the family legend true? Who was the second person baptized?

As historian and genealogist of the Clegg family, Malicent Clegg Wells prepared an essay for the family centennial on 25 September 1955, marking the entrance of Henry Clegg, Jr., and his six-year-old son, Israel Eastham Clegg, into Salt Lake Valley, in which she reports the family tradition (Wells 1955):

> Grandfather was 12 years of age when Heber C. Kimball and other L.D.S. missionaries . . . arrived in Preston. . . . Great grandfather Clegg, Sr., and his 21 year-old son Jonathan were in the market place when these missionaries arrived. They were among the first converts. Tradition has it that great-grandfather was the second man baptized in the British Isles. He ran a race to the River Ribble . . . but lost to George D. Watt. . . .

Throughout her long adult life Malicent Clegg Wells was insistent that the family tradition was true. When the Church planned a centennial in 1937 at Preston, England, she sent a letter to the mission president in London "to clarify the record as to who was the man that lost. . . . That man was my great grandfather Henry Clegg and the second man to be baptized."[1] Nevertheless, the centennial history prepared by Richard L. Evans, *A Century of Mormonism in Great Britain* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1937), repeats the Kimball account. So does the sesquicentennial history by V. Ben Bloxham, James R. Moss, and Larry C. Porter, *Truth Will Prevail: The Rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles, 1837–1987* (Cambridge: University Press for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987, pp. 78–79). It is unlikely, at this date, that new historical material will appear; but what of circumstantial evidence?

Apparently, Henry Clegg's baptism is not recorded in Preston Branch records. A letter to Drucilla Powell from Archibald F. Bennett, then secretary of the Genealogical Society of Utah, on 21 October 1931, reports: "We could find no records of the baptism of Henry Clegg . . . in the Preston Branch records. But in many cases these old records are incomplete." His son Jonathan was baptized by proxy for him in the Logan Temple on 24 June 1890 and was endowed for him the next day. (Henry had died in England in 1865.)

Evidence that Henry Clegg, Sr., must have been baptized during the summer or fall of 1837 is the notation in Joseph Fielding's diary on 25 December 1837, that "Next were proposed to receive Ordination as Priests, viz. Henry Clegg, Peter Melling, Thomas Webster, Thomas Walmsley, John Halsall, Thomas Richardson, and George Watts, who before were Teachers." This ordination took place in the famous Cockpit in Preston when the first general Church conference in the British Isles was held (Evans 1937, 57).

The first published report of the family legend appears in the obituary of Jonathan Clegg: "Among these we note the death and burial services of Elder

[1] In searching the Wells papers in 1980, I found a four-page handwritten item entitled "What of the Man that Lost?" Merlene Wells Bailey of Provo, Utah, daughter of Malicent Clegg Wells, identified the handwriting as that of her ninety-two-year-old mother. She had prepared this note to clarify the historical record and sent it to the mission president in London. Although I cannot document this fact beyond this personal discussion, I believe it occurred. A copy of this account is in my personal files.

Jonathan Clegg, who was baptized in Preston, England in 1837. His father along with Brother G. D. Watts, being the first two of this our glorious dispensation" (*Millennial Star* 63 [14 Feb. 1901]: 105–6). According to the obituary, Bishop John Watkins of Midway was the principal speaker.

Bishop Watkins and Jonathan Clegg were longtime friends. They had brought their families from England on the same ship in 1856 and had, together, endured and survived with the Martin handcart company to settle in Wasatch Valley where they were both active in church and civic affairs (Mortimer 1963, 205–6).

Bishop Watkins, in paying tribute to his departed friend, recounted the familiar story: "George D. Watt and Brother Clegg's father were the first two persons baptized in England." Unquestionably, in late nineteenth-century Wasatch Valley meetings and social gatherings, Jonathan Clegg had recounted this story of the first baptisms at the River Ribble. Sixty-two years later the identical story appears in the centennial history of Wasatch County (Mortimer 1963, 306–7, 310–12).

Now what of the character and integrity of the nineteenth-century Clegg family? How much confidence can be placed in their veracity?

Little is known about Henry Clegg, Sr., beyond the facts already given. He was born 4 August 1788, in the village where he was residing at the time of his baptism. He married Ellen Cardwell, age twenty-one, on 2 October 1809. They had eight children, five boys and three girls. One child died in infancy. Only two of his children immigrated to Utah: his youngest child Henry Clegg, Jr., twenty-nine, in 1855, and Jonathan, age forty, in 1856.

Jonathan homesteaded the southern part of Heber City, including an area a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. In 1875, he sold two of the three forty-acre sections to Wasatch County for only 150 dollars, stipulating that the land should be subdivided into city lots and sold to raise money for the city schools (Mortimer 1963, 205–6).

Henry Clegg, Jr., had been baptized at age thirteen by Joseph Fielding in Preston and was associated with the Church in Preston for eighteen years, meeting Brigham Young, Orson Pratt, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, George A. Smith, and John E. Page. He was an ambitious man, a solid citizen, and had significant mathematical, poetic, and musical abilities. His travel diary from Liverpool to Salt Lake City was partly written in Pittman shorthand. He served as superintendent of Sunday School, stake clerk, justice of the peace, first president of the Wasatch Canal Company, and as the second bishop of the Heber West Ward, from 1884 until his death on 30 August 1894. The funeral procession "was the longest ever seen in the county, consisting of about 120 teams, besides those who marched in the band" (*Wasatch Wave*, 4 Sept. 1894).

Henry's first wife and one of his two sons had died in Mormon Grove, Kansas. He later married nineteen-year-old Ann Lewis from Wales and seventeen-year-old Margaret Ann Griffith from England. Ann Lewis was an educated woman born into a prosperous merchant family. Margaret Ann's father and two brothers had died with the ill-fated Martin company. Henry

had lifted her down, in pitiful condition, from a rescue wagon in Salt Lake City and had assumed responsibility for her care.

Jonathan Clegg was close to six feet tall, weighed near 200 pounds, and was reportedly fearless. When "a man threatened to shoot him," Jonathan "pulled back his coat and dared him to shoot" (Mortimer 1963, 311). In 1888 he was sealed for eternity to Sarah Toomer Young (sixty-two), a destitute widow with five children. Jonathan treated the children as his own.

Jonathan's wife, Ellen Walmesly Clegg, had, with her four children, survived the handcart ordeal: William, fourteen; Alice, nine; Henry, three; and Margaret E., three months. Through her long life she was exceedingly kind and generous. For many years she was Wasatch Valley's principal midwife, a calling received from President Brigham Young. She and Jonathan were already married when he was baptized in the River Ribble 26 September 1837. She may have been related to Thomas Walmesly and his wife, Ann Elizabeth Walmesly, two of the nine people listed by Heber C. Kimball in the first baptism.

Elizabeth was consumptive and considered to be dying. She had to be carried to the water but, after her baptism, began to recover in accordance with Heber C. Kimball's promise that if she would repent and be baptized, she would be healed. She died in 1888, in Bear Lake County, Idaho (Esplin 1987, 16; Evans 1937, 32–33).

The Walmselys, like the Cleggs, had lived in and around Preston for several generations. Thomas Walmesly and Ellen Walmesly Clegg may have been first cousins. Nineteenth-century Utah was an intimate and kin-shaped society. If the Clegg claim were not true, the probability is high that someone would have taken issue with it. No one did. George D. Watt, who in his later years became disenchanted with the Church and died in 1881, lived in Salt Lake City and Kaysville — close enough to have had contact with Clegg or to have heard reports of the story.

In summary, the Cleggs seem to have been honorable people, living in close contact with others informed about the events surrounding the baptism. Although there is no documentation of the family claim and no logical explanation for Heber C. Kimball's omission of Henry Clegg's name from the list of first baptisms, there is strong circumstantial evidence that precludes simply dismissing the story. In a larger and more important sense this family story has served for 150 years as a powerful bonding force in the now widely dispersed Clegg family — holding many close to the faith of their pioneer ancestry and giving all pride in their Mormon heritage. When taken in this light, the Clegg family came out a winner in the race to the River Ribble.

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