

Turning the Media Image of the Church in Great Britain, 1922–33

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Introduction

In 1933, at the end of the most despicable media attacks against the Church, a young Elder Gordon B. Hinckley stumbled severely over the revilings the attacks raised. Mired in a heavy British fog of discouragement, he wrote a very troubled letter to his father a few days after his mission began in Preston. Of that discouragement, his biographer records:

The movie *Trapped by the Mormons*, inspired by Winnifred Graham's inflammatory book of the same title, had inspired widespread anti-Mormon rhetoric throughout the British Isles. Sentiment against the Church, initiated to some degree by the clergy and fostered by the English press, had infected the whole of Britain. . . . After he had taken as much as he felt he could, Elder Hinckley wrote his father that he wasn't getting anywhere with missionary work, and that he couldn't see the point in wasting his time and his father's money. Responding as both father and stake president, Bryant Hinckley sent a reply that was brief and to the point: "Dear Gordon, I have your recent letter. I have only one suggestion: forget yourself and go to work."¹

Heeding that counsel, Gordon B. Hinckley later wrote, "Everything good that has happened to me since then I can trace back to the decision I made that day in Preston."²

Though the terrible sting was still there, the brunt of the negative media image of the Church had been turned by 1933. Much of Elder Hinckley's mission was spent in turning that image even further in favor of the Church. Because of his successes there, immediately after he finished his mission he was made the executive secretary of the newly formed Church Radio, Publicity, and Mission Literature Committee. That committee and related Church assignments made up the professional life of Elder Hinckley. Decades later, as President

of the Church, Elder Hinckley drew upon his many years of media experiences in weighing the pros and cons of an interview with Mike Wallace, “a tough senior reporter,” on the television program *60 Minutes*, which aired before twenty million viewers. In general conference, he explained his decision to the whole Church. “I felt that it offered the opportunity to present some affirmative aspects of our culture and message to many millions of people. I concluded that it was better to lean into the stiff wind of opportunity than to simply hunker down and do nothing.”³

The Problem

In 1933, more than 80 percent of the total membership of the Church had descended from British conversions that began in 1837.⁴ Through nationwide media assaults the legendary Church growth in Britain skidded to a halt. In the April 1924 general conference, Orson F. Whitney, president of the British Mission in 1904–8, described the serious threat those media assaults posed:

A fierce anti-“Mormon” onslaught began in many of the British newspapers; the “stunt press” they call it. . . . The principal charge made against the Elders was that of inducing young women to go to Utah for polygamous purposes. . . .

One of our most active assailants was a minister who had been a Texas cowboy. . . . [He] had the audacity and mendacity to say to his Sunday congregation: “I have seen with my own eyes the bloodstained boulder at the back of Smith’s house, freshly stained with the blood of rebellious girl converts.” Another of his lurid tales was to the effect that the “Mormon” men killed off their old wives by giving them a strong alkali drink which destroyed them gradually, thus making way for younger wives, recruited through the labors of the missionaries.”⁵

President Ezra Taft Benson, one of those missionaries, further described that threat. Though the mission leaders had asked the elders to stop holding street meetings, he felt bound to attend one they had promoted. He said:

The crowd was large and unruly. In our efforts to preach to them, my companion and I stood back to back. He spoke in one direction, and I faced the other half of the crowd. When the saloons closed, the rougher, coarser element came out on the streets. . . . Soon an attempt

was made to trample us under their feet. But since we were taller than the average man there, we put our hands on their shoulders and prevented them from getting us under their feet.

During the excitement, my companion and I became separated. They took him down the far side of the railway station and me down the near side. Things began to look pretty bad. . . .

A British policeman . . . took me by the arm and said, "Young man, you come with me. You are lucky to be alive in this crowd." He led me several blocks and then ordered, "Now you get to your lodge and don't come out anymore tonight." . . .

My companion was not yet there. I worried and then prayed and waited. . . . I decided to disguise my appearance. . . . Then I went out to try to find him. . . .

A man recognized me and asked, "Have you seen your companion?" I said, "No. Where is he?"

He responded, "He's down on the other side of the railway station with one side of his head mashed in."

This frightened me greatly, and I sprinted to the site as fast as I could. Before I reached the railway station, however, I met the same policeman again. He said, "I thought I told you to stay in and not come out on the street again tonight."

I replied, "You did, officer. But I'm concerned about my companion. Do you know where he is?"

He replied, "Yes, he got a nasty blow on the side of his head, but he's gone to the lodge now. I walked partway with him as I did earlier with you. Now you get back there and don't come out anymore tonight."

So I went back to the lodge and found my companion disguising himself in order to go out and look for me.⁶

The *Improvement Era* reported a similar frenzied outrage: "A London pulpiteer, who claims to have lived many years in western America . . . says: 'In Texas and Arizona it is not a crime to shoot a "Mormon" missionary. Here, we give them protection.'" Responding, a reader wrote: "Almost daily one sees accounts of the activity of Mormon Missionaries right here in England. Mormonism is justly likened to a huge viper reaching after and encircling its victims, innocent young women and girls, in its poisonous and deadly embrace. To curtail these activities why not, as in Arizona, declare 'open season' on all Mormon Missionaries in these fair islands and shoot them on sight, instead of giving them police protection?"⁷

Development of the Media Bias

President Heber J. Grant illustrated the grip of the media bias: “During my entire three years in the British Isles [1904–6] I never succeeded in getting a single solitary article published in the newspapers. Some of the vilest, most wicked, obscene, terrible things were published regarding us, but those in charge of the press positively refused to listen to anything we had to say.” Hardly anyone had more executive ability than President Grant nor was anyone more persuasive. He continued:

The manager of Ramsden and Company gave me a letter of introduction to the editor of a London paper. . . . I was told that the editor was out of town, but that his assistant, a Mr. Robinson, would receive me. . . .

[I said to him,] “I know absolutely that everything you have published in your paper is a falsehood. I come to you with a letter from the firm that has done business with us for over fifty years, and that vouches not only for my honesty and integrity, but for the honesty and integrity of every man who has served as president of the British and European missions of the Church for fifty long years.”

[He said,] “Never mind, we do not propose to publish anything you say.” . . .

“As I remember it . . . you are only the assistant editor, and your name is Robinson. Is your name Robinson?” “Yes.”

I said, “Are you related to Phil Robinson?” “No sir.”

“Do you know Phil Robinson?”

“Do I know Phil Robinson? Everybody knows Phil Robinson.”

“Well, I am glad to know that. . . . Was he the correspondent of the London Daily Telegraph, one of the two greatest London newspapers during the Boer War?”

“He was.”

“Would you believe anything he said?”

“Anything he said, fully.”

“All right. Buy his book entitled ‘Sinners and Saints.’ . . . You will find that everything you have published in your paper is a falsehood. . . . Phil Robinson came to Utah and he traveled from Cache Valley on the north clear down to Orderville and St. George and the other places on the south, and wrote a book.” . . .

“Write me half a column.”

I sent it to him. He kept it the usual two or three months, and then sent it back with the usual printed slip which I have read many times: “The editor regrets that he cannot find space for the enclosed manuscript.”⁸

President Grant's persuasive powers, the authority of the Apostolic and mission president's offices, a letter of recommendation from a prominent British industrialist, and a sympathetic book about Mormonism written by the most credible of British journalists could not crack the walls the media moguls had raised.

In 1910, just after Britain had reached the "age of toleration," wherein "creeds were no longer an obstacle to decent and friendly relationships or the enjoyment of the rights of citizenship,"⁹ an organized campaign intent on pressuring Parliament into expelling Mormon missionaries from Britain began in Liverpool.¹⁰ Rudger Clawson, president of the European Mission in 1910–14, described the kinds of incidents that followed: "One elder was tarred and feathered; another was hit in the face with a brick, which resulted in a black eye and a swollen cheek; another received a handful of lime dust in his eyes, nose and mouth, causing temporary blindness . . . ; another bled profusely from a scalp wound caused by a potato studded with glass; and others . . . were hustled about and handled roughly at various times by the infuriated populace who gathered on the streets by the thousands."¹¹

Some of that heated sentiment was rooted in publicity surrounding the Senate hearings about admitting Reed Smoot, a Mormon Apostle and alleged polygamist, into the U.S. Senate. More came from anti-Mormon press reports in America. Still more came from anti-Mormon lecturers and clergymen. Most damaging were the licentious portrayals in Graham's popular novels, including *Ezra and the Mormon* (1907, 1908, 1912), *The Love Story of a Mormon* (1911), *The Sin of Utah* (1912), and *The Mormons: A Popular History* (1913).

President Clawson wrote to newspapers refuting their lies. "The persecution has planted a prejudice in the minds of the people towards us that is hard to overcome and had [toll]ed heavily against us in the matter of baptisms."¹² Clawson's biography illuminates the weight of these crusades. His forty-five years as an Apostle occupy one hundred twenty-nine pages, forty-four (34 percent) of which deal almost exclusively with these media attacks in Britain.

Crusaders baited Winston Churchill and the British Home Office to persuade Parliament to expel Mormon missionaries and refuse entry to any more of them. Clawson also corresponded with

Churchill, who led the way in opposing exaggerated claims and collecting favorable police reports from key cities. “The ‘Mormon question’ came up in Parliament again in early May and Churchill said that although he had not completed his investigation, he had found nothing against the Mormons.”¹³

With the onset of World War I, more important interests replaced anti-Mormon harangues in the press, and military duties kept young Americans from missions. Following the war, immigration blockades left Europe virtually closed to American LDS missionaries. The old crusaders fought hard to maintain their exclusion. The British Home Office, fearful of renewed violence, sided with the crusaders. Senator Reed Smoot, through pressure from the U.S. secretary of state, got a foot in the door. After continual pressure, on May 27, 1920, British Home Office officials sent word to George Albert Smith, the European Mission president, that the elders could return.

The crusaders, having been defeated politically, turned their focus to the public media. Disparaging portrayals of missionaries flourished through the 1920s, including those depicting young British girls being funneled through white slave traffic into wicked polygamous dens in Utah. Books from earlier crusades were promoted, plays and movies were repeated, and newspapers regurgitated salacious fables for eye-catching headlines. Most notorious was Winifred Graham, who based her writing attack on the personal experiences of Henry de Windt. De Windt had passed through Utah on three occasions but failed to even mention Utah in his book, *From Paris to New York by Land*. Three large newspapers, including London’s *Daily Express*, financed his venture. In 1906 Graham and De Windt met in France.¹⁴ Graham later wrote, “He fired my imagination with an account of his recent visit to Utah, where he lived among the Mormons and studied their ways. He said he could not write them himself, having received so much hospitality, but begged me to [do] a propaganda novel, giving away their many secret rites and the polygamist marriages still in vogue.”¹⁵

Graham authored seven books between 1907 and 1923. In 1922 the movie *Trapped by the Mormons* was adapted from *The Love Story of a Mormon*. This story, like the others, featured spellbinding Mormon

missionaries, young British girls, and heroic rescues. Graham wrote: “For something like twelve years I fought the wealthy body of Elders who infested Europe at that time. Not only were they working among the unsuspecting women in England, taking 1,200 converts from Yorkshire and Lancashire alone in one month, but they specialized in combing the Scandinavian countries for white slaves.”¹⁶

To mission presidents and missionaries, her name became synonymous with evil. President David O. McKay wrote: “The activity of the Saints in Britain in tracting is arousing the devil, who is manifesting his evil designs through his co-partner Winifred and her ilk.” He even “implored the Lord to ‘take her in hand soon!’”¹⁷ To turn this milieu of nationwide media hostility, the work of three successive mission presidents stands out: David O. McKay (1922–24), James E. Talmage (1924–27), and John A. Widtsoe (1928–33).

David O. McKay, 1922–24

When David O. McKay arrived as the new president of the European Mission in 1922, he found a stack of newspaper clippings on his desk. Titles included “Women in Chains of Slavery” and “Assassins Who Carry Out Orders of Utah Saints.”¹⁸ The prejudices they incited made it difficult to enroll the McKay children in English schools. Sister McKay wrote that they were told that “people just shudder when a Mormon is mentioned and we must consider our people.”¹⁹ Their son David Lawrence assisted his father following his own mission to Switzerland. He wrote: “A large chiffonier drawer was full of articles from different newspapers . . . , all of them fantastic stories about the Mormon elders bewitching young girls into conversion and then sending them to Utah to lead debased lives. One astounding tale [was] based on the affidavit of a man who swore that he rowed a boat from San Francisco to Salt Lake City but could not get inside the wall around Salt Lake City. Another told about the chopping block behind the Beehive House that Brigham Young used to get rid of his unwanted wives.”²⁰

Andre K. Anastasiou, president of the British Mission during World War II, was from Russia and had come in contact with the

Church while studying law at King's College.²¹ He described the media image when Elder McKay arrived:

One morning on the way to the City I noticed posters everywhere screaming in large headlines about the Mormons. Naturally, I bought the papers. Not one, but a number of them, containing highly exciting stories about the Mormons, were promising further "installments." The articles I read were a shock to me. Such lurid, sensational stories! I could not believe my eyes that important English papers should print such trash. I felt furious at the injustice of it all, at the stupidity of the authors. . . .

I decided to go and see some of the editors personally. One interview was sufficient. Up on a third floor in a large block of offices in Fleet Street, I was ushered into a room of a News Editor, who greeted me very affably with, "What can I do for you?" "I have an article here in answer to the stories you have been publishing about the Mormons." "Is it for them or against them?" he asked me, with no attempt to take the proffered papers. "The article is for them," I answered. "We will not publish it," he said with emphasis. "You will not publish it. Why?" "We are out to crush Mormonism at any cost!" I was astonished at his affront. I picked up my hat. "You are doing me unkindness," I said to him. "I am more or less a stranger in your midst, but I have lived here long enough to admire British fair play and justice. Where is it? Your articles have created in the minds of the people suspicion, indignation, hatred, and even violence against thousands of your own people, whose only so-called offence is that they are Mormons."²²

President McKay decided to bypass the reporters and write directly to the editors of offending papers, beginning with *John Bull*, one of their most established papers. "His long letter appealed to English sportsmanship and love of fair play. . . . To the amazement of all, the next issue of the newspaper contained a large headline which read 'A DANIEL COME TO JUDGMENT,' and under this caption appeared the complete text of President McKay's letter."²³

The McKay years, 1922–24, marked the beginning of success in turning the media image. The major factor was the 1923 dual mission of Reed Smoot, one of the Twelve Apostles and a prominent U.S. Senator. A key voice on the Debt Funding Commission, Smoot met with European heads of state about U.S. help in rebuilding their war torn nations. As part of his visits, President Heber J. Grant asked him to do what he could to get missionaries back into Europe.

“He met with Prime Minister Baldwin in London and received assurance of cooperation.”²⁴

In an interview with Elder Smoot, a reporter of the *London Daily Express*, the vilest of them all, promised a complimentary article in the following issue. On Monday, July 16, Smoot spent several hours in the homes of some of London’s most influential elite, including Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the *Daily Express*, and Sir Edward Houlton, owner of several other London papers. “In my conversation with Lord Beaverbrook the question of the *Express* publishing bitter attacks on the Mormon church came up and he told me he had become convinced that the attacks were unjust and upon my assuring him they were he told me they would not occur again.”²⁵ Senator Smoot’s biographer, Milton R. Merrill, noted: “Incidentally, he arranged a gentleman’s agreement with Lord Beaverbrook and other press magnates by which they agreed to eliminate all anti-Mormon articles from British publications.”²⁶

James E. Talmage, 1924–27

Because of his experience in dealing with anti-Mormon attacks in the American press,²⁷ Elder James E. Talmage was called to serve as the European Mission president ahead of more senior Apostles. In November 1919 he was assigned to attend the “Third World’s Christian Citizenship Conference” in Pittsburgh. It included a full day of discussion sponsored by “The World Commission on Mormonism.” That day was filled with the worst kinds of hatred and false and evil depictions. Included among the special guests was Britain’s Winifred Graham, who “vehemently assailed the United States government and particularly the Attorney General for failing to stamp out Mormonism.”²⁸

It was announced that a Mormon Apostle was in attendance and that he had requested time to address them. His request was denied because it was “a Christian gathering and—as those present were supposed to know—Mormonism was definitely un-Christian.”²⁹ A “special privilege” was finally granted, allowing Talmage five minutes which were met by “the accompaniment of hisses and other ridicule.”³⁰ A mob spirit ensued, and Elder Talmage feared greatly

for his life. From his journal: “I was impressed to the effect that the evil one had determined to arouse the mob to a murderous pitch, and specifically to bring about my death. . . . My soul was surcharged with the upwelling prayer-thought and intense supplication that, if a sacrifice was required or to be permitted at that time, and if I was to be the subject, it should be effected without possible excuse or extenuation based on any rash or overt act or word of mine.”³¹ His escape was miraculous. “As I was hustled and jostled along the foyer . . . the mob seemed to lose sight of me. For the last few yards I walked in the midst of the throng, untouched by all. I saw several people looking for me in bewilderment, and heard uttered inquiries of ‘Where is he?’ etc.”³²

When Elder Talmage arrived in England, the media problem was all around. President McKay explained their biggest hurdle: “Mission authorities had been unable to reach the men at the decision-making level of the offending journals. . . . They were invariably received by sub-editors or staff reporters who listened in cold politeness, promised to ‘see if something could be done.’ . . . Always the man at the top . . . was unavailable—for a variety of reasons or, rather, of conventional fictions.”³³

Elder Talmage’s first direct encounter confirmed this problem. The *Argus*, a daily newspaper in Bradford, Yorkshire, was leading an “all-out” campaign including a refusal to admit Mormons into their municipal baths. Surrounding newspapers—the *Yorkshire Observer*, the *Bradford Daily Telegraph*, and the *Leeds Mercury*—joined the attack. When city officials allowed missionaries the use of the baths, “the *Argus*, seething with anger, published a scathing editorial. . . . In it Mormonism was labeled ‘an abominable thing . . . an insidious attempt to sow the seeds of license in the minds of immaturity . . .’ that ‘should be stamped out ruthlessly.’ . . . The diatribe concluded with the contrived suggestion that the exercise of boxing ‘would come into effect with peculiar value when the Mormon missionary is around.’”³⁴

While at a Church conference nearby, President Talmage visited the *Argus*. “When he offered his calling card, it was taken to the editor . . . only to be brought back with the professedly regretful announcement that the editor’s schedule was so filled that he could

not possibly find time for an interview with the visitor. Dr. Talmage then resorted to a little stratagem.” He requested his calling card,

to add a note which he had earlier “forgotten” to append. Taking his pen he wrote after his name: F.R.S.E., F.R.M.S., F.R.G.S.—signifying “Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh,” “Fellow of the Royal Microscopical Society,” “Fellow of the Royal Geological Society.”

The effect on the several British newspapermen was electric. These were designations with which they were familiar and of which the significance did not have to be explained. The cryptic notations carried a potent message: the owner of these titles was no ordinary American, but a man recognized and honored by prestigious *British* institutions. Fellowship in the Royal Society of Edinburgh was especially impressive at this particular time, for the Prince of Wales—an untarnished national idol in 1924—was to be given honorary R.S.E. fellowship within a few weeks, and the institution was very much in the news.

The newspapermen to whom the altered calling cards were returned gave a startled glance at the inked initialings and hastily excused themselves to return for a further discussion with their editors. Almost always they returned with word that the editor had, after all, managed to squeeze a few minutes from his crowded schedule.³⁵

A report of a conference in Cardiff, South Wales, indicated that in the days prior to the conference, “the press and pulpit were carrying on a most vicious attack on the ‘Mormon’ elders. Large placards and sign boards . . . an atrocious propaganda of silly, old, time-worn tales of girl-snatching . . . was served up for the public.”³⁶ A happy change followed. “Through the clouds which . . . had looked so black and formidable, burst forth a bright ray of hope. The newspapers had made a radical departure from their previous sensational writeups.” In explanation, the report continued. “Credit for bringing this about must be given to President Talmage. With an influence born of his scholarly achievements, and his recognition by, and his membership in, various Royal Societies, together with his sincerity of purpose, his humbleness, and kindly personality, President Talmage exerted a powerful influence upon the editors.”³⁷

Talmage’s strategy often worked. Once he was inside the “previously impregnable door to the editor’s *sanctum sanctorum*, James had most of his battle won.” The media image continued to turn. “The change in the attitude of the press was not reflected only in the disappearance of the scurrilous anti-Mormon attacks but also in

positive ways, including objective reporting of Latter-day Saint activities and even occasional articles directly praising the Mormons and their work.”³⁸

John A. Widtsoe, 1927–33

In the regular temple meeting of the Twelve and the First Presidency, President Heber J. Grant called Elder John A. Widtsoe to replace President Talmage in Great Britain. In the twenty years prior to this assignment, Elder Widtsoe had become well versed in media relations. Convinced to return in 1907 as the president of the Utah Agricultural College, his dealings with the press helped the college climb from near extinction to world acclaim for agricultural success in arid and semiarid climates. Subsequently, in 1916 Elder Widtsoe became president of the University of Utah and, by making the press his ally, was able to turn the university from a nationwide crisis to academic credibility.

In 1922 to 1923, this newest Apostle—now an expert in media relations—was appointed by U.S. President Warren G. Harding and Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover to help resolve serious Colorado River disputes among seven western states. Later, he was given the key role in settling governmental abuses in the repayment of heavy debts for projects like Hoover Dam and ultimately was assigned to fully reorganize the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation which largely determined the survival of seventeen of the forty-eight United States. Again, skillful press relations marked his many successes. It was with that satchel of experience in public relations that Elder Widtsoe set sail for Europe and the media mess awaiting him there. Because of his media successes in his first three-year term, he was reassigned to a second three-years as mission president.

In Britain, Elder Widtsoe followed the advice of his longtime mentor, Elder Talmage. Elder Widtsoe knew the press’s hunger for intrigue and human interest. He knew nothing could more convincingly dissuade the press from their absurdities than actually mingling with Church members, feeling their warmth, their faith, and the value they placed on the truths of Mormonism. What better way to win the press than to have reporters spend hours with eleven powerful

mission presidents, men of much accomplishment, with equally impressive wives—so very unlike the licentious men and trapped white slave women Graham and other crusaders had portrayed to them. Add forty or fifty groomed elders who spoke openly of their love of family, of God, and of His children worldwide. Put them in a small branch service or a district conference of their neighbors who adored the Church of Jesus Christ and whose lives were improved thereby. President Widtsoe trained mission presidents and missionaries to make certain that the press felt invited to their conferences, meetings, activities, and functions. To the First Presidency, he was enthusiastic about the growing involvement of the press, writing:

During our recent European Mission Presidents Conference, we were literally invaded by the Press of Great Britain. We had to “shoo” them off, to get our work done. Not only did individual newspapers send reporters, and photographers, but the Allied Newspapers (the Associated Press of Great Britain) and other large groups kept in constant touch with us. On several occasions the reporters sat through our meetings. It seemed wise to permit them to do this, since so much mysticism has been made to surround Mormonism. The result was a mass of publicity throughout Great Britain, and I suppose, on the continent. And, it was all fair and friendly. The reporters told the truth. I am enclosing a few clippings as examples. We shunted several reporters into the Relief Societies section of the conference, and the sisters received some very favorable publicity. Reading the reports, it must have seemed that the Mormons after all are people, not polliwogs. I have heard President Grant tell of the difficulty in his day of establishing contacts with British newspaper. Times are changing, for the Editors themselves telephoned us on several occasions to ask about our work.³⁹

President Widtsoe kept a close watch, and when false or unfair reports were made he articulately corrected them. He had opened Mormon doors to the press, and they felt inclined to open theirs to him. His professional credentials, like those of President Talmage, helped to grease the hinges. He openly discussed sensitive issues to dispel the aura of suspicion. One report spoke of “Mormon secrets.” The reporter admitted in the article that “it is difficult to believe that an organization which rules, in many ways, so well and wisely as the Mormon Church” should tolerate the secret acts described in the magnificent temple. “Our only concern is to get at the

truth. For this reason we are glad to publish the letter of Dr. John Widtsoe, the Mission President.” The letter directly shredded the source and content of the article.

Press conferences were fun, especially the sticky questions they loved to play with. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* reported one in April 1928:

“The old bogey of young men coming to this country from Salt Lake City to take young women back to America is dead and buried, and, what is more, it had a respectable funeral,” declared Doctor John A. Widtsoe (President of the European Missions, and one of the “Twelve Apostles” of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) at a conference held at the church of that body at Ellesmere Road, Sheffield, last evening. . . .

Doctor Widtsoe described the gatherings of the body to which he belonged in Salt Lake City, and said the audiences numbered as many as 20,000 people. He said that if their faith in Christ was taken from them then their church would fall to the ground. They were not an American church, but a universal church.⁴⁰

The press had used polygamy to try to discredit the Church. Elder Widtsoe viewed that as a gateway to telling more of their story. He used his wife’s family ties to Brigham Young to open the gate wide.

Doctor John A Widtsoe, a former Principal of the University of Utah, U.S.A., who is at present in charge of the Mission to Europe . . . was present with his wife, “Sister” Widtsoe, who is proud of the fact that she is a granddaughter of Brigham Young. . . . Brigham Young had nineteen wives and fifty-six children, of whom Mrs. Widtsoe’s mother was the nineteenth.

“Have you told him who I am?” asked Mrs. Widtsoe with a smile when her husband introduced the “free Press” reporter to her.

“I have,” replied Doctor Widtsoe, “and he never flinched!” . . .

Doctor Widtsoe declared that the Church was growing and that this year had been the most successful for many years. “We discourage converts from emigrating to Utah,” he said “and encourage them to stay in this country, and by their christian lives, sobriety, industry and thrift to show their neighbors that Mormonism is not the terrible thing it has been represented to be.”⁴¹

Elder Widtsoe sought to build public trust, to inform everyone that the message of the Church is happiness and truth and that mis-

sionaries were men of faith, had a strong love of God, and desired only to be heard. Positive reports followed.

If a bright young man calls at our suburban home today he may be anxious to sell you a vacuum cleaner, or make a Mormon of you. . . .

Instead of waiting for one of Dr. Widtsoe's young men to come to see me, I went to see Dr. Widtsoe, who is head of the Mormons in England. . . .

"What do I have to do to become a Mormon?" I asked Dr. Widtsoe, who delayed the service in order to talk to me. He replied sympathetically:

"This may make you flinch. As an English woman you may not be able to bear it."

"Please, let me have the verdict."

"Well, . . . you will not be able to take alcohol and that would be hard on an English woman. You will not be able to drink tea, or coffee, or smoke. You will eat very little meat but great quantities of fruit and vegetables."

"Any dancing allowed?" I asked.

"Dancing? We revel in dancing. And what is more if you become a Mormon, you will live five or six years longer than you would as a member of any other faith."

"Suppose," I ventured, "that a husband wanted two wives, what would happen?"

"He would be excommunicated," the doctor said, sternly. "We had to suspend two of our apostles who had forgotten that polygamy has been forbidden since eighteen-ninety."

"But let us return to the care of the body," the doctor went on persuasively. "As a Mormon you would have to pay less for life insurance and you would find that among Mormons the death rate for one of the world's dread diseases is only one-third of the rate existing among other communities. Why we are exhibiting at the hygiene exhibition in Dresden—exhibiting facts and figures," the Chief Mormon added hastily.

"We intend to proselytize," Dr. Widtsoe continued with enthusiasm. "We have a marvelous message. If you are poor we can teach you how to overcome your poverty. Seventy percent of our members own their own houses. If you are ill we can show you how to be well."

"But don't you find the name of Mormon as somewhat against you when you try to make converts?"

"Sometimes," the doctor said guardedly, "people who come to a meeting of the Latter Day Saints are surprised to find they are Mormons. But we don't disguise the fact. We have no wish to deceive anyone."⁴²

Prejudice was diminishing through their successes with the press, and President Widtsoe was pleased to report to the Saints that a new day of acceptance had arrived. In November 1929 he wrote an article for the *Improvement Era*:

The spirit of tolerance, new and pervasive, is startling. A generation ago "Mormon" elders in Germany divided their time between being in jail and keeping out of jail and for the crime of being "Mormons;" today, they have the use of magnificent schoolhouses in Berlin for Sunday meetings. Then, according to the British press, magnetic "Mormon" elders exported English girls to an "immoral" place in the American West; today, the same papers publish respectful interviews with said elders, and comment upon the splendid achievements of the State of Utah; and one paper is now publishing, serially, a life of Brigham Young, written by one of his daughters. There are those who would gladly flay or burn a "Mormon," but their voice is thin, and they are of the class who indiscriminately would like to flay or burn somebody.⁴³

As things improved with the press, Elder Widtsoe set his eyes on other means for turning the media image. He thought an appealing book would enable the Church to tell its own story. There was a lively intrigue about Brigham Young, polygamy, and the people nicknamed "Mormons." Properly handled, a book about Brigham Young could shift public opinion in favor of the Church. Widtsoe's interest was influenced by the fact that his mother-in-law, Susa Young Gates, Brigham's child and a prolific author, had been writing a biography of her father. To her he wrote: "Things are happening over here that make me feel that right now we have need of just the kind of material that you have been assembling in your book, for use among those who are beginning, hesitatingly, to become interested in our work from the historical and picturesque point of view rather than from the religious, but yet with an understanding that the lurid tales of the past are but idle tales."⁴⁴

President Widtsoe, an experienced author, built a relationship with Harold J. Shepstone, an editor and publishing agent. Shepstone felt that the best course, both for the book and the Church, was to publish it serially in prominent newspapers. As things progressed, President Widtsoe wrote Susa: "It is now nearing completion in form for magazine publication. Unless some anti-Mormon pressure is brought to bear, there will be little doubt about its publication in

the near future. . . . It will undoubtedly be one of the most powerful means of propaganda in behalf of our cause.”⁴⁵

Seventeen chapters and some special family photographs were ready for publication. A photograph of Brigham and his wives became a point of disagreement between Widtsoe and Shepstone. Shepstone felt that the photograph would capture the most interest and would contribute much to the success of the series. The Widtsoes felt it would probably do more injury than good. Finally, President Widtsoe wrote: “Lets ‘lay low’ on the wife business that’s been harped on so much that it ought to be threadbare. We’re to stress the epoch-making contribution of the man to the conquest of the West. Give the other a rest.”⁴⁶

Several weeks later Shepstone wrote President Widtsoe: “The ‘Sunday Express’ turned it down with the remark that they would prefer not to touch the subject. I then tried the ‘News of the World,’ ‘Sunday Dispatch,’ and ‘The People,’ and quickly discovered that the story was not sensational enough.”⁴⁷ Shepstone’s edits were factual and ennobling, and he did not perpetuate the maligned image the press had profited from for decades. The Widtsoes were not willing to cheapen the story, and the media was not ready to publish the truth of Mormonism’s chief icon. Though disappointed, President Widtsoe thought the series represented a significant victory.

Soon Shepstone reported that Britain’s most respected publishing company, Jarrolds of London, had agreed to publish the book in Great Britain.⁴⁸ “I sent them this MS. some five weeks ago. . . . They assured me that this is quite long enough and that it would be only tiring to the ordinary reader to publish such lengthy MS. as Mrs. Gates has written.”⁴⁹ Next, Shepstone wrote of an agent friend in New York, “I had a cable from him last Friday, which reads: ‘Have placed book rights with Macmillan.’ . . . The moment I received the cable from New York I at once phoned to Jarrold’s and I must say they were quite nice about it and were quite willing in the circumstances to be content with the British rights. As you know, it is best for a book to be published seperately [*sic*] in each country if it can be managed.”⁵⁰

President Widtsoe wrote Susa, saying, “Jarrolds, of London, was willing to print [Shepstone’s] newspaper articles in book form at

their own expense. We had to decide quickly.” He concluded: “The Cause that we represent would be served by having such a book on the market. It would be a distinct advantage to us to have a book written by ourselves, printed by a leading British publishing firm. I therefore wired Shepstone approval at once.”⁵¹

The opportunity to further turn the media image drove President Widtsoe. Maude May Babcock toured Europe in 1929. She was a very accomplished woman the Widtsoes had embraced at Harvard. She had joined the Church and pioneered speech and women’s programs at the University of Utah. To the First Presidency he wrote:

I wrote to our good friend in London, Mr. William Goodair . . . a man prominent socially; a blood relative of nobility. . . . I wrote him and told him that Miss Babcock, one of the finest readers in the United States, would undoubtedly be willing to give the readings for benevolent purposes in London, if he could take the time to make suitable arrangements. I think he did not wait half a day before he wired me an answer. He had already secured an engagement for Miss Babcock before a fashionable group. . . . He also had a number of other things up his sleeve. . . . Then a foun[t] of social events followed. She met Lords and Ladies—our Elders were drawn into the same groups, and finally arrangement was made by which the famous drawing room of Lady Beecham was placed at the disposal of the Lady McEnteyre, who was the chairman of arrangements. . . . All declared it to have been a wonderful affair. Lords, Ladies, Ambassador [*sic*], Ministers, some two or three hundred were present—mingling freely with the Mormon Elders and listening to Professor Maude May Babcock of Utah—known also as a Mormon. Daring to take the time to tell you all of this because it is another evidence of the turning of the tide with respect to our people, and I am thoroughly convinced that to win the respect and understanding of such groups of people means that much of the prejudice that has existed will be allayed. Such people are the molders and makers of public opinion and what they say is carried far and wide. I doubt if we have done enough of such things in the past, to smooth the way before our Elders.⁵²

Turning the media image was at the forefront of President Widtsoe’s plans for the World Hygiene Fair in Dresden, Germany, in 1930. It was an exceptional opportunity to teach large groups of people the Church’s positive view of health through the Word of Wisdom. Similar exhibits followed this one:

The Word of Wisdom—its principles and results—forms one of the most popular exhibits in the International Hygiene Exhibition at Dresden, Germany. Thousands visit the exhibit daily; receive Word of Wisdom information and tracts from the missionary attendants, and the large visitors' book is rapidly filling up with names and addresses of persons who desire further information. . . .

The exposition itself is unique. It is dedicated to one thing: The preservation and improvement of human health. It is built around the monumental Museum of Hygiene, the finest in the world. . . . No European spectacle is more worth seeing. . . [Widtsoe] compiled the necessary vital statistics and wrote the desired tracts, which are published in English and German.

Prominent professional people from all parts of the earth have made favorable comments upon this method of preserving human health. Invitations have been received to give Word of Wisdom information in other lands. As high as 30,000 have passed through the exhibit in one day; the average is near 5,000; about 120,000 tracts were distributed the first two months.

The exhibit is effectively located at the front entrance of the League of Nations' building, near the rooms devoted to the International Red Cross. Through the open door the illuminated main wall is observed. The lighted sun—the Word of Wisdom—is rising from the sea of ignorance, and radiating from it are the rewards of the Word of Wisdom—health, long life, wisdom, etc. The rays are lighted alternately, with fine effect. In the middle of the floor stands a large globe, slowly rotating, and showing in brilliantly lighted spots the points on earth where the Church is teaching the Word of Wisdom. On the left side wall is a moving, endless, lighted ribbon which tells the story of the Word of Wisdom; and on the opposite wall is a large comparative statement of the physical, educational and moral conditions among the Latter-day Saints, showing the results of the Word of Wisdom.⁵³

Much remained to be done, but the media image in Great Britain had been turned. The old Mormon bogies were replaced by favorable images. In November 1933 the Widtsoes returned to Salt Lake City. Soon thereafter, Ruderger Clawson, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, sent Elder Widtsoe a letter: "Please be advised that you have been appointed to act as chairman of a committee of three to 'Organize the Available Material for Publicity Purposed Among the Missions of the Church.'" ⁵⁴ That committee assumed for the entire Church the key role the European Mission office had for Europe. Many other heavy assignments [Church Commissioner

of Education, Editor of the *Improvement Era*, a special assignment at USC, the Church Security (Welfare) Committee, the Utah Genealogical Society, and the Utah Water Storage Commission] crowded his work with the Publicity committee. Two recommendations to ensure the success of the committee stand out: “(1) That suitable returned missionaries . . . be called to the aid of the Committee. . . (2) that for general supervisory and coordinating purposes the part or full time of a paid man be placed at the disposal of the work.”⁵⁵ In 1935 the Church Radio, Publicity, and Mission Literature Committee was created and at Elder Widtsoe’s request, Gordon B. Hinckley, recently returned from similar work in Britain, was hired as the committee’s executive secretary. The rest is history.

Notes

1. Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 63–64. “That July day in 1933 was my day of decision, A new light came into my life and a new joy into my heart. The fog of England seemed to lift, and I saw the sunlight” (64).

2. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith*, 64.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Remember . . . Thy Church, O Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 82.

4. Richard L. Evans, “History of the Church in Great Britain,” *Ensign*, September 1971, 25. This article was adapted from Elder Evans’s book *A Century of “Mormonism” in Great Britain*, published in 1937. The book in turn was based on a series of articles written for the *Millennial Star* in 1928–29, while Elder Evans served as a missionary in England.

5. Orson F. Whitney in Conference Report, April 1924, 37. Whitney was president of the European and British Missions from 1921 to 1922. He was replaced by David O. McKay.

6. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, April 1985, 48–49.

7. Editor’s Table, “A Tempest in England,” *Improvement Era*, May 1922, 643–44.

8. Heber J. Grant, in Conference Report, October 1937, 8.

9. William George Addison, “Religious Equality in Modern England, 1714–1914,” in Malcolm R. Thorp, “The British Government and the Mormon Question,” *Journal of Church and State* 21 (Spring 1979): 305.

10. Thorp, “The British Government and the Mormon Question,” 307.

11. Rudger Clawson, “Memoirs of the Life of Rudger Clawson,” (1926): 90–91, as quoted in Malcolm R. Thorp, “The Mormon Peril: The Crusade against the Saints in Britain,” *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 69–88.

12. Thorp, “The Mormon Peril,” 88.
13. David S. Hoopes and Roy Hoopes, *The Making of a Mormon Apostle: The Story of Rudger Clawson* (Landham, MD: Madison Books, 1990), 263. “Churchill replied, but it is apparent from his biographies that never during his brief tour as home secretary did he consider the ‘Mormon question,’ a serious problem. He always acknowledged the letters Rudger wrote him, but other matters not surprisingly captured his attention” (257).
14. See Harry De Windt, *From Paris to New York by Land* (New York: Warne and Co., 1904), as quoted in Malcolm R. Thorp, “Winifred Graham and the Mormon Image in England,” *Journal of Mormon History* 6 (1979): 109.
15. Winifred Graham, *That Reminds Me* (London, Skeffington, 1945), in Thorp, “Winifred Graham and the Mormon Image in England,” 109.
16. Winifred Graham, *That Reminds Me* (London, Skeffington, 1945), 32.
17. Thorp, “Winifred Graham and the Mormon Image in England,” 107.
18. See Mary Jane Woodger, *David O. McKay, Beloved Prophet* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2004).
19. Woodger, *David O. McKay, Beloved Prophet*.
20. David Lawrence McKay, *My Father, David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 163.
21. Anastasiou was born October 13, 1894, in Kherson, Ukraine, USSR. He was married September 30, 1922, in London, England, No baptism date is listed in FamilySearch. Elder Junius F. Wells said in 1922, “His name is Andre Anastasiou, a born Russian, who has been converted to the gospel four or five years before” (in Conference Report, October 1922).
22. Andre K. Anastasiou, *Latter-day Saints and British Fairplay* (London, British Mission, 1942).
23. Jeanette McKay Morrell, *Highlights in the Life of President David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 75.
24. Milton R. Merrill, *Reed Smoot, Apostle in Politics* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1990), 154.
25. Smoot Diaries, book 33, 85, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 85.
26. Milton R. Merrill, *Reed Smoot, Apostle in Politics* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1990), 154.
27. See John R. Talmage, *The Talmage Story: Life of James E. Talmage—Educator, Scientist, Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1972), 206.
28. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 197–98.
29. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 198.
30. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 198.
31. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 199.
32. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 199.
33. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 206.
34. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 207.
35. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 208–9.

36. "The Work in Wales," *Improvement Era*, 1925. The attack was so vicious that President McKay said, "The time has come when true Britons ought to resent these stories as a reflection upon the intelligence of the British nation."

37. "The Work in Wales," *Improvement Era*, 1925.

38. Talmage, *The Talmage Story*, 211.

39. Widtsoe to the First Presidency, September 2, 1929.

40. "Mormon Mission One of the 'Twelve Apostles,'" *Sheffield Daily Telegram*, April 9, 1928. The *Sheffield Daily Independent*, April 9, 1928, added, "There is no Mormon ministry, but every person is fitted to take part in services, and may be called upon to speak."

41. "Granddaughter of Brigham Young Preaches to Mormon Church at Varteg. Man with Nineteen Wives and Fifty-Six Children," *Free Press of Monmouth Shire*, November 9, 1928.

42. "The Mormons Are Here: A Frank Talk, Two Apostles Who Forgot," newspaper unknown, September 8, 1929, Widtsoe Collection.

43. John A. Widtsoe, "Europe in the Melting Pot," *Improvement Era*, 1929.

44. Widtsoe to Gates, March 2, 1928, correspondence, Susa Young Gates Collection, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

45. Widtsoe to Gates, November 19, 1928, Susa Young Gates Collection.

46. Shepstone to Widtsoe, March 12, 1929, John A. Widtsoe Collection, Church Archives.

47. Shepstone to Widtsoe, August 29, 1929, John A. Widtsoe Collection.

48. See Shepstone to Widtsoe, November 28, 1929, John A. Widtsoe Collection.

49. Widtsoe to Shepstone, November 28, 1928.

50. Widtsoe to Shepstone, December 11, 1929, John A. Widtsoe Collection.

51. Widtsoe to Gates, Susa Young Gates Collection, May 1, 1930. Widtsoe added: "True, this was done somewhat regretfully, for I had looked forward to the time when a first class popular life of Brigham Young might be worked over from your larger work, but I felt that if the popular Life were published first might delay indefinitely the publication of the larger work. However, we followed the promptings of the Spirit and I have no regrets. I trust that you approve also in your hearts."

52. Widtsoe to First Presidency, May 3, 1929, John A. Widtsoe Collection.

53. John A. Widtsoe, "The First Word of Wisdom," *Improvement Era*, 1930, 13–14.

54. Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 520.

55. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe*, 526.