

## INTO A FOREIGN LAND: A CATHOLIC AMONG MORMONS

Polly Aird

Although I was brought up in a Congregational church and my husband in an Episcopal church, after reading Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* in the early 1970s, we converted to Catholicism. There we found a spiritual home. I now help out in a seven-month class for those who want to become Catholic. Why is a Catholic from Seattle interested in Mormon history? My background includes Episcopalians, Quakers, Presbyterians, Mormons, and Unitarians. It involves belief, dissent, and conversion, and then belief, dissent, and conversion all over again, with some large doses of persecution thrown in from time to time.

One branch of my mother's family included seven generations of Church of England (Anglican/Episcopalian) priests. Another branch left the Church of England and joined the Quakers, only to be persecuted in the 1680s, first during the reign of Charles II and then in the "Bloody Assizes" under James II.<sup>1</sup> To escape further persecution, these forebears came to America in 1685 and settled around Philadelphia. With this background, my mother was brought up half Episcopalian and half Quaker.

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1. Henry N. Paul, *Joseph Paull of Ilminster, Somerset, England, and Some of His Descendants Who Have Resided in Philadelphia, Penna* (Philadelphia: H. N. Paul, 1932), 1–15; Ellinor Collins Aird, *The Robeson Family in America* (Ardmore, Pa.: privately printed, 2003), 18.

More than a hundred and fifty years after my mother's family came to America, my father's grandparents—the McAuslans and the Airds—arrived from Scotland. Having deserted the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), they converted to Mormonism in the 1840s in the Glasgow area where they too encountered persecution—anti-Mormons often disrupted meetings by whistling, clapping, stamping, hooting, or more damagingly, breaking chairs or pulling down the gas lamps.<sup>2</sup> Not long after arriving in Utah in 1853–54, however, the McAuslans became disillusioned with their new faith. The causes were complex, but primarily stemmed from the excesses of the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57.<sup>3</sup>

Most disturbing for them were the preaching of blood atonement and the Parrish-Potter murders in Springville six months before the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Aaron Johnson, bishop of Springville, had called a series of council meetings after receiving two letters from Brigham Young warning about two drifters who were heading south to California. The second letter ended with “Be on the look out now & have a few trusty men ready in case of need to pursue, retake & punish.”<sup>4</sup> These letters, broadly interpreted, combined with the Reformation's thrust to purify Zion led Bishop Johnson to appoint two men to spy on the William R. Parrish family who, having lost their faith, planned to leave for California by the southern route. In the end, William Parrish and his son Beason, and, by mistake, Gardiner G. “Duff” Potter, one

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2. William Gibson, Journal, 1:23, Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; Polly Aird, *Mormon Convert, Mormon Defector: A Scottish Immigrant in the American West, 1848–1861* (Norman, Okla: Arthur H. Clark Co., an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 85.

3. For a full account of the McAuslan family's Mormon experience, see Aird, *Mormon Convert, Mormon Defector*.

4. Brigham Young to Aaron Johnson, Feb. 3, 1857; and to Bishops and Presidents South, Feb. 6, 1857. Brigham Young, Letterpress Copybook Transcriptions 3, 352, 387.

of the spies, were killed.<sup>5</sup> Springville was six miles from Spanish Fork where the McAuslans were living and as they too had lost their faith and wanted to leave, they were alarmed.

But leaving Utah was not simple, as this was ten years before the transcontinental railroad was completed. The family feared the Danites, Brigham Young's purported secret band of armed thugs. That there was danger for those who lost their faith is shown by the murder of the Parishes, but whether the McAuslans were targeted is impossible to know. Nevertheless, their perception of peril was real.<sup>6</sup>

In 1858 the US Army marched into Utah to install a non-Mormon governor and effect a separation of church and state. With others, the McAuslans applied to the new governor for help to get out of Utah. Thus in June 1859, some forty families of disaffected Mormons left for California under the protection of an army escort.<sup>7</sup>

Soon after the McAuslans left Utah, my father's paternal family—the Airds—moved to Heber City. There, William Aird, my great-grandfather, also became disillusioned. In 1873—twenty years after the family had arrived in Utah—he told his priesthood quorum that, while he still believed in Joseph Smith, he no longer believed in the Utah church authorities. He resigned from the quorum and withdrew from the church.<sup>8</sup> Soon afterward he joined the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, today's Community of Christ, another instance of belief, dissent, and conversion.

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5. Polly Aird, "‘You Nasty Apostates, Clear Out’: Reasons for Disaffection in the Late 1850s," *Journal of Mormon History* 30 (Fall 2004): 173–91.

6. Peter McAuslan, Letter to Robert Salmon, Dec. 1860, reprinted in Aird, "‘You Nasty Apostates, Clear Out,’” 192–201.

7. Polly Aird, "Escape from Zion: The United States Army Escort of Mormon Apostates, 1859," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 44 (Fall 2001): 196–237.

8. Melchizedek Priesthood Minutes 1861–1878, Heber Branch, Wasatch Stake, Dec. 27, 1873, Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

William Aird was a handloom weaver and made most of the cloth worn in Heber, but when he left the Church, he lost his customers. The now economically- and socially-persecuted family was soon starving. William's son, my grandfather, then ten years old, later wrote that the hardest part besides the constant hunger was the taunting of other children. When the stake president, Abram Hatch, discovered their plight, he made sure the family received at least the barest necessities of life. Hatch further said that since it was not the fault of the children that their parents had left the Church, the community should offer the children work so they could support the family. Over time, attitudes changed and the family was accepted once more.<sup>9</sup>

About the time I started high school, my grandmother wrote an account of these family experiences. Years later my father decided to expand her story by adding context. As I had been an editor for many years, he asked me to go over it. What a patchwork quilt—the family stories mixed in with Scottish history, Mormon history, Utah history, and Mormon beliefs! In trying to straighten it out, I became intrigued. Why had these Scots converted in the first place, what happened that disillusioned them, and with what did they fill the spiritual vacuum in their lives?

I knew nothing about Mormonism except what my grandmother and now my father had written, none of it very complimentary. Deciding to keep an open mind, I starting reading and then ordering books through interlibrary loan. The first book I read was Wallace Stegner's *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail*. First published in 1964, its final section, "A Word on Bibliography," speaks of the problem for historians:

The literature on the Mormons is enormous, repetitious, contradictory, and embattled. . . . The more one wades into this morass the deeper he

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9. John W. Aird, Letters to Juliaetta Bateman Jensen, Jan. 20, and Mar. 10, 1949, in Emily McAuslan Aird's family history, typescript 1953, copy in the Polly Aird Papers, Utah State Historical Society, 36–38, 44–45.

is mired, and the farther from firm ground. There *is* no firm ground here; there is only Mormon opinion, Gentile opinion, and the necessarily tentative opinion of historians trying to take account of all the facts and allow for all the delusion, hatred, passion, paranoia, lying, bad faith, concealment, and distortion of evidence that were contributed by both the Mormons and their enemies.<sup>10</sup>

Well! It looked pretty hopeless. Nevertheless, I wrote letters to the Utah State Historical Society, and then—bravely, as I look back on it—to Leonard Arrington, the dean of Mormon history. Both were generous in their replies, with Arrington writing a long, single-spaced typed letter suggesting books and people I might contact. His letter gave me the courage to keep going. At the Utah State Historical Society, the then curator of manuscripts, Gary Topping (also a Catholic!), was likewise helpful. But it wasn't long before I realized that I needed to go to Utah and do primary research.

After reading relevant records in the Historical Society and Family History Library, it became obvious that I needed to get into the Church archives (formally known as the Church History Library) with their wealth of documents and diaries. I was hesitant, even afraid. I had Stegner's words in mind. Here was I, a Catholic and a descendent of people who had deserted the LDS faith, wanting access to records that involved painful parts of the Church's history. It was now the early 1990s, not that many years after Arrington's dismissal as Church Historian and banishment to Provo. I had read his and Davis Bitton's book, *Mormons and Their Historians*, in which they said that many documents in the archives had become highly restricted.<sup>11</sup> That confirmed Stegner's description of the problem with doing Mormon history. I was sure I would not be allowed in.

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10. Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Salt Lake City: Westwater Press, 1981), 313.

11. Davis Bitton and Leonard Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 165.

Gary Topping, however, said to go and introduce myself to Ron Watt, whom he knew through the Utah Historical Society. Ron, he said, was as kind a person as one could hope to meet. Thus, with my heart in my mouth—and no crucifix showing—I found my way to the second floor of the Church Office Building and the archives. There I was confronted with a document to sign giving the Church the right to review anything I published that included material from their collection. I signed with trepidation, for there was no other way to get in. I asked for Ron Watt and introduced myself. To my relief, he was unreservedly friendly.

It wasn't long before I discovered that everyone in the archives would go out of their way to help. Over the years, Ron Barney and Randy Dixon in addition to Ron Watt—as well as many others inside and outside the archives—have patiently and cheerfully answered my questions, no matter how ignorant and off-the-wall they must have sounded. Since then the Church archives has become increasingly open and no longer insists on review rights. With the advent of Richard Turley as Assistant Church Historian, many more records are now available.

The helpfulness of the archives staff puzzled me. Why were they so hospitable, especially in light of the research I was doing? Bit by bit I developed theories. Perhaps it was because Mormons are truly nice people. Or maybe they were intrigued by my project and curious to see what I might turn up. Or maybe they believed the truth would not hurt the Church and felt my interest was not in bashing the Church, but in figuring out what happened to one family. But finally I thought, Oh! They hope I will see how wonderful the Church is and convert!

Later, on a Mormon History Association post-conference bus tour, I sat next to Paul Anderson, now retired curator at the Museum of Art at Brigham Young University. As we chatted I told him my theories of why the staff at the Church archives was so helpful. After recounting my thoughts that Mormons are simply nice, that maybe they did not believe the truth would hurt the Church, or that they hoped I'd convert, he laughed and said, "Oh, Polly, it's that you can't imagine how

delighted we are to have an outsider interested in our history!” I loved his response! But it also reveals what distances remain between Mormon insiders and outsiders.

Throughout this journey, the Mormon History Association has been my home. Lavina Fielding Anderson in her gracious and welcoming way regularly encouraged me and eventually asked me to join the editorial board of the *Journal of Mormon History*. The MHA conferences and especially the tours have made it possible to get to know many Mormons. Almost all have been warm and friendly, though curious about my involvement.

The result of all this is that my first book, *Mormon Convert, Mormon Defector*, about the McAuslan family that escaped Utah with the help of the army, was published in 2009. It was followed by a book edited with Will Bagley and Jeff Nichols titled *Playing with Shadows: Voices of Dissent in the Mormon West*, which includes four previously unpublished journals or autobiographies of nineteenth-century Mormons who had difficulties with Church authorities.<sup>12</sup> I’ve also written several papers and served on the executive board of the MHA. In the process, I’ve become somewhat of a specialist on nineteenth-century Mormon dissenters. I certainly had no idea that this is where I would land when I started researching a family story! But the history of dissent is a wide-open field, and far from what most Mormon historians care to pursue.

This conference has given me a chance to mull over what I have learned about Mormonism, Mormon people, and Mormon dissenters. What I see is this: in the nineteenth century, dissenters were treated as enemies. One was either for the Church or against it. The attitude was that through some character flaw these people had lost their way and allowed Satan to get hold of them. There was little discussion or curiosity

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12. Polly Aird, Jeffrey Nichols, and Will Bagley, eds., *Playing with Shadows: Voices of Dissent in the Mormon West* (Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark Co., an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

about the doubts they had and even less about how they might still be accepted as neighbors in spite of leaving the Church.

One historical example will suffice, that of John Hyde Jr. Hyde was born in England in 1833, baptized in London in 1848 at age fifteen, and ordained a Seventy three years later. From 1851 to 1853 he served under John Taylor on a mission to France. After that, he emigrated to Utah, married his English sweetheart, and taught school for a living. He received his endowment in 1854.<sup>13</sup>

Hyde began to find things in Mormonism that distressed him. One was the mixing of the spiritual with the mundane. In Great Britain, the Church stressed biblical teachings and promoted discussions. Gifts of the Spirit and visions were important. But in Utah, Hyde was put off by the typical meeting: “They . . . always commenc[e] by singing and prayer, but [then descend into] discourse on adobe-making, clothes-washing, house-cleaning, ditch-digging, and other kindred subjects. . . . It is no more worship than any thing else they do.”<sup>14</sup>

Hyde came to distrust the Church leaders. In England polygamy was regularly denied as a pernicious rumor, but when he got to Utah he realized the missionaries had not told the truth. As he wrote later, “The whole of the apostles abroad had lied in denying it; positively, deliberately, wilfully [sic] lied,—wrote lies,—published and circulated lies,—the heads of the church sanctioned and commanded them. . . . What confidence can we place in the statements of such men, or the pretensions of such a system?”<sup>15</sup>

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13. Lynne Watkins Jorgensen, “John Hyde, Jr., Mormon Renegade,” *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991): 123–29.

14. John Hyde Jr., *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* (New York: W. P. Fetridge & Company, 1857), 39–40.

15. John Hyde Jr., “‘Utah as It Is,’ To the Editor of the Polynesian,” *The Pacific*, Nov. 27, 1856, in Roger Robin Ekins, ed., “The Pusillanimous Railings of an Apostate Mormon: The Strange Case of Elder Cannon and Mr. Hyde,” *Defending Zion:*



Hyde had other complaints related to the control Brigham Young kept over individuals as well as to the practice of polygamy. The latter did not, he said, make either men or women happy or elevated.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, it was a struggle to decide to leave the Church: “Every tie that could bind any one to any system, united me to Mormonism,” he wrote. “It had been the religion that my youth had loved and preached; it was the faith of my parents; of my wife and her relatives. . . . I clung [to it] with desperate energy.”<sup>17</sup>

In May 1856 he accepted a mission to Hawaii because he hoped that “to be actively employed in the ministry might waken up my old confidence; that in the effort to convince others, I might succeed in reconvincing myself.”<sup>18</sup> In this he failed. By the time he reached Hawaii, he was persuaded that Mormonism was in error. Returning to San Francisco where he had earlier defended polygamy, he now lectured against it, and then went on to New York City where he published his book, *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs*. His wife never joined him and eventually married another man as a plural wife in Salt Lake City.<sup>19</sup>

In January 1857 Hyde was excommunicated publicly in the Old Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. It held some 2,500 people, though how many attended that day is not known. In a discourse, Heber C. Kimball moved that:

John Hyde be cut off from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . root and branch. . . . I want you to vote, every one of you, either for or against, for there is no sympathy to be shown unto such a man. . . . All that are in favour that John Hyde be cut off . . . and that

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*George Q. Cannon and the California Mormon Newspaper Wars of 1856–1857* (Spokane, Wash.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2002), 122.

16. John Hyde, “Renunciation of Mormonism,” letter to *The Pacific*, Nov. 27, 1856, reprinted in Ekins, *Defending Zion*, 120.

17. Hyde, *Mormonism*, 21–22.

18. *Ibid.*, 22.

19. Aird, “You Nasty Apostates, Clear Out,” 203.

he be delivered over to Satan to be buffeted in the flesh, will raise their right hands. (All hands were raised.)<sup>20</sup>

This nineteenth-century example has echoes in the recent excommunications in the Church. A woman recently posted on the Feminist Mormon Housewives blog saying, “In the church, apostasy has been neatly wrapped up in the parable of the wheat and tares. Those who ‘apostatize’ must be the tares and those left in the church pat themselves on the back for being the ‘wheat.’ They see their judgments as having been sure, swift, and Godly.”<sup>21</sup> In googling “LDS wheat and tares,” I got a number of perspectives on this parable, so I don’t know how representative her post is. Although those recently excommunicated were not turned over to the buffeting of Satan, she certainly felt the judgments were too harsh.

How would a Catholic view this parable? Fr. Dan Dwyer, in his usual generous way, answered my email:

To me it seems that one aspect of the parable is that it is difficult to tell wheat from tares—so rather than make a judgment we should leave people to God’s judgment. Practically speaking that would mean that one should be very hesitant to excommunicate—in case you are ripping up the wheat! Sometimes excommunication is necessary, . . . But we need always [to] remember that excommunication is just that—a withholding of communion for a serious reason. It is not an action that NECESSARILY cuts the person off from God—only God knows when and if that ever happens. I think the parable of the wheat and the tares

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20. Heber C. Kimball Blood Atonement Sermon, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1854–89), 4:165.

21. “Lucy” comment on “Why Aren’t You an Apostate?” Feminist Mormon Housewives (Feb. 15, 2015), retrieved from <http://www.feministmormonhousewives.org/2015/02/why-arent-you-an-apostate/>. The parable of the sower is from Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43. See also Doctrine and Covenants 86:1–7. See also the Primary lesson on the parable at <https://www.lds.org/manual/primary-7-new-testament/lesson-17-the-parables-of-the-sower-and-the-wheat-and-ares?lang=eng>.

calls for as much inclusion as is humanly possible—and has more to do with one’s ultimate destiny in the kingdom than in the status of one’s church membership here.<sup>22</sup>

One Russian Orthodox priest comments, “Christ does not want the tares pulled out that grow alongside the wheat in the Church because he wants the righteous to learn patience and for sinners to feel His loving kindness.”<sup>23</sup>

Leaving the subject of dissent, let me turn to working as a Catholic in Mormon history. Early on I decided that I did not need to carry on into yet another generation the negative views of Mormonism inherited from my father’s family. Especially thanks to MHA, I have made wonderful friends, both Mormon and Catholic, who have greatly enriched my life. Here in Mormon studies, our little band of Catholics has taken the name “Morlics” (i.e., Mormons-Catholics). We tried Cathmons (Catholics-Mormons), but that didn’t have the same ring.

I respect the sincerity of my Mormon friends’ beliefs. My research about the past of my dissenting ancestors has led me into corners I never suspected existed. This formerly foreign land of Mormonism has thus become increasingly familiar, populated by friends, and full of fascinating byways.

Nevertheless, I have also had some experiences with Mormons that have been less inviting. In the course of my research, I have met and talked with a number of Mormon cousins—descendants of relatives who did not leave the faith. Most were welcoming, curious to meet me, and generous with family papers or photographs that might be relevant to my work. One experience, however, was different. I had thought this set of cousins would be interested in what I had turned up about our

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22. Fr. Daniel Dwyer, OFM (whose essay also appears in this issue), email to Polly Aird, Feb. 20, 2015. Emphasis in original.

23. Fr. Victor Potapov, “Gospel Parables: An Orthodox Commentary,” Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist, Washington, DC, retrieved from [http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/parables\\_potapov.htm](http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/parables_potapov.htm).

common ancestors, but they were not. I puzzled over this for some time. Maybe I'm wrong, but I finally concluded the problem was that they did not want to let go of their picture of our ancestors. The ones they wanted were something like those in a coloring book of handcart pioneers undaunted by any obstacle. They did not want real human beings who experienced the ups and downs of life and maybe even struggled with doubt. They seemed afraid of having their view shaken, of somehow losing their heroic forebears.

Several people over the years have asked if I am LDS, and when I say no, they brightly chime, "We can fix that!" One woman looked puzzled when I said I was Catholic, and then burst out, "But we want you!" Another time, on a tour to the Cedar City Rock Chapel, an elderly friend took my hand and led me downstairs to the baptismal font and hinted that I should join the faith. Yet another person told me that I might find myself walking beside a swimming pool, fall in, and find myself baptized! These people wanted only the best for me, but each instance implied that my Catholic baptism did not really count and that my Catholic faith was inadequate. That's disheartening. I would hope that Mormons and Catholics could come to acknowledge and respect each others' beliefs without one feeling superior to the other.

Although we have come a long way, we Mormons and Catholics, the road still stretches ahead. Hopefully over time we—historians and ordinary folk, Mormons and non-Mormons—will be less quick to judge and more willing to take an interest in each other's religious beliefs. And hopefully non-Mormons will go beyond the seemingly "weird" in Mormonism to find the underlying vibrant faith and culture. May all religions recognize that people—living or dead—are and were questioning people, for questioning—including doubting—is what humans do.