

To Forsake Thy Father and Mother: Mary Fielding Smith and the Familial Politics of Conversion

Amanda Hendrix-Komoto

Note: This article was first presented at the annual conference of the Mormon History Association in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, on July 1, 2012.

In 1852, Heber C. Kimball delivered a funeral oration for Mary Fielding Smith, the sister-in-law of the martyred prophet and the wife of his brother Hyrum. Kimball described her as a devoted wife and mother. He told the congregation that “if any person has lived the life of a Saint, she has.”¹ He offered her as an example to the women of Zion, as an exemplar of the faith who had looked after her sons and daughters. She also had not complained when her second husband had not visited her very frequently. Kimball ended by telling the congregation, possibly making insinuations about the industry of other women, that she lived with “economy” and “industry,” caring not only for her immediate family but also for several older adults in her care.² Kimball was not the only one

*The 2012 Mormon History Association Conference was held in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, June 28–July 1. The following papers were presented in a session titled “Conversion in 19th-Century Mormonism: Identities and Associations in the Atlantic World.” Richard Bushman was the respondent.

to eulogize her. Her son Joseph proclaimed that “nothing beneath the celestial kingdom” could “surpass [his] deathless love” for his mother. “She was good!” he exclaimed. “She was pure! She was indeed a Saint!” and “a royal daughter of God.”³

In many ways, this emphasis upon Mary’s virtue continues today. Conference talks, biographies, and children’s books extol her virtues and offer her as an example to Mormon women on how to be a Saint.⁴ Although the emphasis provides young women with a much-needed female role model, it also misrepresents her life. Mary Fielding Smith indeed sacrificed much for her commitment to Mormonism, but doing so was not easy or uncomplicated. Mary’s conversion, for example, placed a strain on her relationship with her family in England who saw her faith as a delusion and hoped she would return to the Methodism of her youth. In a world in which the family was at the center of Anglo-American senses of identity, this estrangement was particularly difficult. Her relationship with Hyrum was no easier. In one letter, he accused her of being an unloving wife, all too willing to have him absent and too severe a disciplinarian to be a proper mother. In this paper, I explore the familial politics of Mary’s conversion, exploring first her relationship with her natal family and then her marriage to Hyrum. Doing so reveals not only the complications in her life but also the difficulties faced by Mormon women and other converts within the early church in general, as well as the operation of class in the Anglo-American world.

Mary was born in Bedfordshire (in northeast England) in 1801. Still relatively rural, Bedfordshire was not unaffected by the dislocations and shifts in production that were transforming nineteenth-century Britain. The enclosure of fields and the introduction of intensive farming techniques and new crops transformed the rural economy, contributing to what some historians have termed “the industrious revolution.”⁵ As a result, rural counties like Bedfordshire moved from semi-communal ownership of the land to holding it privately and managing it with commercial landlords.⁶

Like many people in the early nineteenth century, the Fieldings found their lives profoundly changed by these transformations. Their father, John, abandoned his native Yorkshire as a youth in order to live as one of his uncle’s tenants. When he had

first visited his potential farm, he felt that the land was unsuitable; but upon opening his family Bible, his eyes fell upon a verse so appropriate that he came to believe that their move to Bedfordshire had been ordained by God.⁷ In becoming rural tenant farmers, the Fieldings lived between social classes. Although not quite middle class, they did not identify themselves either with the laboring classes of industrial Britain or with the rural villagers among whom they lived.

The instability of their social position was underscored by their father's decision to become an itinerant preacher within the Primitive Methodist Church. Although Methodism had begun as a radical critique of the Church of England in the eighteenth century, it was calcifying by the time that John bought his farm in Bedfordshire. The Methodist movement, which had once embraced female spirituality and allowed the working class a space within church governance, was becoming a more respectable (and thus less responsive) church. Primitive Methodism appealed to those who experienced this increasing respectability as a palpable loss. The members of the Primitive Methodists were often laborers, artisans, and farmers who felt that industrialization had destroyed their communities. Intense emotional meetings evoked an extinct world of cottage-based industry and critiqued industrialization.⁸ The church also embraced female preaching and gifts of the Holy Spirit that the mainstream Methodist church now largely eschewed. Although John Fielding moved to Bedfordshire in the hope of providing for his wife and children, he may have found himself unable to do so. Whatever the ultimate reason for his joining the Primitive Methodists, he found himself attracted to the movement and soon became an itinerant preacher. His decision to join a lamented sect would have placed the family in an even more marginalized position within British society.

By the time that Mary converted to Mormonism, however, her family were no longer the marginalized tenant farmers they had once been. Her brother James was a prominent preacher in northern England and her sister Ann had married a clergyman in the Church of England. When Ann wrote an obituary of their mother, Rachel, she emphasized her mother's extreme piety and religious devotion. Doing so was a way to posthumously claim her mother's respectability. It was important in the nineteenth cen-

tury for middle-class men and women to have certain understandings of domesticity and the family. In their book *Family Fortunes*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue that middle-class men and women defined themselves against a dissipated aristocracy and a lazy, uneducated working class by emphasizing their inherent morality and industriousness.⁹ The painstaking needlework that middle-class women completed, the display of family Bibles and frequent church attendance in middle-class homes, and the emphasis upon modest dress and aspect for both middle-class men and women were meant to portray its members as people upon whom governance could rest.

This emphasis upon domesticity is evident in Ann's obituary of her mother. In one section, she refers to her mother's skill at "domestic affairs," which combined "frugality" and "benevolence." She suggests that her mother practiced "economy" in all of her affairs, never wasting a spot of cream or buying unnecessary ribbons to adorn her dresses. Yet, her mother was also "always ready to yearn" over "the afflictions and distress" of her "sons and daughters." "Her hand and heart," Ann writes, "were ever open to relieve their wants."¹⁰ In stressing these aspects, the obituary creates her mother as an admirable woman whose respectability and propriety were beyond reproach. In doing so, she shores up her own respectability and class status while claiming a similar position for her mother.

Ann's obituary of her mother also provides the context within which Mary's conversion to Mormonism must be understood. Her family was one that was at the edge of respectability. Thus, correct understandings of domesticity and family were extremely important to maintain their class status, as others might continually question their position within British society. Mary's conversion to Mormonism challenged their assumption of middle-class status. She had converted to Mormonism in the 1830s when missionaries visited Canada, where she lived with her brother Joseph and sister Mercy. Most people responded to the presence of these missionaries who proclaimed that God's church had been restored to earth and that miracles were again being worked with scorn and derision. A woman named Izabella Walton, however, invited the preachers into her home. A few days later, a missionary preached in the Fielding house. According to Mary's brother Jo-

seph, the man explained the prophecies of the Bible better than any other minister in the area. In spite of local opposition, the Fielding siblings soon became convinced of the “great power” of the new gospel and were baptized.¹¹ Mary immediately wrote to her family about the new church, hoping to provide her English siblings with a foretaste of the gospel in order to prepare them for eventual conversion.

Her brother Joseph’s letters suggest that the news was initially well-received. Their brother James found their missives so edifying that he read them to his congregation, who then prayed to “the Lord” to “send them his servants” so that they could learn about the new gospel. They, however, did not tell their brother everything about the gospel. Fearing that they might jeopardize this favorable response, they held back from telling their family about the most radical parts of Mormonism.¹² Absent presumably was anything more than a few lines about the discovery of an important new testament or the revival of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In 1837, Joseph was called as a missionary to Great Britain. As he departed from New York City, Joseph felt anxious. It had been his “earnest Prayer ever since [he] came into the Church . . . that the Lord would open the way, the glad Tidings to go to [his] native Country, particularly to [his] Brethren in the Flesh.”¹³ When he first arrived in England, he met with a cordial reception. His brother James offered to let Joseph and his companions use his chapel as a place to preach. Only one Mormon sermon was ever preached in that chapel. Although James could rejoice in the revival of spiritual gifts and the appearance of a new record of God, the idea that men had to be fully immersed in order for their baptism to be valid shocked and angered the Christian minister, who then cast the missionaries from his chapel.¹⁴ Although it is difficult for those of us living in the twenty-first century to understand the venom and vitriol with which James responded to full immersion, he was not the only minister in Britain to feel this way. Debates over the sacrament had been fiercely contested in Britain, occasionally breaking into violence. Baptism symbolized entrance into the Christian community and the acceptance of God’s love. To debate its meaning and efficacy was to debate who had been saved and who would be cast out of the Kingdom of God.

The Mormon missionaries, however, rejected the reasons

James provided for his denial of the gospel. Instead, they blamed his sudden opposition not on theological difference but on avarice. They accused him of being too greedy and proud of his position within the community to accept a maligned and despised religion. An 1841 edition of the *Millennial Star* called the minister a “hypocrite” and accused him of deception.¹⁵ James’ decision to cast out the Mormon missionaries was hardest on Joseph, whose diary recorded a telling incident between the two brothers. As they were sitting down to breakfast one day, James “began to say very hard things of [the missionaries] and the Book of Mormon.”¹⁶ Unable to eat, Joseph stood up from the table with feelings of anger and grief and declared that “the Book [of Mormon] was of God” and James would be forced to repent.¹⁷ He then quickly left the house, refusing to return.

Mormon scholarship has generally not been kind to James Fielding. In his biography of Mary Fielding Smith, for example, Don Corbett describes him as a man who willingly gave into the power of the adversary and turned against those men to whom he had promised his friendship. Part of the reason for the ill portrayal is that Joseph is a sympathetic character for those who believe in the Mormon gospel. Another reason is the imbalance of sources available. Although a few letters survive from James’ hands, the vast majority of the evidence comes from Mormon sources, making it difficult to ascertain his motives. What remains, however, suggests a more complicated picture in which James Fielding was a man concerned to stress spiritual gifts while avoiding enthusiasm and delusion. His rejection of the gospel ultimately relied upon the same type of reasoning that his brothers and sisters had used when deciding whether or not to accept the gospel: he believed that the message of Mormonism was not in accordance with the scriptures. Joseph had seen in the sermons of the Mormon missionaries better explanations than he had seen offered for the content of the Bible. James simply could not see these.

The Mormon missionaries, however, were not completely amiss in attributing his decision to class motives. Indeed, his descriptions of Mormonism were laden with class imagery. In a letter he wrote to his sisters Mercy and Mary, he compared the visions that Joseph Smith had received to the mad delusions of

Joanna Southcott and the French Prophets.¹⁸ The former was infamous for claiming to be pregnant with the son of God, possessing a sealed box of prophecies, and receiving dictation from the “Spirit invisible.”¹⁹ Her visions attracted thousands of followers who believed she would die only to be resurrected and inaugurate the end times. The French Prophets similarly reeled, railed, and swooned as they invoked the Holy Spirit and spoke dramatic prophecies.²⁰

The contemporary press responded to the spectacles such prophets offered with sarcasm. Although both of these movements included followers among all social classes, they became by-words for the follies of working-class religion. Newspaper articles used their legacies to warn against the dangers of populism and an uneducated working class. After the arrival of Mormon missionaries in Great Britain, British newspapers explicitly compared Mormonism with these earlier religious fantasies, lamenting that the “poor deluded wool comber” had been tricked into joining their movements.²¹ When Mary, Mercy, and Joseph Fielding agreed to be baptized, their family members believed that they had embraced delusion and spurned rational thought. Mormonism’s radical embrace of spiritual gifts and acceptance of the visions of a New York farmer seemed to align it with Southcott, the French Prophets, and a multitude of failed English prophets. For the three siblings to join Mormonism, then, was to challenge nineteenth-century middle-class ideas about class, respectability, and family. James saw his brother’s radicalism as an affront to their family unity and to their newfound social position. He wrote to his sisters that Joseph had torn apart his flock and destroyed his congregation.

Mary did not respond to the schism within her family well. Joseph initially feared to tell her about the result of his labors.²² She had prayed fervently for her family’s conversion and their rejection of Mormonism would disappoint her. Even after she learned of their decision, Mary continued to send letters, which Joseph read to them with little positive result.²³ Mary’s distress was doubtless born mostly out of her love for her family. The pain she felt, however, would have been deepened by expectations for women in the nineteenth century. In this time period, women’s spirituality focused on their status as daughters, sisters, and moth-

ers. The separation between political and domestic economy had encouraged women to find meaning in their families. Magazines contained images of women surrounded by their golden-locked children or nursing infants whom they proudly displayed in their arms. Similarly, devotional literature of the time encouraged women to be dutiful to their parents and husbands and to dote upon their children. For Mary to be separated from her family and rejected by them was difficult. It meant abandoning the image of herself as a dutiful daughter and loving sister. It would have placed her in a difficult position and marginalized her within her community. It was, ironically, a position that her mother had occupied before her.

Mary likely found solace in the presence of her sister Mercy. The relationship, however, was not an uncomplicated one. She and Mercy had initially immigrated to Canada together where they had lived with their brother. After their conversion to Mormonism, Mary married Hyrum Smith and Mercy, a man named Robert Thompson. Like the two sisters, Mercy's husband was originally from England and had settled in Toronto, Canada. In 1841, however, he contracted tuberculosis and died after a short illness. In an effort to take care of his wife's sister, Hyrum married the widow two years after her husband's death. Doing so brought the sisters closer together and may have brought Mercy additional comfort. It also, however, further estranged them from their natal family. According to the literary theorist Felicity Nussbaum, middle-class understandings of domesticity emphasized the importance of chastity and monogamy within marriage. Although members of the middle class had premarital sex, took multiple lovers, and frequented prostitutes, their wealth allowed them to do so clandestinely. In the middle-class Victorian imagery, it was only members of the working class and colonized countries that acted promiscuously and had multiple partners. In entering into polygamous marriages, Mormons seemed to take what had been secret and illicit and bring it into the very heart of marriage. The open sharing of their husband would have further alienated Mary and Mercy from their brothers and sisters in England, who likely would have seen their marriage as immoral and even obscene.

Many Mormon men and women who were alienated from their families of origin because of their religion took comfort in

the creation of new families through temple adoptions and the bonds created by polygamy. Mary's marriage to her husband Hyrum, however, was anything but easy. During their early marriage, Hyrum was frequently absent due to his imprisonment and church duties. Only one year after they were married, he was imprisoned for more than four months in the Liberty Jail. During his imprisonment Mary was quite ill, although Hyrum did not know or recognize the extent of her illness. Her absence greatly troubled him. Hyrum wrote that his greatest trouble was that he had not heard from her but once. He greatly desired to know how she prospered. Eventually, his despair at not having heard would turn to anger. In March 1839 he wrote to her, saying that even if she had no feelings for him as a husband she could have sent "some information concerning the little babe or those little children" that lay near his "hart."²⁴ He also felt that if she had decided to forsake him she should "send me word. Then I should know what to depend upon."²⁵

The difficulties that Mary was having with Hyrum denied her some of the solace she could have found in the Mormon community after her natal family had abandoned her. His constant imprisonment and the distance between them denied Mary the full status of wife and mother. His comments made her feel isolated and alone. In one instance, she discovered that rumors circulating about her abilities as a mother had come from the lips of Hyrum himself, who had accused her of being too harsh and strict with his children. In her letters to her husband, she tried desperately to fix their relationship and to reassert her position as wife and mother. She wrote to her husband that she could not "bear the thought of [his] having any such suspicion" and that he must be "misacquainted with the principles of [her] heart." Her "reason, religion, and honor and every feeling of [her] heart" forbade her to even entertain "such a thought" of abandoning her poor husband. Furthermore, she wrote that she was far from "an oppressive Step Mother" and had always acted as she thought best.²⁶ There is a sense of indignation but also of desperation in her letters.

Although she and Hyrum eventually reconciled, Mary's position within the Mormon community was far from secure. After her husband's death she married Heber C. Kimball as a plural wife but in many ways remained a widow. She was forced to find

her own way to Zion, and her son Joseph Fielding often recorded slights that other members of their camp made against his mother. One man asked her to wait until the next company left because he believed that her presence would hinder the group. After she arrived in the valley, she became one of a dozen wives of Heber C. Kimball. Instead of having the love and comfort due a wife, she had to be satisfied with occasional visits from her husband, which she often initiated. Kimball recorded that she accepted her lot with grace and was satisfied with him even if she only saw him once or twice a week.²⁷ In spite of her acceptance of her life, Mary's lot was not easy. She had been estranged from her natal family, had had a difficult relationship with her husband Hyrum, and had been left to care for her children and stepchildren alone.

Focusing on her estrangement from her family and her difficult relationship with Hyrum allows us to see Mary as a more complicated figure than the hagiographies that have been written about her would suggest. She struggled with her position in the Mormon community. She also struggled to reconcile her desire to be seen as a dutiful mother and faithful daughter with her estrangement from her family and her strained relationship with Hyrum. (In this way, she was like many early Mormon women. The letters that Louisa Barnes Pratt wrote to her family after her conversion suggest a similar discomfort on the part of evangelical relatives who worried that her acceptance of the Mormon gospel would lead her to hellfire.) The writings of Mary's biographers and eulogists perform a work similar to that which her sister Ann did for their mother: they try to posthumously create her as a sanctified woman whose grace was recognizable to anyone who saw her. In so doing, they hold her up as a model for Mormon women and girls, but they also flatten her life and make it difficult to understand her precarious position within both British society and Mormonism.

Notes

1. Heber C. Kimball, "Funeral Address," *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 1, edited by George D. Watt (Liverpool and London: S.W. and F.D. Richards, 1854), 246.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Quoted in Jane McBride Choate, "Heroes and Heroines: Mary Fielding Smith—Mother in Israel," *The Friend* (July 1993), 32.

4. See for example, Susan Easton Black and Mary Jane Woodger, *Women of Character: 100 Profiles of Prominent LDS Women* (American Fork: Covenant Communications, 2011), and Aileen H. Clyde, "Confirmed in Faith," <http://www.lds.org/general-conference/1996/10/confirmed-in-faith?lang=eng> (accessed August 10, 2012).

5. The term "industrious revolution" was originally coined by Akira Hayama to describe the changes in spending habits and consumption that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. It also explains the transformations that occurred within agriculture and cottage industry in this time period. It is perhaps best explained in Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

6. *Western Civilizations: Their History & Culture*, 17th edition, Vol. 2, edited by Judith Coffin, Robert Stacey, Joshua Cole, and Carolyn Symes (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 581.

7. Ann Fielding Matthews, "Memoir of Mrs. Rachel Fielding of Honidon, Bedfordshire," *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* (August 1830), 516.

8. Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

9. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), *passim*.

10. Matthews, "Memoir of Mrs. Rachel Fielding of Honidon, Bedfordshire," 517.

11. Joseph Fielding, *Diary of Joseph Fielding, March 1797–December 19, 1863*, MS 15214, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 3.

12. Joseph Fielding to Mary Fielding Smith, October 2, 1837, Mary Fielding Smith Collection, MS 2779, Folder 5, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

13. *Diary of Joseph Fielding*, 4.

14. See Joseph Fielding to Mary Fielding Smith, October 2, 1837; *Diary of Joseph Fielding*, 12; and Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, and Willard Richards, "Mission to England," *Millennial Star* 12, no. 1 (April 1841), 290–292.

15. Kimball, Hyde, and Richards, "Mission to England," 291.

16. *Diary of Joseph Fielding, March 1797–December 19, 1863*, 12.

17. *Ibid.*

18. James Fielding to Mary and Mercy Fielding, May 28, 1840, Mary

Fielding Smith Collection, MS 2779, Folder 6, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

19. For work on Joanna Southcott and her relationship to British Christianity, see Anna Clark, *The Struggle for Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley and Los Angeles.: University of California Press, 1997), 108–117; and Susan Juster, “Mystical Pregnancy and Holy Bleeding: Visionary Experience in Early Modern Britain and America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (April 2000), 249–288.

20. For a history of the French Prophets, see Catharine Randall, *From a Far Country: Camisards and Huguenots in the Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

21. “Modern Instances of Superstition,” *Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal* Vol. 1, No. 3 (January 20, 1844), 44; “The Mormonites, or the Church of Latter-Day Saints, Part III,” *The Edinburgh Christian Magazine* 5, no. 118.

22. Joseph Fielding to Mary Fielding Smith, October 2, 1837.

23. Diary of Joseph Fielding, 18.

24. Hyrum Smith to Mary Fielding Smith, March 20, 1839, Mary Fielding Smith Collection, MS 2779, Folder 1, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

25. Hyrum Smith to Mary Fielding Smith, March 30, 1839, Mary Fielding Smith Collection, MS 2779, Folder, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

26. Mary Fielding Smith to Hyrum Smith, April 11, 1839, Mary Fielding Smith Collection, MS 2779, Folder 1, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

27. Kimball, “Funeral Address,” 246.