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## Mormon Passage of George D. Watt

Ronald G. Watt

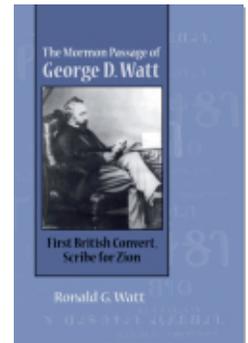
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## INTRODUCTION

### “ON THE LORD’S BUSINESS”

On May 15, 1868, an argument between Brigham Young, the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and George D. Watt, his clerk, erupted in Young’s Salt Lake City office. Feeling desperate about the financial pressures of his suffering family, Watt was asking for \$5.00 a day, a raise of \$1.50. The labor-management discussion rapidly turned heated. Young grudgingly guessed he would have to pay Watt what he demanded but thought that he did not deserve it. As far as Young was concerned, no one in the office worked hard enough for the pay he received. Watt felt that was tantamount to an accusation of stealing. He was outraged and wounded. More than a decade later, he recorded, “I was suddenly and unexpectedly crushed, by a public charge of meanness and sly robbery, by one against whose affirmation I had no appeal. I could only see my character as an honest man gone among my friends and brethren, my future efforts to do good defeated, over thirty years of labor and struggle a blank, and branded as a scoundrel to the end of my life.”<sup>1</sup> “I immediately put on my hat and coat and left.”<sup>2</sup>

By storming angrily out, Watt left all his papers, especially his shorthand notes, in his desk for a future historian. He planned to throw them away, not bequeath this treasure trove to history. It was an accident, a very fortunate accident for us. For a future biographer, he left at least one letter that he

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1. George D. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878, holograph, general correspondence, John Taylor First Presidency records, Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).
  2. George D. Watt to Martha Watt, May 17, 1868, holograph, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

had written in shorthand and longhand, one letter from Willard Richards, an 1851 shorthand diary recounting most of his journey from England to Utah, fifteen shorthand letters, and some shorthand notebooks filled with sermons he had taken down between 1851 and 1868. Included in these shorthand notebooks were his careful portrait sketches. He never came back for those papers. Probably some clerk who needed the desk boxed them up, thinking that the notes would be useful later. When clerks transferred Brigham Young's papers to the historian's office, they also moved Watt's shorthand notes. There they remained, more curiosities than objects of research. They waited until I arranged them in 1985. They preserve sermons and Watt's own musings; they also reveal a great deal about this unusual man.

As a teenager, I had heard of George D. Watt. He was the first person baptized into the Mormon faith in England. He was responsible for the Deseret Alphabet, and he was also an instructor at the University of Deseret. However, there was something else that lurked in his background. Sometime in that same period, Ida Watt Stringham and Dora Dutson Flack wrote *England's First "Mormon" Convert: The Biography of George D. Watt*. In that volume, I found out about the later period of his life. He had been excommunicated from his religion. Those authors thought that it was because of a disagreement with his bishop, Christopher Layton. Even after this discovery, I still knew that George D. Watt had been innovative in shorthand and the creation of the Deseret Alphabet, but many questions remained unanswered.

In 1972 I began employment in the archives of the LDS Church Historical Department and found many sources that Stringham and Flack had never used. With those sources, I had to find out why Watt had been excommunicated. I wrote a biographical sketch of his life with emphasis on the time when he had left the Mormon faith. I discovered that he had been involved with the Godbeites, a splinter group, even though the previous authors said he had not, and he had left the church. He no longer believed in Mormonism. My heritage and my religious conviction said that this good man could not have done this, but the sources did not lie. I published those findings in *BYU Studies* in 1977 under the title, "Sailing the 'Old Ship Zion:' The Life of George D. Watt."

After that publication, colleagues and researchers at the archives, knowing that I was interested in this ancestor, began finding more sources. I also discovered more, and I finally felt I had to write a biography. After I finished it, George Watt was a one-sided character—rather flat, but I felt it was the best I could do. I set him aside for several years.

After I finished other projects, I was ready to look at Watt again. In that period of time, other sources about him had surfaced. The Historical Department began to transcribe Watt's shorthand notes of the sermons of the General Authorities, and LaJean Carruth, the expert in Pitman shorthand,

discovered a diary that he had written about his second voyage across the Atlantic and his journey across the plains. Also Ardis Parshall, a researcher, had found some articles Watt had written in the Salt Lake *Semi-Weekly Telegraph*. Now I was finally able to create a full portrait of George D. Watt.

I also gleaned information from other sources. Until 1868 Watt had associated with all the important men of the Mormon kingdom. To some he wrote letters; others left statements about him. Friends and colleagues have been helpful in finding and sharing often-hard-to-locate snippets of information.

All of these letters and his diary show that George D. Watt could express himself on paper with remarkable fluency, vigor, and eloquence. Where did he learn this skill? He received only a few years of formal education from a teacher in an English poorhouse, yet his letters are very insightful, revealing his thoughts, aspirations, and personal feelings in memorable prose. Much of it must be a native gift, and his easy familiarity with the language of the King James Bible suggests that this literary masterwork strongly influenced his style.

Watt converted to the LDS Church in 1837 at the age of twenty-five. In 1840 he served a mission to Scotland with Orson Pratt as his companion. The earliest piece of writing from his pen is dated 1840, when he wrote to George A. Smith, another apostle in the British Isles, trying to cheer him after an illness. Watt wrote, "Bro. Geo. Let us rejoice even in afflictions knowing that the time is at hand, when we shall reap if we faint not."<sup>3</sup>

Watt emigrated to Nauvoo with his wife, Mary (Molly) Gregson Watt, and two sons in 1842. The little boys died on the arduous trip up the Mississippi River. He returned to the British Isles as a missionary in 1846 with Molly and their Nauvoo-born son, George D. Watt Jr. When they left Britain in 1851, Watt began a diary of the trip, keeping it in Pitman shorthand ("phonography") that he had learned on his mission in Scotland. During a storm, he kept his fears at bay by recording the many noises around him: "Outside the wind is heard raging on like the voices of a thousand malignant spirits screaming the requiem of some distant wreck. In it is heard the plaintive cry of an infant mingled with the disagreeable sound of a hundred females, discharging from their discomforted stomachs the provisions they refused to digest." About a week later, he recorded another storm: "The dark waters beneath us are angered by the merciless winds. They set foaming, roaring, and swelling powers in awful majesty as though they had waged war with the furious element beneath them, while our ship . . . is surrounded by the administrators of justice."<sup>4</sup> His combination of poetic metaphor and exact reportage is a rare fusion of vigor and vividness.

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3. George D. Watt and Orson Pratt to George A. Smith, December 22, 1840, holograph, George A. Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives.

4. George D. Watt, Journal, February 6, 21, 1851, shorthand, George D. Watt Papers, LDS Church Archives (transcribed by LaJean Carruth, September 2001).

As a phonographer, Watt was in the forefront of a new technology that allowed a stenographer to record words as rapidly as a person talked. His greatest contribution to the Mormon church and history resulted from another argument—this one with Willard Richards, the *Deseret News* editor. When Watt returned to Salt Lake City in 1851, he obtained a position with the *Deseret News* reporting the speeches of church authorities, but Richards never paid him. He offered Watt some pamphlets to sell but not until Richards had already started to sell them. Finally, Watt wrote an imploring letter, telling Richards that he needed pay for his work. Richards rejoined that he had tried to help Watt economically but he had refused. Furthermore, Watt had not recorded the speeches that Richards thought he should have, so Richards felt he had failed the people of Zion, had a bad spirit, and was on the road to apostasy. Watt did not take this rebuke meekly and replied with a lengthy and detailed defense. He summarized, “I only ask for the enjoyment of my common rights with other men. I am not now aware that freedom of speech (whether verbally or in writing) is always a shure sign of a man possessing a bad spirit.” He then extended an olive branch: he was willing to work shoulder to shoulder with Richards and entreated him, “You can lead me but you cannot intimidate me: while a kind word from your lips vibrates through my soul like the sweetest sounds of harmony.”<sup>5</sup>

It was the right note to strike. When Watt suggested to Brigham Young that he publish a journal of sermons from which Watt could receive his salary, Young and Richards agreed. The *Journal of Discourses* ensured that all Mormons and even non-Mormons would know what the Lord wanted through the speeches of his representative, Brigham Young.<sup>6</sup> From then on, Watt had a permanent desk in the president’s office and the Tabernacle, taking down the speeches in his swift, curious symbols.

When the United States sent an army to Utah in 1857, Young reacted as the governor of the territory by declaring martial law. Watt went to the mountains as a member of the Utah militia to delay and perhaps even battle the oncoming soldiers. While he was in Echo Canyon, not far from Salt Lake City, he wrote to one of his plural wives, Alice Whittaker Watt, “How long we may stay at this point I cannot say, neither does it concern me, I am on the lords business.” He continued, “Tho I presume my home is as dear to me, and your sweet society, as home and a wifes society can possibly be to any mortal, it is to defend such endearments that I am here, ready if necessary to pour out our blood like water for them, for our holy religion, and

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5. George D. Watt to Willard Richards September 24, 29, 1852, holographs, Willard Richards Papers, LDS Church Archives; Willard Richards to George D. Watt, September 26, 1852, holograph, Watt Papers and Richards Papers.

6. George D. Watt to Brigham Young, May 3, 1853, shorthand, Watt Papers (transcribed by LaJean Carruth, May 2005).

for national liberty.”<sup>7</sup> The two sides settled their differences amicably, and Watt’s resolute sacrifice was not required.

After Nauvoo an expanding circle of believers accepted the doctrine and practice of plural or polygamous marriage. After August 1852, it was preached from the pulpit and propounded by missionaries. Watt married six times altogether, a large number when most plural husbands married only twice. His letters to his family members show him as very loving, concerned with guiding his wives and children in the ways of the Lord. Watt and Molly Gregson married in Britain before they encountered Mormonism. She died in 1856. He married his second wife, Jane Brown, in January 1852, followed the next year by Alice Longstroth Whittaker, whose first husband, Moses Whittaker, had died shortly after arriving in Utah. In his forties, Watt courted eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Golightly, proposing to her by letter: “I offer myself to you, if you can in return give me this love, and with it yourself, which offering would be prized by me above the glittering and perishable treasures of the earth.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps its passion influenced her decision, and they married on June 23, 1859.

About this time, ironically, Jane, his second wife, was deciding she could no longer endure a polygamous marriage, and she and Watt separated. In 1863 she asked Brigham Young for a divorce. When Watt learned what she had done, he chastised her by letter, telling her to stop speaking evil of him and his family. If she would return to him, live “a humble and faithful life before the Lord, and strive to make a loving wife to me the rest of your days,” then “all shall again be right between us.”<sup>9</sup> Unpersuaded, she did not withdraw her request, and Young granted the divorce.

Watt married two more women: Sarah Ann Harter in 1866 and Martha Bench on November 9, 1867. He fathered twenty-seven children, twenty-one by his last three wives.

Young encouraged learning, and so Watt joined the Universal Scientific Society, Polysophical Society, Deseret Theological Institute, Deseret Agricultural and Manufacturing Society, and a few others, attending meetings regularly and participating as a speaker. His interest in agriculture and economics, both new fields to him, manifested itself in five articles for the *Semi-Weekly Telegraph* and other papers on planting and raising trees and asparagus. When he wrote about raising sheep, he also included some solid information on economic theory: supply and demand and the availability of markets. “Demand and supply are the great foundations of commerce,” he asserted correctly, but he was overly optimistic in seeing no end

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7. George D. Watt to Alice Whittaker Watt, October 14, 1857, holographs, Watt Papers.

8. George D. Watt to Elizabeth Golightly, 1858, holograph. Elizabeth kept that letter in her special box of precious things for the rest of her life.

9. George D. Watt to Jane Brown Watt, n.d., ca. 1863, shorthand, Watt Papers (transcribed by LaJean Carruth, 2005).

to demand.<sup>10</sup> By 1869 he had earned the reputation of being one of the foremost experts in the entire territory about agriculture and economics.

Watt remained a fervent member of the church. Between 1858 and 1867, he regularly accompanied Brigham Young out of town and took down his sermons and those of other church authorities. He contributed greatly to the church by his shorthand notes and the publication of the *Journal of Discourses*. He had, as he said later, only one thought, and that was “to die in the harness for the triumph of truth and God’s Kingdom on earth.”<sup>11</sup>

But the argument with Brigham Young changed Watt’s life. Two days after stalking out of the office, he wrote the details to his wife Martha, who was in Manti taking care of her parents, then added, “My Darling do not sorrow over these things. I have been grieved at the unqualified saying of the president, I have served him faithfully 16 years and had become attached to him, but the change will be for my good in health and circumstances.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly he saw the breach as irreparable and, to my knowledge, never tried to repair it. Over a decade later, the year after Young’s death, he lamented, “I have since discovered that I might have taken a more reasonable view of the matter. But feeling outraged and abused, I was chagrined and insensed. I did not take time to reason but in strict accordance with my impulsive nature kicked over the bucket and spilled the milk.”<sup>13</sup>

That decade was a hard and lonely one. Watt grieved over the loss of his position and status, became bitter toward Brigham Young, and began to associate with English intellectuals like himself, especially William Godbe, who was flirting with Spiritualism. Godbe was also entertaining doubts about the truthfulness of Mormonism and, with his associates, strenuously opposed Young’s economic policy. But Watt stayed distant enough from the Godbeites that he was not disciplined during their excommunications in 1869. He moved his families to his Kaysville farm—a prudent financial move but one that left behind friends and associates who understood and even empathized with him. He found himself in an environment where he did not fit and his differences aroused suspicions.

Two years later, Watt wrote to Brigham Young, disclaiming any Godbeite sympathies: “As to New movements and old movements at home and abroad, all hell being moved to dethrone God if it were possible, and destroying His rule on earth, they have no more of my fear or regard than the pooting [pooping] of a mouse a day old.” He affirmed his loyalty: he had “entered into solemn and grave covenants to stand by my brethren and the cause of truth, and I am going to do it, the Lord being my helper, to the end of the

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10. George D. Watt, “A Talk,” *Semi-Weekly Telegraph*, October 24, 1867, 3; also see Watt, “A Talk,” *Semi-Weekly Telegraph*, November 7, 1867, 1.

11. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878.

12. Watt to Martha Watt, May 17, 1868.

13. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878.

chapter.” He admitted, though, to having been “under the devil’s harrow now for two years. It has been my chief business to extricate myself, and have been of little use to the cause of truth, to myself, to you, to anybody else all this weary time.”<sup>14</sup> If Brigham Young responded, the answer has not been preserved.

Nor were the hard years over. Watt’s bishop, Christopher Layton, predicted that he would apostatize. The ward teachers, whom Layton sent, asked Watt personal, probing questions about his testimony, including why he did not attend church more often. He told them that his teams needed rest and sent an outraged letter to Brigham Young, where he was more candid: “I cannot sit and hear personal castigations administered from the stand to myself and friends.” And if Bishop Layton was trying to make him humble, “it never can be accomplished in this way. Espionage, or adversity only stiffens my neck and sets me in defiance, while generous kindness, and smiling friendship melts my soul into tears of gratitude and resolves of eternal affiance.”<sup>15</sup>

Watt struggled with his faith, and finally, it failed. He gave a formally prepared address to the Liberal Institute in Salt Lake City in April 1874. It was a vitriolic attack on Mormonism, and Bishop Layton excommunicated him. His old friends and neighbors shunned him. This punishment and isolation further embittered him. To John Taylor, he lamented, “Your humble friend stands in this category of rejected ones; . . . has been met with ‘apostate,’ ‘son of perdition,’ ‘traitor’ and such like hard and vicious terms.”<sup>16</sup> He had still not reconciled with the church when his life ended in 1881.

Because Watt speaks so often in this work, it is almost an autobiography. By letting his own words express his thoughts and feelings as much as possible, I have chosen to let the reader discover the essence of George D. Watt. A few years prior to Watt’s death, Edward Tullidge, another Godbeite, asked him to write an autobiographical sketch, which he did. He sent it off to Tullidge to publish in *Tullidge’s Quarterly Magazine*. It was too long, so Tullidge hesitated, then Watt died. The manuscript was later thrown away. Perhaps this book takes the place of that lost manuscript.

A complex and passionate man, Watt remained to the end of his days a believer, imbued with religious devotion as he expressed his hunger for God in Methodism, Mormonism, and then Spiritualism. Religious fervor was the mainspring of his life, but other facets—intellectual, cultural, personal—show a lively mind and a loving heart, manifest unstintingly in his devotion to his wives and children. In reality Watt is a tragic figure. From

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14. George D. Watt to Brigham Young, July 27, 1870, holograph, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.

15. George D. Watt to Brigham Young, August 23, 1871, holograph, incoming correspondence, Young Papers.

16. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878.



*From Frank Graham, compiler, Lancashire One Hundred Years Ago (1968)*

The Manchester, England, where George Watt spent his childhood, was a smoky, factory city in the midst of the Industrial Revolution.

the time of his baptism in Preston, he fervently believed in Mormonism, but because of his argument with Brigham Young, the feelings of his neighbors, the controversy with his bishop, and finally his embittered thoughts over the years, he let his faith fail and went on to another religion. This should have been a biography of an ancestor that his Mormon descendants would be proud of. Instead, it is the story of a complicated individual whose personality shows his inner self. This introduction is only a glimpse of a deeper soul, a talented and expressive man.