

Historians' Corner

Edited by Ronald W. Walker

We feature in this issue's Historians' Corner a letter written by Elder Parley P. Pratt to President Joseph Smith. Written from Manchester, England, in late 1841, the letter provides a window through which we can view the religious setting of early Victorian times. It is, of course, a personal perspective. Parley Pratt, an early Mormon convert, preacher, pamphleteer, missionary, and Apostle, was one of the first evangelists of his faith dispatched to Great Britain. As such, his words convey the wonder of his new environment. Perhaps as significant, they also carry a hint of that introspective, otherworldly melancholy that was common to the man.

The letter is ably edited by David H. Pratt, an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University. Professor Pratt, incidentally, is a descendant of Parley P. Pratt.

Oh! Brother Joseph

David H. Pratt

Urban England, particularly Manchester in 1841, personified all that was wrong with this earth to a millenarian. Parley P. Pratt came to England with the majority of the Quorum of the Twelve in 1840 and went to Manchester in April to edit the *Millennial Star*. After the initial conversion rate of the first year, which must have seemed like a harbinger of the millennium, Pratt was left to preside over the missionary work while the other Apostles returned to Nauvoo. He was to reside for another year and a half in Manchester during one of its stormiest periods.

Manchester was the crown jewel of the Industrial Revolution. However, the concomitants of industrial progress in the early nineteenth century were overcrowding, disease, and crime. Manchester's growth rate was over 40 percent between 1811–31. By 1851, more than 70 percent of the population had been born outside of Manchester.¹

David H. Pratt is an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University.

Frequent migration was necessary to maintain a population where the average age at death was computed by a government report in 1842 to be seventeen for a laborer and thirty-eight for the upper classes in contrast to thirty-eight for an agricultural laborer and fifty-two for the gentry in a rural county.²

Manchester's mills rose from one or two employing 1,240 workers in 1790 to sixty-six mills with 51,800 hands by 1821. Families were packed into older, frequently damp housing where one privy might be shared by thirty households.³ A French visitor dramatically summed up the Manchester of 1844: "You hear nothing but the breathing of the vast machines, sending forth fire and smoke."⁴

Trade cycles were not new to Manchester, but the severity of the economic crisis of 1837–41 was. The bank failure of 1837 in the United States, overproduction of cotton goods, foreign tariffs and competition, plus a series of bad harvests combined to stifle industry. Food prices rose while wages were cut by 20 to 25 percent. Out of a total population of 353,390, some 50,000 hands were unemployed or underemployed in the summer of 1837. By March 1842, 116 factories and mills and 681 shops and offices had been forced to close their doors.⁵

It is in this context that we must first view Parley P. Pratt's letter to Joseph Smith, written on the eve of the year which a modern historian has branded the gloomiest in the entire nineteenth century.⁶ Pratt's "Millions of Laborers" in the first paragraph is rhetoric, but based on substance. Of greater historical importance is the reference to the status of the converts and the missionary tool of "humbling the rich and exalting the poor." It was probably such a technique that led to the inclusion of Mormons along with some interesting bedfellows—socialists and Chartists—as the focus for attack by the monthly propaganda piece, which Pratt mentions as an afterthought.

More information is needed on contemporary opinion of Mormons. Did the English consider them as another dissenting religion or as a social movement allied to similar causes? What were the sources and who were the molders of these opinions? Location could be one factor. Since at least July 1840, Mormon meetings had been regularly held in Carpenter's Hall. Faucher does not mention Mormons in his study of Manchester, but he does perceptively note that "As to religious sects, the latest imported is generally the most acceptable."⁷ However, the editorial comment on Faucher's essay rounds out one theme of how Mormons, Chartists, and socialists might have been connected in the public eye.

As closely connected with the state of religion in Manchester, we may mention "Carpenter's Hall," and the "Hall of Science." The first is the Sunday resort of the Chartists. They open and close their meetings with the singing of democratic hymns, and their sermons are political discourses on the justice of democracy and the necessity for obtaining the charter. The

second is an immense building in Camp Field, raised exclusively by the savings of the mechanics and artisans, at a cost of £7,000, and which contains a lecture-hall—the finest and most spacious in the town. It is tenanted by the disciples of Mr. Owen. In addition to Sunday lectures upon the doctrines of Socialism, they possess a day and Sunday-school, and increase the number of their adherents by oratorios and festivals—by rural excursions, and by providing cheap and innocent recreation for the working classes. Their speculative doctrines aim at the destruction of all belief in revealed religion, and the establishment of community of property; and they are vigorously opposed by the evangelical portion of the religious public.⁸

The remainder of Parley P. Pratt's letter indicates his millennial expectations. The six questions have a note of crescendo about them as he warms to the theme of the millennial signs. The closing paragraphs echo the first six verses of section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Original spelling, punctuation, and capitalization have been retained.

Manchester, Dec. 4th 1841

Dear Brother Smith,

I take this opportunity to communicate with you, and would say that my self and family are all Well, and We wish health and peace and favour to rest abundantly upon you and your family and all the household of faith. We Rejoice greatly in the continual good news Which We hear from the Land of Zion, and in the spirit of faith, union, confidence, enterprise and industry Which seems to prevail and increase in your midst. We Rejoice in the Building of the temple and feel great desire to push it foward. You will doubtless get the Letter I sent last and you will there see What my mind has been on that subject for some time and I find that it is in perfect accordance with the spirit of the Lord in Nauvoo, viz. to push the Temple ahead with all posible speed, and I hope it Will be enclosed by next fall. Br Fielding and my self will continue to foward according to our ability, and will endeavour to Influence others So to do. But O! Br. Joseph Millions of Laborers are out of employ, and are starving in this country, and among others hundreds of the most faithful Saints, and hundreds more are laboring like slaves on about half what they can eat. This pains my heart, and I sometimes feel as if I could take them all on my shoulders and upon my arms and carry them to Zion; but allass, the means is Wanting. Yet we are enabled to Work the deliverance of many by humbling the rich and exalting the poor. But Dear Br. the saints in this country are nearly all poor and there is no capital among them as it were; therefore they cannot fulfil your epistle in Regard to men of capital coming first to prepare the way for the Rich will not hear nor obey the Gospel, and the poor must flea or perish, and if they perish they had rather perish Where provisions cost about one sixth part what they cost here. Yea, most gladly would they sell them selves for slaves to their Brethern in America for the sake of a being on the earth, but no one will buy them. (That is hire them, and advance them Money to go with.)

Dear Br be so kind as to write me a few lines in answer to this letter, and give me a word of encouragement, and advise, for I get no letters from America either from you or any one else, except one of late from Elder G. A. Smith. Do not fail to write this once as I have never Rec'd a letter from you since I have been in this Land.

And now I would ask advise on several points.

first, I would wish to come home in the spring and stay till the temple is done, if it is wisdom.

secondly, have you any advise to give as to any farther provision for the care and government of the Churches in this Land in my Absence, and in the absence of the Residue of the quorum?

thirdly, any Advise or instructions in Regard to gathering of the saints from this Land?

fourthly, any instructions as to the spread of the message to other Nations?

fifthly, When Will The "purchased possession" be Redeemed and the temple and city commence in Jackson Co. Mo.

sixthly, When Will the ungodly, lying, Gentiles begin to loose their Power and ceace to Rule; and We who have now spent half of our lives for them, be privaledgeed to turn from the Gentiles and go in full power to the Remnants of Joseph and Israel?

Now Dear Br, If you will answer this Letter the same night you get it and answer these six questions, and impart such other Advise or instruction as god may give you it will be a great Blessing to me.———

as to news, the Lord is still working in power and signs in this land. Many of the sick are healed, many have visions, some in Dreams, and some in Open day. the ministering of Angels is frequently enjoyed, and in short all the gifts of God are frequently manifesterd, as far as they have been generally ~~attended to~~ attained to, in this age.

The Church is Generally in union, and increasing in Confidence, and in Numbers; but it makes but slow progress because of the lying spirit Which every Where prevails, and the priestcraft and false doctrines Which are like a flood around us. Discussions, Contentions, Lectures, Sermons, play cards, tracts, Books, Papers pamphlets, etc. etc. are flooding the Country in Great number, all contaning Little else than Lies and foolishness of the Grossest kind aganst the Cause of truth. There is now a monthly periodical of a large size Published jointly against us, and the Socialests, and Chartists.

in short, it is wearysome to notice the multitude of Evle and Lying publications, much more to answer or Reply to them. We therefore pass them in silence With few ecceptions, and the Lord answers them in his own time, and in his own way, by Bringing them to Naught and by doing his own work.

The wickedness and folly of the priests and their followers is incredible; it is beyond every thing, language cannot tell it. And I feel as though it must come to an end soon, very soon, and the servants of God be Delivered, and this yoak broken off from their necks; I am really impatient I cannot bear with them much longer, the Spirit which is in me cries; come out in judgement Spedily O, God, and cause their Wickedness and falsehood to cease, and let the cause of truth triumph and thy Saints Rejoice. Why Should thy servants be wasted a way and their lives cease from the earth or their time gone, till Old age come upon them While the wicked Still bear Rule, and the cause of truth is in Reproach. How long O, Lord—How Long!

Dear Br, Do enquire of the Lord how long we ~~must~~ must see the Gentiles triumph and hear, and bear their Reproach. When Shall the power of falsehood Cease to prevail, and the Lord come out of his hiding place, and make bear his Arm in the eyes of the nations, in behalf of his own Cause, and his own people?

Do not be angry with your old friend for earnestly seeking this knowledge, or some information on the subject of these times, for I feel to humbly solisit at your hand a word on these subjects. In the mene time be assured that you have my love and best Wishes, and give the Same to all enquiring friends.

I Remain your Brother in the cause
of truth.

P. P. Pratt.

President. J. Smith.

All the American friends in this country are well as far as I know.

P. P. Pratt⁹

NOTES

¹J. J. Tobias, *Urban Crime in Victorian England* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 157, 166.

²The report is summarized briefly in F. Roy Willis, *Western Civilization: An Urban Perspective*, 2 vols. (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1973), 2:672.

³François Vigier, *Change and Apathy: Liverpool and Manchester during the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 129, 134.

⁴Leon Faucher, *Manchester in 1844: Its Present Condition and Future Prospects* (1844; reprint, London: Frank Cass and Co., 1969), 18. Faucher's visit may have been hasty and his information secondhand, but he is insightful. The editorial comments, which were designed to be a corrective by the local translator, are frequently even more useful and add to the contemporary assessment of Manchester rather than detract. It must be kept in mind that this was the same Manchester that motivated Engels to write.

⁵*Ibid.*, 141, 147. Editorial silence on the main points while haggling over weekly average earnings and pawn tickets supports the dangerous situation in which Manchester found itself during these years.

⁶Asa Briggs, *The Making of Modern England, 1783–1867: The Age of Improvement* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 295.

⁷Faucher, *Manchester in 1844*, 22–23.

⁸*Ibid.*, 25.

⁹Joseph Smith Collection, Letters, incoming, 1832–44, Library–Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.