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Mormon Polygamy, 1849-1856

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# “For Life, the Resurrection, and the Life Everlasting”: James J. Strang and Strangite Mormon Polygamy, 1849–1856

By David Rich Lewis

IN the early 1860's, a young man arrived in Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, eager, he tells us, to investigate the workings of Mormon polygamy and present another picture of the institution to an already shocked nation. Yet when he saw the Mormon women, “then I was touched.”

My heart . . . warmed toward these poor, ungainly, and pathetically “homely” creatures, and as I turned to hide the generous moisture in my eyes, I said, “No—the man that marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind, not their harsh censure—and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence.”<sup>1</sup>

With his brilliant wit, biting social satire, and irreverent tongue-in-cheek prose, young Samuel Clemens called the public's attention to a recognized issue of moral and political consequence. Polygamy, one of the so-called “Twin Relics of Barbarism,” was the subject of numerous books, theological treatises, congressional debates, moral outcry, and public consternation. Between 1850 and 1900 the plethora of newspaper stories, magazine articles, and books on the subject overwhelmingly

focused on the polygamous practices of one group in particular, the Utah Mormons.

Despite this attention, polygamy was not solely a Utah phenomenon. It was also practiced by other groups during the nineteenth century, including John Humphrey Noyes and his “free-love” community at Oneida, New York, Simon Lovet and the Perfectionist societies, and several schismatic Mormon groups. One of the better known schismatic groups was the Strangite Mormon community of Beaver Island, Michigan, led by their Prophet and King, James Jesse Strang.

Although several books and articles deal with this Mormon community and the man behind it, none has presented an adequate account of Strangite polygamy. In light of the relatively abundant source material, a reexamination and reinterpretation of Strang and Strangite polygamy and its impact on individual Saints, women, and the Mormon and Gentile communities seem warranted.<sup>2</sup> While much remains hidden by time and by the intent of Strang and his followers, the progression of polygamy on Beaver Island can be traced with some certainty. Yet the history of Strangite polygamy is more than that of a peculiar institution; it is the story of Strang himself. To study Strang's writings and actions is to understand more fully the man, his beliefs,

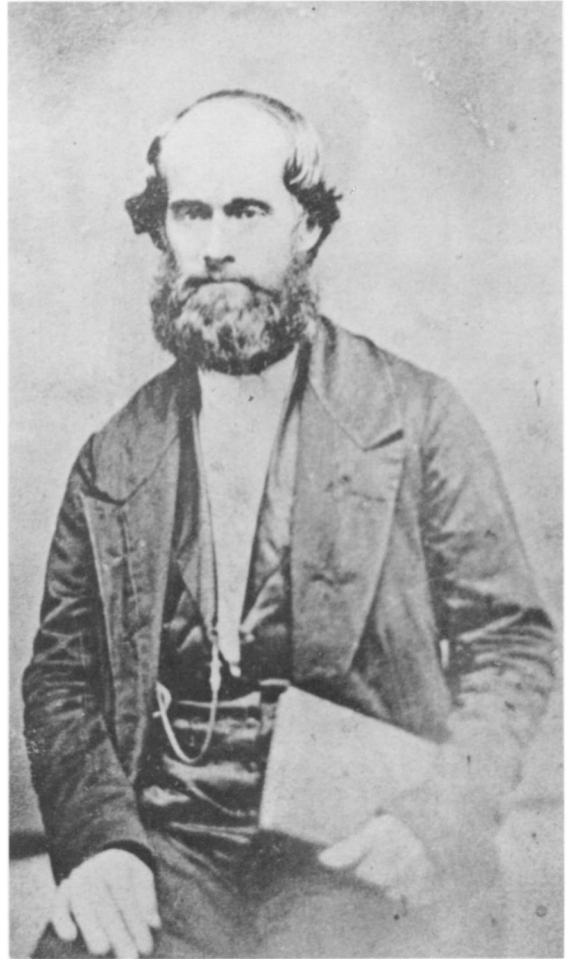
<sup>1</sup>Samuel Clemens, *Roughing It* (Hartford, Connecticut, 1873), 117–118.

<sup>2</sup>According to Mormon usage, a “Saint” is a member of the Mormon Church, while a “Gentile” is any non-Mormon.

and his intentions. Intellectual, dynamic, lustful, and obsessed with dreams of power and grandeur beyond reality, Strang created a marital institution and a political kingdom to serve his aims and desires.

**J**ESSE James Strang—or James Jesse Strang as he came to be known—was born on a farm near Scipio, New York, on March 21, 1813.<sup>3</sup> A sickly youth with meager formal education, Strang gained experience as a farmer, teacher, postmaster, temperance lecturer, newspaper editor, and lawyer in the Chautauqua County area. In 1836, Strang met and married Mary Abigail Perce, the daughter of a Baptist minister. After seven years, he moved his family to Burlington, Wisconsin, where he was first influenced by his wife's Mormon relatives. Traveling to Nauvoo, Illinois, in February, 1844, Strang received instruction and was baptized into the Church by its Prophet and Seer, Joseph Smith, Jr. Although he was commissioned to organize a branch of the Church in the Burlington area of Wisconsin, Strang returned home with ideas of his own.

On June 27, 1844, the Prophet Joseph was assassinated by a mob in Carthage, Illinois. Without their Prophet, the church members (scattered throughout the East and England) found themselves without guidance or direction, but they were soon reassured through the actions of the Twelve Apostles of the Church under the able leadership of Brigham Young. Schism and factions within the Church soon appeared, the most persistent and persuasive being led by James J. Strang. He claimed to have received divine revelation on the day of Smith's murder and a letter from Smith written nine days before his death and to have discovered and translated ancient brass plates near his Wisconsin home, all recognizing him, appointing him, and anoint-



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*James Jesse Strang about a year before his death.*

ing him Prophet and successor to Joseph Smith.<sup>4</sup> Tensions between the two rival factions heightened as each hurled excommunications at the other. While a majority of Saints upheld the legitimacy of the Brighamites, and eventually moved to Utah after 1847, Strang attracted many of the disgruntled to his "Garden of Peace," Voree, in southeastern Wisconsin.

Between 1845 and 1848 Voree grew rap-

<sup>3</sup>In the following background discussion I rely mainly on these general works: Milo Quaife, *The Kingdom of Saint James* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1930); Doyle C. Fitzpatrick, *The King Strang Story* (Lansing, Michigan, 1970); Henry E. Legler, *Moses of the Mormons* (Milwaukee, 1897); Mark A. Strang, ed. and trans., *The Diary of James J. Strang* (Lansing, Michigan, 1961); Robert P. Weeks, *King Strang* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1971); Robert P. Weeks, "A Utopian Kingdom in the American Grain," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 61:3–20 (Autumn, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>*Chronicles of Voree, 1845–1849*, photostat in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, pp. 1–31; Voree (Wisconsin) *Herald*, January, 1846; James J. Strang, *The Diamond: Being the Law of Prophetic Succession* (Voree, Wisconsin, 1848), chapters 2 and 3, pp. 3–7; Wingfield Watson, ed., *Revelations of James J. Strang* (Spring Prairie, Wisconsin, 18—?), 7–8; Joseph Smith, Jr., to J. Strang, June 18, 1844, in the James J. Strang Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.



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*The cottage built at Voree in 1844 by James Jesse Strang as it appeared in 1933.*

idly as a community, and Strang as a missionary and Prophet of God. His revelations continued to come as needed. On August 25, 1846, Strang experienced a vision in which, "I beheld a land amidst wide waters, and covered with large timber, with a deep, broad bay on one side of it." Strang was describing Big Beaver Island in northern Lake Michigan, a "vision" he may have seen in person that very summer on one of his frequent missionary tours east. Beaver Island offered the room and isolation necessary for the Saints to gather in and for the fulfillment of Strang's "divine" mission.<sup>5</sup>

Exploring the island in early 1847 with four companions, Strang found the surroundings ideal. There were acres of timber, rich soil, plentiful fishing grounds nearby, a good bay with easy ship access, and few Gentile inhabitants. Settlement of Beaver Island and the city of Saint James progressed slowly but steadily;

<sup>5</sup>Watson, ed., *Revelations of Strang*, 11–12; Elizabeth W. Williams, *A Child of the Sea* (Harbor Springs, Michigan, 1905), 61.

by the spring of 1850, the community boasted between six and seven hundred people.<sup>6</sup> At this time, Strang revealed his design for the Church. On July 8, 1850, at the conclusion of several days of conferences, a portion of the newly translated *Book of the Law of the Lord* was read, establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. James J. Strang the Prophet was crowned "King" by George J. Adams, a counselor and ex-theatrical performer, with a metal crown and all the pomp and ceremony that could be mustered.<sup>7</sup>

From this point, Strang's plans unfolded rapidly. The practice of polygamy was introduced; the doctrine of passive resistance to reoccurring Gentile depredations upon the island Mormons was discontinued; and in No-

<sup>6</sup>James J. Strang, *Ancient and Modern Michilimackinac* (St. Ignace, Michigan, 1885), 25.

<sup>7</sup>James J. Strang, *Book of the Law of the Lord* (St. James, Michigan, 1856), chapter 20, pp. 168–169. Cf. "Mrs. Cecilia Hill's Recollections," in Legler, *Moses of the Mormons*, appendix III, 51–53; "Organization of the Kingdom of St. James, July 8, 1850," in the Strang Papers. This document is signed by 234 men and women who witnessed the event.



vember, 1852 and 1853, Strang was elected to the Michigan legislature by Mormon block voting. At the height of his political power in 1853, Strang was nominated by a fellow Michigan legislator as a candidate for the governorship of the Utah Territory. The population of Beaver Island continued to grow, and by 1854 Strang commanded over 2,500 souls, with as many as one thousand more scattered in Voree, Wisconsin, Michigan, and the East.<sup>8</sup>

Yet all was not balmy and peaceful for the King. Gentile opposition to the Mormons persisted over fishing rights, suspected thefts, and the stifled liquor trade with island Indians. Strang and his followers found themselves in court and jail at Detroit and nearby Mackinac Island several times on various criminal charges, and armed encounters occurred at St. James, on the nearby islands, and at Pine River, Michigan.<sup>9</sup> Violence and conflict continued to mount, both within and without the Mormon community, culminating in the assassination of King Strang by two dissatisfied Mormons (aided by two others) on June 16, 1856.<sup>10</sup> Strang lingered for twenty-three days before he died on July 9 at his parent's home in Voree. He purposely did not name his successor. Without Prophet or leader, the Saints on Beaver Island fell victim to hostile Gentile mobs and were driven from the island, never to recover their property or faith. With the death of Strang came the virtual death of his church.

How then did polygamy find its way into Strang's theocratically controlled community of Saints? What are the outward manifestations of this marriage doctrine on Beaver Island which are so intriguing to modern scholars? What was its significance? How was the doctrine received by Saint and Gentile? And, underlying all this, how did Strang's personality and intellectual bent affect the formation of his church and the institution of polygamy?<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>*Census and Statistics of the State of Michigan, May 1854* (Lansing, Michigan, 1854), 403–413. The population for Beaver Island was 2,608, although not all were Mormons. For Strang's nomination as Utah Territorial Governor, see Enos Goodrich to Hon. Chas. E. Stuart, March 7, 1853, in the Strang Papers.

<sup>9</sup>Strang, *Michilimackinac*, 25–40; *Northern Islander* (St. James, Michigan), July 14, 1853.

<sup>10</sup>*Northern Islander*, June 20, 1856. Thomas Bedford, a nonpracticing Mormon, and Alexander Wentworth pulled the triggers.

FOLLOWING the death of Joseph Smith, Jr., in 1844, the dismal schism and dispersion of the Saints, and Strang's establishment of a community at Voree, word circulated among the faithful of both factions that Joseph had established and practiced a plural wife doctrine before his death. While these rumors had surfaced before in Nauvoo in 1835 and brought forth vigorous official denials, now they received more attention and credence, particularly among the Brighamite followers, whose leaders did little to deny the charges or hide the practice.<sup>12</sup>

As Prophet and leader of a smaller group of Mormons, Strang struggled to cement his position and enlarge his following. To demonstrate theological continuity yet observable and attractive differences, Strang attacked Brighamite polygamy as early as 1846 and suppressed the practice within his own flock. During the semiannual conference of the Saints at Voree in April, 1846, Strang officially announced the excommunication of Brighamite leaders, delivering them over "to the buffetings of Satan in the flesh," for teaching, among other things, "that poligamy, fornication, adultery and concubinage are lawful and comendable [*sic*]."<sup>13</sup> The Voree *Herald*, the official church newspaper, carried Strang's curse on ministers of the gospel who taught polygamy: "May their bones rot in the living tomb of their flesh." Official excommunications of Saints believing in or practicing polygamy and spiritual wifery occurred regularly between 1846 and 1848 as Strang struggled to curb the doctrine.<sup>14</sup> In 1847, Strang made his strongest statement against such practices:

I have uniformly and distinctly dis-

<sup>11</sup>For the Mormons, polygamy—or more correctly, polygyny—was a plural marriage for time and eternity, while any other legal marriage was for time only. The spiritual wife doctrine was a spiritual sealing (a marriage or act of binding together forever in a special ceremony) for eternity only. This allowed men to be sealed to any deceased woman who had not been married for eternity, to allow her to enter heaven and to increase his glory and the size of the Church in the next world. Eternal marriage was the only sure way for a woman to attain exaltation. The words polygamy and spiritual wifery were often used interchangeably or without much distinction.

<sup>12</sup>Fawn M. Brody, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York, 1972), 185.

<sup>13</sup>*Chronicles of Voree*, 67, 74.

<sup>14</sup>*Voree Herald*, April, 1846; *Chronicles of Voree*, 107, 130, 149–151, 160. Cf. *Zion's Reville* (Voree, Wisconsin), December, 1846.

carded and declared heretical the so-called "spiritual wife system" and everything connected therewith. . . . I now say distinctly, and I defy contradiction, that the man or woman does not exist on earth, or under earth who ever heard me say one word, or saw me do one act, savoring the least of *spiritual wifery*, or any of the attending abominations. My opinions on this subject are unchanged, and I regard them as unchangeable. They are established on a full consideration of *all* the scriptures, both ancient and modern, and the discipline of the Church *shall* conform thereto.<sup>15</sup>

Despite his "unchangeable" opinions, change he did. Sometime after the Church conference at Voree in April, 1848, Strang sent his emissary, George J. Adams, to reveal a new order to Elvira Eliza Field, an eighteen-year-old school teacher whom Strang had recently met.<sup>16</sup> Elvira was told that the Prophet had received from angels a holy record containing God's laws for the organization of his Kingdom on earth. Since the biblical practice of polygamy was to be restored in that kingdom and Prophet Strang would be acting as King on earth for God, it was necessary for him to set an example. Adams was therefore offering Elvira the distinct honor of becoming the first plural wife of the Prophet and a Queen in the Kingdom. Since the move to Beaver Island had not yet been completed, Strang requested total secrecy in this matter until such time as the fullness of the doctrine should be restored. Out of faith, gullibility, or infatuation with the Prophet (who was said to have had haunting eyes and an impressive impact on people, despite his overlarge forehead), young and attractive Elvira Field accepted the proposal. On July 13, 1849, after a Church conference on Beaver Island, she married Strang in a simple, secret ceremony, unbeknownst to her family. Of the conference, Strang reflected that it was "the most pleasant, interesting and spirited conference that I ever had the happiness to attend."<sup>17</sup> And well it should have been.

<sup>15</sup>Voree *Herald*, August 12, 1847.

<sup>16</sup>The account appears in a memorial booklet of Elvira Field, prepared by her son, Charles J. Strang (1910) and is quoted by Milo Quaife in *The Kingdom of St. James*, 100–102. Cf. Milo Quaife, "Polygamy at Beaver Island," in *Michigan History*, 5:337 (1921).

<sup>17</sup>*Gospel Herald* (Voree, Wisconsin), August 2, 1849.



Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University

Elvira Field as "Charley Douglass."

At this point Strang left Beaver Island in the company of several apostles for a missionary tour to strengthen or reconvert eastern branches of the Mormon Church. Elvira Field completely disappeared from view, only to emerge in Strang's company, shorn of hair, dressed as a man, and traveling as Strang's nephew and private secretary, "Mr. Charles J. Douglass." While several of Strang's apostles surely knew of the wedding, and others speculated on the "physiological peculiarities" of the young man, Charlie Douglass succeeded in fooling most people for quite some time. Her performance, along with Strang's audacity under fire was convincing enough in November, 1849, to weather a potentially devastating challenge which occurred at a conference in New York City. At that meeting, Strang was publicly accosted by Lorenzo Dow Hickey and Increase Van Deusen, who charged him with "adultery, fornication, spiritual wifery, and all

the abominations that were ever practiced at Nauvoo." Hickey claimed to have letters from his wife on Beaver Island reporting such reliable gossip, but the next day when Strang loudly denied the charges and called to see the letters, Hickey backed down. Van Deusen was permanently excommunicated after a trial by a church council. Hickey was disfellowshipped, but eventually accepted back on his own recognizance and repentance. Certainly, if Hickey and others had positive proof that Charlie Douglass was indeed a woman they could have pointed her out, for she was recording the minutes of the meeting for the church newspaper.<sup>18</sup> However, given that the accusation and trial took place on two separate days, that Hickey got off so lightly and rose to prominent leadership, that he was well aware of the doctrine one month later, and that he eventually took three additional wives himself, we can speculate that Hickey was confronted with the truth by Strang or others and was asked to withdraw his statements for the good of the Prophet and the Church.<sup>19</sup>

Faced with this widely publicized scandal and the persistent gossip months later that "your clerk was in the habit of wearing petticoats until very recently," Strang maintained his course with a mixture of anger and wounded dignity, putting the burden of proof of Charlie's gender on his accusers.<sup>20</sup> Strang attempted to dismiss the rumors as the gossip of character assassins and "pseudo Mormons," yet went to great lengths to find out who started the rumors which culminated in Hickey's outburst. Between December, 1849, and February, 1850, a series of letters passed between Strang and the rumorers in which everyone blamed someone else or denied words attributed to them. In this confusing tangle of correspondence with eastern church members, Strang's concern became apparent to all involved. Amos Lowen replied to Strang's inquiries as to the situation in New York in January, 1850:

The story about Charlie had died away I

thought, but has been revived again. [John Urshbruch] (Peter [Hess] says) declares positively that he is able to prove his first assertion: Tom Braidwood believes that *Charles is a woman*. He laughs and winks when the name Charles D[o]uglass is mentioned.

"The matter gives me no concern," Lowen continued, "and I would not have alluded to it but for your enquiry."<sup>21</sup> Unlike Lowen, Strang's concern was genuine. Already, many eastern members had broken from his fold to rejoin the Brighamite Mormons or other sects. Charlie was becoming recognized for what she was. Whether or not Strang was forced to speed up his plans for the institution of the Kingdom (and polygamy) is uncertain, but his preparations were well advanced. Migration to Beaver Island had progressed as planned, and the city of St. James, soon to be the official headquarters of the Church, was taking shape. On Beaver Island Strang would be free from the prying eyes of Gentile neighbors and "pseudo Mormons," free from harassment, free to turn his dreams of power into reality.

ON July 8, 1850, in the uncompleted tabernacle, the Prophet revealed the plans for God's kingdom on earth to the assembled Saints, and was crowned "King," according to revelation: "He hath chosen his servant James to be King. . . . He hath established him a Prophet above the Kings of the earth." Among other doctrines, Strang read Chapter 44 from the *Book of the Law*, which established and outlined the practice of plural marriage and spiritual wifery: "Thou shalt be fruitful and multiply and replenish the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and subdue it."<sup>22</sup> The disguise was finally shed, and Elvira Field was reborn to the world in all her royal glory.

The justification for polygamy was relatively simple and expounded as vigorously as it had once been condemned. Strang (and

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, November 22, 1849. Cf. Trial Record of Hickey and Van Deusen, 1849, and I. Van Deusen to Strang, December 19, 1849, both in the Strang Papers.

<sup>19</sup>L. D. Hickey to J. J. Strang, December 24, 1849, in the Strang Papers. Cf. John Cumming, "Lorenzo Dow Hickey," in *Michigan History*, 50:58 (1966).

<sup>20</sup>Gilbert Watson to J. Strang, February 11, 1850, in the Strang Papers.

<sup>21</sup>Amos Lowen to J. Strang, January 10, 1850. Cf. Strang to Amos Lowen, November 21, 1849; Strang to John Urshbruch, November 20, 1849; Peter Hess to J. Strang, November 22, 1849; James and Clarissa Canny to J. Strang, June 16, 1850, all in the Strang Papers.

<sup>22</sup>Strang, *Book of the Law*, 168–169, 310–328. Spiritual wifery appears on page 318.



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*The bleak remains of a Mormon home remind visitors of the Strangite settlement on Beaver Island some fifty years earlier.*

later Wingfield Watson, a contemporary Mormon, defender of the faith, and apostle) contended that polygamy had biblical roots in such God-approved men as David, Abraham, Jacob, Saul, Gideon, and others. Only when carried to unrighteous extremes or practiced for the wrong reasons was polygamy condemned and removed from earth. Polygamy was never abolished in the Apostolic Church by divine authority, only by canon or statute. Even Martin Luther and Melancthon rationalized the practice.<sup>23</sup> Strang argued that the law, as given, prevented abuse by defining the limits of polygamy: "Thou shalt not take unto thee a multitude of wives disproportioned to thy inheritance, and thy substance: nor . . . to vex those thou hast . . ." and "thou shalt not go after strange women . . .", among other restraints.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, following God's law concerning polygamy and spiritual wifery was beneficial. It increased the eternal glory of the participants,

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 318–328, contains Strang's commentary on the text. Cf. Wingfield Watson, *Prophetic Controversy No. 5* (Lyons, Wisconsin, 1901).

<sup>24</sup>Strang, *Book of the Law*, 310–311.

allowed the surplus of women an opportunity to marry better than they might have otherwise and attain celestial glory, increased the number of "souls" in the Church, halted prostitution, and promoted chastity. Wingfield Watson listed other benefits of polygamy in typical Mormon fashion:

It [polygamy] gives health and strength, and beauty of form, and soundness of constitution to fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. . . . For where several women are willing to share the affections of one man, possessed of every excellence, their dispositions must necessarily be socially and morally good, and they would therefore be very likely to hand down these excellent traits to their posterity.<sup>25</sup>

Such a large and "excellent" posterity would also serve to enhance the glory and immortality of the parents. But transcending all justifications and purported benefits, polygamy had been restored by the word of God

<sup>25</sup>Watson, *Prophetic Controversy No. 5*, 23. On Beaver Island in 1854 the so-called "surplus" of women was indeed small. *Census and Statistics*, 403–413.



through Strang and was not to be questioned. Strang had played his trump card. He had established his kingdom on his own terms and had legitimized his sexual practice and his theocratic position as undisputed Prophet and King of the Strangites.

The reaction of the Saints to polygamy varied, yet the vast majority must have accepted this revelation and followed the King, whether blindly or grudgingly. The absence of newspaper reports indicates two things: that Strang desired to keep his pronouncement from reaching the mainland press, and, as revealed in an unusually quiet church record, that there was no widespread dissatisfaction to condemn. Yet dissatisfaction did exist, and soon after the announcement three prominent members in Voree—Jason W. Briggs, Henry H. Deam, and Zenas H. Gurley, Sr.—repudiated Strang and the polygamy doctrine and established the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup> Other dissatisfied members of the Voree community followed their lead and split with Strang's church, but the defection was neither widespread nor noisy.

The decision whether or not to practice polygamy ultimately lay within the male prerogative. But it was the Mormon woman and wife who had to give of herself, her feelings and emotions, accommodate and accept the new lifestyle imposed on her without much choice or face divine wrath. While polygamy was promoted as a great benefit for women, as well as for the family and community (and indeed there were positive aspects recognized by women), it also represented an unprecedented loss of status for women during a period of generally rising female status.<sup>27</sup> Mormon women were scripturally bound to accept polygamy, were dependent on men and marriage as their only avenue to heaven, and were held in that position by fear of eternal damnation. It is hard to tell how widespread this perception was among Strangite women, but like their Utah sisters, they did recognize their plight.

**W**OMEN'S reactions to the announcement varied from immediate rejection to solid support, with the majority apparently falling into a central category of doctrinal acceptance but practical re-

sistance. Ann Davis Hickey, who had been married to Lorenzo D. Hickey for over eight years, was the first to reject the doctrine openly in 1850 by returning to her parents' home in Lapeer, Michigan, and never rejoining her husband. Mary Perce Strang continued to live with the Prophet for many months and was made a member of his council in an attempt to pacify her, but she eventually became bitter and left (or was asked to leave) the island in May, 1851.<sup>28</sup> How long she had known about Elvira Field before Strang's disclosure is uncertain, but an intelligent woman like Mary surely could not have been fooled for long by the sudden appearance of a new nephew and private secretary. As late as October, 1855, Strang emphatically denied that he and Mary were separated, stating that she ran his farm in Wisconsin and "occasionally" spent the winter with him at the state capitol or "on this Island."<sup>29</sup> Apparently this was wistful thinking mixed with moral defensiveness and a sense of loss on Strang's part, for Mary never returned to him.

Mary Perce was not Strang's only wife to feel this way. Writing eighty years later, Eugena Strang, daughter of Strang's fourth polygamous wife, Phoebe Wright, recalled that "Mother had lived with father only eight months when he died, but even then she had begun to feel dissatisfied with polygamy, though she loved him devotedly all her life."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Quaife, *The Kingdom of St. James*, 113–114. Cf. "Minutes of the Conferences of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Beaver Island, Michigan, 1847–1855," p. 38, microfilm copy in the Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

<sup>27</sup>Kathleen Marquis, "'Diamond Cut Diamond': Mormon Women and the Cult of Domesticity in the Nineteenth Century," in *Papers in Women's Studies* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1976), 111–113. Marquis lists recognized benefits such as less housework, a better economic situation, more independence from the husband, and the positive affects on children and the family. For a Utah Mormon woman's defense of polygamy, see *Northern Islander*, June 8, 1854.

<sup>28</sup>Samuel Graham claimed that Strang ordered Mary from the island. Graham agreed with Strang's order but chided him for placing her on the council in the first place when he knew her existing attitudes. Graham to Strang, July 20, 1850, July 8, 1851, July 10, 1851, in the Strang Papers.

<sup>29</sup>*Northern Islander*, October 11, 1855. According to Fitzpatrick, *The King Strang Story*, 118, Mary moved to Elgin, Illinois, in 1851. Cf. Hyrum Brown to Mary Strang, August 6, 1851, in the Strang Papers.

<sup>30</sup>Eugena Strang to Hazel Strang McCardell, June 6, 1936, as cited in Fitzpatrick, *The King Strang Story*, 84.

It is not surprising that an eighteen-year-old bride could feel dissatisfaction with the prospects of sharing her husband forever. Phoebe Wright never remarried.

Two other women, Mrs. Thomas Bedford and Mrs. Alexander Wentworth, also expressed dissatisfaction with polygamy and the Kingdom in general and the policies concerning clothing in particular. According to the revelation that, "Ye shall not clothe yourselves after the manner of the follies of other men. . . ." Strang imposed a dress code upon women specifically, doing away with frilly, long and tight-bodied fashions, for reasons of health, cleanliness, economy, and humility. He introduced instead a Turkish-style of dress—a short skirt and pantalet trousers. At about the same time, this costume came into fashion among suffragettes in the East. Named after Amelia Bloomer, the "Bloomer costume" was seen as a liberating fashion, but on Beaver Island the imposition of this costume gave it a different connotation. An unusual characteristic of Mormon women, the costume was frequently mentioned by visitors to the island.<sup>31</sup> Mrs. Bedford's refusal to conform to this code brought open criticism from the church press, and heated an existing personal conflict, leading ultimately to Strang's assassination at the hands of her husband and Alexander Wentworth.<sup>32</sup>

Despite individual manifestations of dissatisfaction, the community as a whole accepted Strang's doctrines, which proved desirable enough to attract four intelligent women to Strang alone. Clement Strang records that his mother, Elvira Field, never expressed any jealous feeling or dissatisfaction with Strang or his household. Late in her life, Sarah Wright Wing, Strang's third polygamous wife, described Strang's household to Milo Quaife in terms suggesting no dissatisfaction: "You ask if we all lived in the same house—we did but had separate rooms—and all met in prayer and ate at the same table—he [Strang] was a very mild-spoken, kind man to his family, although his word was law—we were all honest

in our religion and made things as pleasant as possible."<sup>33</sup> Strang's household probably exemplified polygamy at its best, but there is no reason to believe that other polygamous wives could not enjoy similar experiences.

While the internal peace of the Strangite community was disrupted momentarily by the announcement of polygamy and the resulting schism of some respected wives and members, the Saints continued to grow and prosper on Beaver Island, and by 1855 were colonizing the Michigan mainland. King Strang exhorted his Saints at every opportunity to follow the laws of the Kingdom (which included polygamy). At the April conference, 1851, Strang spoke "at considerable length" on the law of the Kingdom of God. During the celebration of "King's Day," July 8, 1852, the official minutes report that

Pres. Strang made some remarks on the subject of Matrimony and the sealing order. That it was necessary . . . in order to keep up the relation of Husbands and Wives and Parents and Children in time and in eternity.

The order of Sealing next attended to.

The next day, "Bro. [Samuel P.] Bacon read the 35th Chapter of the Book of the Law. . . . Preaching by Pres. Strang on the subject of marriage and the Sealing Power."<sup>34</sup> Strang understood the necessity of a constant barrage to reinforce the doctrine and to build up his power and kingdom on earth.

**R**ECORDS of actual polygamists on Beaver Island and the mainland are scant, but several names and families appear prominently. Understandably, the most complete record is of James Strang's polygamous situation. Strang took four polygamous wives in addition to his first legal wife, Mary Perce, whom he married on November 10, 1836. The first was nineteen-year-old Elvira Field in 1849, followed by thirty-one-

<sup>31</sup>Strang, *Book of the Law*, chapter 39, p. 288; *Northern Islander*, May 15, 1851, August 12, 1852; Memoir of E. S. Stone, as recorded in Legler, *Moses of the Mormons*, appendix V, 55. For information on the Bloomer movement, see D. C. Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer* (Boston, 1895), 65, passim.

<sup>32</sup>*Northern Islander*, May 1, June 20, 1856.

<sup>33</sup>Clement J. Strang, "Why I Am Not a Strangite," in *Michigan History*, 29:458 (1942); Sarah A. Wing to Milo Quaife (1920), as cited in Quaife, *The Kingdom of St. James* 107–108.

<sup>34</sup>"Minutes of the Conferences," 31, 38–39. The thirty-fifth chapter of the *Book of the Law*, 207, 211, deals with "Establishment of the Law," and commentary on polygamous relationships. "Seal," as used by the Mormon Church, is defined in footnote 11, above.



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"King James's" castle stands, ravaged by the elements, about forty-five years after Strang's death.

year-old Betsy McNutt on January 19, 1852, and finally two cousins, nineteen-year-old Sarah A. Wright on July 15, 1855, and eighteen-year-old Phoebe Wright on October 27, 1855. All of his wives were young and reputed to be quite attractive, with the exception of Betsy McNutt. The story is told that Betsy, being teased at a social function about her advanced age and single status, declared that there was but one man she would marry. It became evident that she had the Prophet in mind. Informed of the situation, Strang supposedly married her out of a sense of "galantry,"<sup>35</sup> but more probably to maintain the illusion that polygamy was for all, not just for the young and beautiful. Strang fathered a total of fourteen children, with one being born to each of his polygamous wives after his death in 1856.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup>From interview with Wingfield Watson, cited in Quaife, *The Kingdom of St. James*, 111.

Up to the present, little was known of the other polygamous unions which Wingfield Watson estimated to be engaged in by sixteen to twenty men. Yet records made in the *Minute Book of the Church* at Beaver Island, hitherto unnoted by previous scholars, reveal the names of four other polygamous males and their wives. Lorenzo D. Hickey's three polygamous sealings (or marriages) are typical of those found in the book:

Sealed at South Troy July 13, 1853 by Samuel P. Bacon one of the Twelve [,] Sarah Ann Sinnell [?] to Lorenzo Dow Hickey for life the reserrection and the life everlasting. Also October 1853 by George Miller, Frances Brownson Sealed to L. D. Hickey for life the reserrection and the life everlasting [O]n the 26th of July 1855 by James J. Strang

<sup>36</sup>Mary Perce gave birth to four children, one dying in infancy; Elvira had four, one dying in infancy; Betsy had four; Sarah and Phoebe each had one child. After Strang's death, only Elvira and Sarah remarried.

Pres. of the Church [,] Adaline S. Scott was sealed to L. D. Hickey for life the resurrection and the life everlasting.<sup>37</sup>

George Miller's sealings are listed in similar manner, with Strang sealing his lawful wife, Mary Catherine Fry, and his first polygamous wife, Elizabeth Boutan, to him on March 3, 1851, followed by the sealing of Martha Ann Bagley to him on January 29, 1853.<sup>38</sup> Two other unions "for life the resurrection [*sic*] and the life everlasting" appear in the record. Samuel C. Wright was sealed to his lawful wife, Rebecca Finch, and another, Edna Chidister, on October 12, 1851, while on July 10, 1852, David Heath was sealed to his lawful wife, Margaret Sitty, and Sarah Ann Chalmers.<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that the last two entries closely followed conferences wherein Strang preached the marriage doctrine. While this record is in no way a complete listing of polygamous unions (for Strang and the reported "others" who took one additional wife do not appear), it does provide a porthole view of Strangite polygamists.

Of particular interest are the more numerous entries of strictly spiritual sealings for eternity only. It appears that spiritual wifery and the sealing of children, both dead and alive, was performed regularly after 1850. Women often allowed their husbands to be sealed to deceased women and shared in the experience by standing proxy for them. In some cases, as frequently occurred in Utah polygamy, the man was sealed to his wife's sister or other relative. Below are some examples from the record:

James M. Greig . . . sealed to Secinda Thompson Deceased. Ellen O. Greig [his wife] stood proxy for her. Children sealed. Charles C., Ellen E., Caroline M., and Mary A. deceased.

Hyrum G. Hall and Serena H. Seynde Sealed as man and wife for time and eternity. Also Hannah B. Seynde deceased. Sealed. Serena H. Hally Proxy for Hannah B. Seynde.

The Deceased Children of Sr. Porter's

<sup>37</sup>"Minutes of the Conferences," 62. Hickey was sealed to his first wife, Ann Davis, in October, 1851, probably by proxy. *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 52, 58, 61. In all of the following sealings the first wife was legally married prior to the sealing for eternity.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 53–54.

were sealed to James J. Strang, Elizabeth, Samuel, Emely-Ann, Charlana, Victory Elizabeth, Sirenn and James.<sup>40</sup>

A more unusual and unexplained spiritual practice recorded is the sealing of entire families at once to Apostles of the Church, a practice apparently unique to the Strangites.

On the of 1853, [*sic*] Warren Post Sealed Charles Kendal and his family to M. M. Aldrich sen. that he might be their prince forever.

October 1853 by Warren Post one of the Twelve [,] John Sinnell dead [,] George Brownson Proxy [,] his wife Betsy Sinnell and Chester Sinnell their son were joined to L. D. Hickey's house hold for life the resurrection and the life everlasting and he is to stand a prince for them.<sup>41</sup>

Possibly these sealings occurred individually and were recorded as one, but the noticeable difference in wording gives the passages a unique tone.

According to the record and accepted practice, sealings, whether for the first legal wife or the third spiritual or plural wife, were always conducted by Strang or his apostles, as were baptisms for the dead and other spiritual rituals. Only worthy men were allowed to have women and children sealed to them—never the reverse—and sealings probably took place in the unfinished tabernacle or other appropriate spots on the island and mainland.

Spiritual sealings to more than one woman were probably more widely accepted and practiced by the body of the Church than actual earthly polygamous unions for several reasons. Earthly polygamy required a financial as well as an emotional commitment, and the impoverished state of many Saints in the early years on Beaver Island proved prohibitive. And, men were encouraged to gain the tacit approval of their first wife and to be called to the practice by the Prophet. Surely a number of men were dissuaded by the tears of their wives and by Strang's tough stance on improper marriages and adultery, as demonstrated in the case of his compatriot, George Adams.<sup>42</sup> There was also probably an element

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 51, 50, 53. Strang's interest in increasing his eternal posterity and glory is clearly demonstrated in this last example.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 56–57, 62.

<sup>42</sup>George J. Adams returned to Beaver Island from Baltimore in August, 1850, with a woman of "question-



of fear involved in the decision to take an additional wife—fear of Gentile neighbors, of the civil law, and of conflict within the home itself. A spiritual wife could be easily concealed and was not flagrantly illegal; a polygamous one was.

Polygamy was more demanding than spiritual wifery, was more socially and financially restrictive, and was, more importantly, limited in its expansion by time. Polygamy existed publicly for six years, years of physical community building and poverty for most Saints on Beaver Island. It is not surprising then that less than twenty in an estimated five hundred-plus Mormon families practiced polygamy, and that devout followers turned instead to spiritual wifery to ensure their glory.

**H**OWEVER successful Strang was in convincing and controlling his own followers, one unsubdued and hostile clique remained: the Gentiles of Beaver Island, Mackinac Island, and the mainland. The hostility did not really focus on the Strangites for their marriage practices; such charges, when infrequently made, were usually allusions to such practices rather than open attacks upon them. The battle between Gentile and Saint raged over more worldly issues—politics, land, fishing rights, liquor sales, laws and infractions of the law—prompted by a basic fear and misunderstanding of each other. Why such silence on this issue when Utah Mormon polygamy was drawing front page notice? Again, the answer lies in Strang's shrewd handling of the situation. Only when Strang reached the isolation of Beaver Island, away from the prying eyes of the world, did he announce polygamy, and even then he publicly maintained a low profile on the situation. Reflecting Strang's orders, Amos Lowen wrote from New York, "As to the cry of polygamy against us I will neither deny or affirm at present. But the time is at hand

able character," Louisa Pray, alias Louisa Cogswell, whom he introduced as his new wife, stating that the former Mrs. Adams had died. Eventually, the real Mrs. Adams wrote from New Jersey where she had been abandoned in her illness. Adams and his "lady" were soon forced off the island and out of the Church. *Northern Islander*, December 12, 1850. For a fascinating account of Adams's further career, see Peter Amann, "Prophet in Zion: The Sage of George J. Adams," in the *New England Quarterly*, 37:477–500 (1964).

when I shall publicly avow the doctrine and I expect to make more converts to the faith than I ever have before."<sup>43</sup> Even residents of areas in relatively close contact with the islanders, such as Green Bay, Wisconsin, barely had an inkling of the marriage practice.<sup>44</sup>

Despite its isolation, tales and rumors of Mormon polygamy slowly spread from those who visited Beaver Island. The imaginative United States District Attorney, George C. Bates, luridly described the inside of Strang's house during a raid to arrest him in 1851: "We entered a long low room, where wide berths, heavily draped with stunning calico, shielded the beds like the berths and state-rooms of steamers, which proved to be occupied by Mormon women four in a bed. . . ."<sup>45</sup> Other equally exaggerated memoirs of Strang's "harem" appeared at intervals on into the twentieth century. Regional newspapers took the lead in contemporary Gentile speculation. In November, 1850, a Cleveland newspaper which hinted at polygamous practices and the Strang-Field (Charlie Douglass) connection was met with this reply from the church newspaper, *The Northern Islander*: "We can see no importance in the discovery that Strang's private secretary is Mr. Charles Douglass. What has Mr. Douglass ever done that Strang should not appoint him secretary? And whose business is it if he is enamored of Almira Field? [*sic*] Who has a better right?"<sup>46</sup> The facade of Strang's newspaper remained cool and indignant as it suffered a direct hit. Other insinuations, by the *Pontiac Gazette* (Michigan) in particular, brought equally indignant and elusive replies. Only in October, 1855, did an attack draw a direct rebuttal and "confession" from Strang regarding his other wives, "whom I would marry if the law permitted me."<sup>47</sup>

Given the situation of the Brighamite Mormons and their struggle in Congress and in

<sup>43</sup>Amos Lowen to J. Strang, December 7, 1850, in the Strang Papers.

<sup>44</sup>For a discussion of the Green Bay *Advocate* and the Mormons, see Charles O. Burgess, "Green Bay and the Mormons of Beaver Island," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 42:39–49 (1958).

<sup>45</sup>George C. Bates, "The Beaver Island Prophet," in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collection* (1902), 32:231. This description is highly unlikely to be true since Strang had only one wife living with him at the time.

<sup>46</sup>*Northern Islander*, January 9, 1851.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, October 11, 1855. Polygamous wives were not considered to be "legally" married, even by Strang.

the national press over polygamy, the attacks on the Strangite institution appear almost nonexistent by comparison. Their nearest Gentile neighbors were too busy arguing over economic and legal issues, and the press was preoccupied with polygamy in Utah, as were writers like Samuel Clemens, Sir Richard Burton, and their readers. Shrewdly, the King dissociated his group from the Utah Saints and maneuvered his small island clear of national attention.

In keeping the island protected from close scrutiny, Strang did not intend to remove himself and his newspaper from the larger polygamy debate. He had too much at stake and was too much of a debater to let the issue be one-sidedly mauled. While hostility existed between the two sister churches over succession, leadership, and divine revelation, traces of a commonality of experience shone through in the *Northern Islander's* frequent defense of Utah polygamy and in statements that both groups were persecuted solely because they were "Mormons." The mentality that "there is no *legal protection* to a Mormon" permeated their collective consciousness and affected their similar responses to the Gentile world.<sup>48</sup> Brighamites and Strangites may have approached polygamy from different direc-

tions, but their reactions, practices, and justifications were remarkably similar.<sup>49</sup>

UP to this point, polygamy as practiced by the Strangite Mormons has been described in narrative fashion, accepting the practice as ordained by "divine revelation," taking Strang at his word, and describing the institution and its historical manifestations in those terms. Yet the realm of the divine is a tightrope for the historian: hagiography on one side, cynicism and skepticism on the other. If Strang truly was a prophet, the world has lost the truth; and if not, the world has only gained more hard-knock experience from his (and other "prophets' ") failures. Putting the divine aside, it is necessary to look

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, April 3, 1851, July 29, September 9, 1852. For defenses of polygamy as an institution, see *ibid.*, March 4, 1852, March 2, June 8, 1854, June 14, 1855.

<sup>49</sup>For Smith's revelation, see Joseph Smith, trans., *The Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1876), sec. 132, pp. 423–432. Cf. Brigham H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (6 volumes, Provo, Utah, 1965), 4:55–59, 5:295–300. For an interesting statistical analysis of Utah polygamy, see Stanley S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 35:309–321 (1967).



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*The heavily forested shoreline of Beaver Island helped to seclude Strang's community.*

deeper into James J. Strang, the man, to understand polygamy and his career. We need to ask how and why he arrived at this point, and look to his relationship with the Mormon Church and Joseph Smith, Jr., to find the inspiration for his theocratic movement. While drawing lines of correlation, individual mentality, and intent from historical sources is admittedly tenuous at times, such an investigation of Strang merits historical consideration and speculation.

"From my infancy," Strang records, "I have been taught that mankind were totally depraved, and my own observations and experience have demonstrated that the heart of man is an impure fountain from which bitter waters are perpetually flowing."<sup>50</sup> Such was the experience of a precocious and intelligent young boy growing up in the "Burned-over District" of frontier New York. Writing in 1855, Strang recalled that for "long weary days I sat upon the floor, thinking, thinking, thinking! occasionally asking a strange, infantile question. . . . My mind wandered over fields that old men shrink from . . .," pondering life until "my head ached."<sup>51</sup> His formal schooling was meager and his physical health weak, but he managed to obtain a surprising amount of independent book-learning and to dominate local debating clubs with his thought and voice. He was intellectually aggressive by nature and became increasingly more aggressive to compensate for his physical weakness.

Strang read widely, but he was particularly impressed by the work of a leading figure in what has been termed the "Revolutionary Enlightenment" in Europe and America. The Comte Constantin de Volney, in his popular treatise, *Ruins* (1791), blamed the decline of past civilizations on the corruptions of kings and priests, "and the depressing doctrines of gloomy religions." Volney looked for a utopian, universal religion to replace the old order—a sort of "secular millennialism"—but was disappointed by the failure of his theory in practice in revolutionary France. While his ideas, and the ideas of the Revolutionary Enlightenment in general, made little lasting

headway against the strong current of American Protestantism, his "enlightened" regard for science and skepticism of religion deeply influenced Strang.<sup>52</sup>

Yet book-learning alone did not satisfy Strang, and at age fifteen he turned to field observations in biology. Mark Strang, his grandson, notes that his observations were "directed toward the procreative process" and natural "sexual union." Expecting to find the law of "species perpetuation" in command, Strang arrived at his own "law of Happiness,"—the pleasure of all species in the physical activity of reproduction. During this period Strang became so attracted to an unwed mother named Nancy Crawford "that I almost thought her part of myse[l]f," and he talked openly of marriage.<sup>53</sup> But in this he was thwarted by the objections of his parents, their enrollment of him in the Fredonia Male Academy, and Nancy's engagement to another man. It seems probable that this relationship affected his experience with and disposition towards love, and his romantic biological theory.

Strang recorded this incident at a time four years later (1832) when he was embroiled in another threatening entanglement with a married woman, Mary Draper Torrance. In a ciphered paragraph he described the situation and his sexual and emotional frustration: "*she had kissed me a number of times and I should have returned the compliment had it not been for the consequences. I really wanted to do the other thing and believe I might have done it too by careful management if I had tried. . . . But I am somewhat inclined to a certain evil which is easier avoided than correct[ed]. I am fond of female company.*"<sup>54</sup> One month later, after this publicized "affair" (as he termed it) had blown over, Strang again expressed serious consideration of matrimony and was again frustrated. His amorous disappointments and designs put aside for the moment (but never far from his mind), Strang concentrated on his law studies, until in 1836 he met and courted Mary Perce. After two dis-

<sup>52</sup>Strang, ed., *Diary*, 3; Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), 168, *passim*.

<sup>53</sup>Strang, ed., *Diary*, xxiv–xxv, 12–13 (coded). Strang wrote much of his diary in a code which has been translated by his grandson, Mark A. Strang. Coded passages will be italicized and cited as such in the footnote. It is interesting to note that the most provocative and revealing passages are in this code. Apparently Strang wanted no one to know his secret thoughts.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 12 (coded).

<sup>50</sup>Strang, ed., *Diary*, 21. The diary covers the years 1831–1836, with a flashback to 1828. Strang was fifteen to twenty-three years old during this period.

<sup>51</sup>James J. Strang, *Ancestry and Childhood of James J. Strang* (1855), as published in Legler, *Moses of the Mormons*, appendix I, 38.

couraging "interviews," Strang wrote emphatically: "*By heavens she is mine. I will steal her heart in an hour she thinks not. I know she can and must and will love me. . . . I know I shall finally conquer.*"<sup>55</sup> After coming to his biological theory of "Happiness" at age fifteen, after the repeated disappointments and rebuffs of earlier loves, Strang finally did conquer a woman; it was a conquest and a feeling he would long remember, and would repeat four more times.

**B**UT Strang had more important things on his mind than mere love. Throughout his diary run the constant themes of a search for political power and fame. His words and plans ring with a thinly concealed megalomania:

I am 19 years old and am yet no more than a common farmer. 'Tis too bad. I ought to have been a member of Assembly or a Brigadier General before this time if I am ever to rival *Cesar or Napoleon* which I have sworn to.

The winter season is now nearly past and I am sorry I have not made more improvements in preparing for my great designs (*of revolutionizing governments and contrie[s]*). . . .<sup>56</sup>

During the South Carolina Nullification Crisis of 1831–1833, Strang envisioned "revolutionizing" the United States' government: "*Amidst all the evils of the disturbances of our national affairs there is one consolation: that is if our government is overthrown some master spirit may form another. May I be the one. I tremble when I write but it is true.*"<sup>57</sup> His plans to marry were overshadowed by "*dreams of empire*," he talked of foreign intrigue and marriage to the heir to England (Victoria), and his dreams were of "*royalty and power.*" "*O! if I was King of England I would try my fortune in the bloody field.*"<sup>58</sup> Given the seemingly premeditated course of Strang's later life, his dreams and words were more than innocent flights of fancy. By 1835, at age twenty-two, his resolve was firmly stated, his goals fixed: "January 1st [1835]. I have rejoiced in the sunshine



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*James Strang's daughter Nettie.*

and smiled in the shade of another year. It is gone. I hope not lost. But it is gone in the way of the world and passed as others have passed their days who have died in obscurity. Curse me eternally if that be my fate. I know it is in my power to make it otherwise."<sup>59</sup>

A career proper to such plans for greatness played incessantly in Strang's thoughts. While he desired power and fame, he also earnestly desired "to [devote] my life to the service of mankind." Sometime prior to August, 1832, Strang "took a resolution . . . to be a *Priest, a Lawyer, a Conqueror, and a Legislator* unless I find better business."<sup>60</sup> He apparently could find no "better business" than the eerie combination of all four in the form of Prophet-King James J. Strang.

But Strang voiced strong reservations about priests and about religion in general. A not-very-devout member of the Baptist faith, raised during a period of religious revival and fervor, Strang watched as the Second Great Awakening changed individuals and society

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 62–63 (coded).

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 17, 15 (code italicized).

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 32 (coded).

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 15, 18–19, 34 (all coded). In fact, when he did become "King," he halted passive resistance and took the field on several occasions against his Gentile adversaries.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 50–51.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 9, 22 (code italicized).



all around him. Instead of being swept up in this intense religious wave (which he noted in his diary with evident disdain), Strang turned to science and empirical reason, and soon came to question religious dogma, evidence, and the nature of God. During his early biological investigations, Strang seems to have come to his own conceptualization of God as a Principle, the single primordial cause—the Spirit of Nature.<sup>61</sup> In 1832 he wrote, “*I am a perfect atheist . . .*,” a fact that his son, Clement Strang, and grandson, Mark Strang, felt compelled to believe. Strang confided to his diary that he prayed “*just to please people.*” “*It is all a mere mock of sounds with me for I can no longer believe the nice speculative contradictions of our divine theologians of our age.*”<sup>62</sup> His pronouncement on the clergy is none too kind given his later “resolution” and the course of his life. “*Sometimes,*” Strang wrote, “*I have almost a mind to become a priest but that i[s] to[o] small business for me. Cursed is every man and beast he has subjected.*”<sup>63</sup>

For eight years, from 1836 to 1844, the record of James Strang’s thought is almost silent. But the time spent as a lawyer, postmaster, lecturer, editor, and father in a frontier New York county could only have intensified the ambition of a man who once wrote, “I should rather be the best hunter in an Indian tribe than a common place member of the New York bar.”<sup>64</sup> Then in 1843–1844, dissatisfied with his work and his life, Strang moved to Wisconsin in search of a new start and new opportunities. It was at this important juncture in his life that Strang became aware of the Mormon Church and the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr.

Strang’s comments on Smith in an 1848 eulogy reveal how he instinctively perceived the Prophet in 1844: “Joseph Smith was a very illiterate boy, as uncouth in manner and expression as one could well be, and, in fact, profoundly ignorant on all subjects without exception. . . .”<sup>65</sup> Strang looked at Smith and saw a man more than seven years his elder, his

inferior in education, oratory, and natural talent, who had become the unchallenged prophet of over ten thousand devout followers, the builder and military leader of a city, and a presidential candidate—all within fourteen years’ time. The opportunities appeared unlimited for a more talented man who was obsessed with power and fame, who recognized the overwhelming power of religious fervor and the frailty of mankind. Strang was shrewd enough to see that the path to his dreams lay through this church, at least for a moment. What might have happened had Smith not been killed three months later remains a mystery. But Strang was quite prepared even when the time came so suddenly. He moved swiftly, with power and audacity, toward his destiny, assured of his superior intellect, eloquence, and plan for control.

STRANG patterned his career very closely after that of Joseph Smith, using the age-old devices of magic, mystery, and miracle to capture faith. He proceeded to have divine visitations and revelations. He was given sacred brass plates and the biblical peep stones, Urim and Thummin, to translate them. He set out to establish a city and even a kingdom, and was given the “sealed” section of Smith’s *Book of Mormon*—the “Plates of Laban”—which outlined his theocratic kingdom on earth. He strove for public office and protection for his followers, and he was eventually assassinated, leaving his church without a successor. The parallels are too great to be coincidence rather than a carefully orchestrated plan—all, that is, except his own murder.

But to say that Strang blindly followed Joseph Smith’s lead in instituting polygamy and the Kingdom would be to underestimate a complex character. Strang knew of Joseph’s practices by December, 1846, at the latest, and probably well before. His early condemnation of polygamy served as an effective means of attracting followers and drawing a distinct dividing line theologically between his church and that of Brigham Young. Possibly these were years of personal inner conflict over the issue. Torn between his drive for power and control and his love for his wife, Strang lashed out vehemently against polygamy. His denunciation was a reaction rather than a positive

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 21–22, Mark Strang’s commentary is in footnote 17. Cf. *ibid.*, 10–12, 35–36.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 21, 10 (coded). Cf. Clement Strang, “Why I Am Not a Strangite,” 463.

<sup>63</sup>Strang, ed., *Diary*, 19 (coded).

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 27–28.

<sup>65</sup>*Gospel Herald*, 1848, as cited in Fitzpatrick, *The King Strang Story*, 40.

action. Whatever the case, Strang's anti-polygamy stance proved expedient only as a short-term device.

Strang also recognized the necessity of physically removing his flock from close contact with the Gentiles before announcing polygamy. He saw what was happening to the Brighamites with only the rumors of polygamy floating about and knew he must wait. Besides, once the Saints had settled on the island, they would be less likely (and less able physically and financially) to pack up again and leave if they were slightly dissatisfied with the doctrine. With Beaver Island under colonization and his own power growing more secure, Strang could then complete his plan by establishing the Kingdom. His alteration of an "unchangeable" position on polygamy through *his own* revelation, and not through Joseph's, marks the epitome of his plans and his personal dreams of power. *He* was in control, *He* was the Prophet receiving revelation, and not someone else.

Strang, a man of powerful sexual impulses, plagued with frustration, saw in polygamy a vehicle for power and control over women—a control which he felt he lacked, and which he lamented in his diary.<sup>66</sup> Physically weak, he strove to excel intellectually over others. He was concerned with fame, and polygamy held out the possibility of earthly (and eternal) immortality for him through a numerous posterity who would carry forth his name, his memory, and be as "a crown of glory to an old man."<sup>67</sup> The flash point was reached when Strang met the very attractive, intelligent, and desirable Elvira Field, whom he could possess

<sup>66</sup>Quaife, *The Kingdom of St. James*, 99, notes that Wingfield Watson reported Strang's "powerful sexual impulses" on the authority of the Prophet's own oral statements. Cf. Strang, ed., *Diary*, 12–13, 62–63 (coded).

<sup>67</sup>This is a common theme which runs through all Mormon ideology. B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 5:297; F. M. Brody, *No Man Knows My History*, 299–300; S. S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," 317; Strang, *Book of the Law*, chapter 44, pp. 310, 313–314, 327–328.

*Strang claimed to have been directed to this hillside near Voree where he discovered the sacred brass plates.*

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(and have children by) only through plural marriage. "Revelation" was then received and the scene set for his political and theological conquest and control of both women and men. There was no general outcry, no mass exodus; Strang had achieved his power and awaited time to confirm his fame.<sup>68</sup>

Much of what has been said about Strang must be acknowledged as speculative. Religion, like the mind, is a sensitive and complex area whether you are analyzing your own or that of someone else. The possibility exists that Strang's thought and plans radically changed when he converted to Mormonism, that he was the divinely appointed successor and earthly King of the Saints, and that polygamy was ordained by God. Possibly there exists no connection between his early frustrations with love and the practice of polygamy, between dreams of power and fame and his course of "empire." But in light of the evidence, this seems very unlikely. Even his contemporary childhood companions questioned his sudden religious motivation. In 1846, his sister, Myraetta A. Losee, wrote: "I know not how to address you. I have nothing to say in regard to the motives which may have actuated you—but I entreat you, I beg you, . . . pause, and think of the fearful responsibility you have taken upon you." Wealthy Smith, an early female companion and confidant, questioned Strang more directly: "It has always been a

great mystery in my mind how you came to be a mormon. . . . What your object could have been in joining them, I am at a loss to know, unless it was for the sake of gain, or (as I have often heard you say) to immortalize your name, for it does not seem possible that you can be a sincere believer in mormonism. . . ."<sup>69</sup>

The ultimate question remains one of faith and belief: was Strang directed by God or directed by his own innate motivations and desires? Was he led by fate or by bold design? That Strang was an intelligent man, a magnetic, powerful, and persuasive leader is clear. He proved his abilities often. Yet none of Strang's extended family, and few of his apostles, carried on the faith or the practice of polygamy after his death. In his final days Strang did not even see fit to appoint his own successor, although pressed to do so by his associates. Strang himself was the only real cement and "supreme force" within his church, and he faced that fact in the end. If duration and prosperity are any indicators of *autorité divin* in Christian theology, then Strang lacked such approbation and so did his kingdom.

But James Jesse Strang ultimately triumphed in his temporal goals of power, service, and fame; he eluded obscurity and proved the observation he had made twenty-two years earlier: "All the works of man are destined to decay. . . . All the works of art and alike the systems of intellect fall before the tooth of time. . . . And fame, fame alone of all the productions of man's folly *may* survive."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup>In an excellent article, "James J. Strang: The Prophet Who Failed," in *Church History*, 50: 182–183 (June, 1981), Lawrence Foster argues that Strang instituted polygamy as a vehicle for political power. In the larger sense, Strang's entire kingdom was a political vehicle, with polygamy fulfilling a dual role in political and sexual control.

<sup>69</sup>Losee to Strang, May 5, 1846; Smith to Strang, November 1, 1846, in the Strang Papers.

<sup>70</sup>Strang, ed., *Diary*, 48–49.