

Mary Jane Woodger



PROLOGUE

THE first time John R. Winder saw John Taylor was at his home in Liverpool in 1850. From that time the two were always the best of friends. After President Taylor passed away, Winder wrote to John Taylor's family, saying, "I sincerely hope that you, one and all, will always strive to emulate the good example left to you as a heritage, and that the birthday anniversaries of President Taylor will ever be a marked feature in the history of his family."¹

Winder's request was fulfilled in a significant way in 2008 with the John Taylor Church History Symposium, celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of John Taylor's birth, with this accompanying volume.

John Taylor was born in Milnthorpe, Westmoreland, a "magnificently beautiful area of England where the deep waters of Windermere, Grasmere, and Morcombe Bay lend a quality to the environment that is exhilarating simply to inhale."² This area is known by some as the cradle of intellectualism, the home of poets and authors. However, John's birth on November 1, 1808, as the second son of James and Agnes Taylor was fairly

CHAMPION OF LIBERTY

unexceptional. His parents were descendants of nobility, but because they were younger siblings they had neither titles nor income: “Though James owned property in the village of Hale in the county of Westmoreland, England, he spent several years working for the British government. His employment with the excise board required him to move from place to place, including a five-year stay in the city of Liverpool. . . . In addition to their first two sons, the Taylors would bring two daughters and six other sons into the world.”³

Despite such an obscure birth, eventually John Taylor would be highly spoken of by Church members throughout the world. President Brigham Young would say of him, “He has one of the strongest intellects of any man that can be found; he is a powerful man, he is a mighty man.”⁴ Elder Matthias Cowley would say that John Taylor was “the most dignified and without affectation had the most commanding appearance of any man I ever saw in my life.”⁵ And T. B. H. Stenhouse called him the “Manacled Giant.”⁶

The road from being an obscure child born in England to a “champion of liberty” in America had everything to do with John Taylor’s baptism into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

From an early age John Taylor had spiritual experiences. Growing up in the Lake District of northern England known for its mysticism, the environment seemed to have an effect on young John Taylor, and he had experiences that his friends and those around him did not. “Young Taylor possessed a portion of the spirit of God and was very happy. Manifestations of its presence were frequent, not only in the expansion of his mind to understand doctrines and principles, but also in dreams and visions. ‘Often when alone,’ he writes, ‘and sometimes in company, I heard sweet, soft, melodious music, as if performed by angelic or supernatural beings.’ When but a small boy he saw, in vision, an angel in the

Prologue

heavens, holding a trumpet to his mouth, sounding a message to the nations. The import of this vision he did not understand until later in his life.”⁷

He left Westmoreland at the age of fourteen to become an apprentice to a cooper (barrel-maker) in Liverpool. For the next five years he worked as a woodturner in Penrith, Cumberland County, near the border of Scotland. It was while there that John Taylor was introduced to the Methodist sect, and he joined the Methodist faith in 1824.

From that time on, John Taylor had a keen awareness of his future: that he was to become a Methodist minister and preach the gospel in Canada. When his parents moved their family to Canada in 1830, John followed. He went to Canada as “a Methodist Preacher . . . , but before coming he told his friends that sometime he was going to America to preach the Gospel. They told him he was already preaching the Gospel. No, he replied, there is something more to come. He had that premonition long before its fulfillment.”⁸

Though John Taylor intended ultimately to reach the United States, Canada was more than just a waiting ground for him. While in Canada, he had many life-changing experiences. There he met a beautiful woman, twelve years his senior, whom he fell in love with and proposed to. He “met Leonora while preaching for the Methodist Church in Toronto. Also a native of England and a devout Methodist, Leonora had immigrated to Canada as the maid to the wife of the secretary of Lord Aylmer, Governor General of Canada. She rejected John’s first proposal of marriage, but a dream changed her mind. In her dream she saw herself happily married to John and felt impressed to then accept his proposal. They were married January 28, 1833.”⁹

CHAMPION OF LIBERTY

It was also in Toronto, Canada, that John and Leonora came into contact with Parley P. Pratt, “who had been sent on a mission to Canada under a prophecy of Heber C. Kimball that there he would find a people ready to receive him, and that out of that service would come a harvest which would lead, among other things to the spread of the work to the British Isles.” Parley P. Pratt baptized both John and Leonora Taylor on May 9, 1836. From the time of his baptism until the time of his death, John Taylor was “an unflinching and powerful exponent of the truths which had come into his life and which had taken possession of all his loyalties. He selected as his motto, ‘The kingdom of God or nothing.’”¹⁰

John Taylor first encountered the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1837 while visiting Kirtland. From that day on he became one of the Prophet’s staunchest defenders. Later that year, the Prophet Joseph Smith called John Taylor to move to Far West, Missouri, and accept a position in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The call came at a difficult time; he joined the leadership of the Church during a time of great apostasy and mob persecution. Through the dark days of Missouri and then in Nauvoo, he was one of the kingdom of God’s greatest advocates. John Taylor once said, “I do not believe in a religion that cannot have all my affection, but in a religion for which I can both live and die. I would rather have God for my friend than all other influences and powers.”¹¹ As an Apostle he served his first mission to the British Isles with other members of the Twelve where thousands of converts joined the Church. Many of these converts joined John Taylor in Nauvoo where as the editor of the *Times and Seasons*, the *Wasp*, and the *Nauvoo Neighbor* he defended The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its prophet. In Nauvoo John Taylor not only served as a spiritual leader but also as a civic leader. He was a

Prologue

member of the Nauvoo City Council, regent for the University of Nauvoo, and a judge advocate in the Nauvoo Legion.¹²

John Taylor was in the Carthage Jail when a vicious mob murdered the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. Though John Taylor was shot five times, he survived the attack. He penned the announcement of the Martyrdom, declaring that “Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord has done more save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” (Doctrine and Covenants 135:3).

Church leadership was then placed upon the shoulders of Brigham Young and the Twelve, who began to prepare the Saints for their exodus to the Rocky Mountains. “On February 16, 1846, Elder Taylor and his family crossed the Mississippi River with all of the supplies and possessions they could carry in eight wagons and a carriage. The Taylors left a fine two-story brick home, a brick store, a printing office, a barn, and another building lot in town. Additionally, he owned 186 acres of arable land and timber east of the city. For his property and improvements, he would receive little or no compensation.”¹³

Soon after the Taylors arrived at Council Bluffs, John Taylor was called on a second mission to England. Leaving his family, on October 3, 1846, along with Parley P. Pratt and Orson Hyde, he set out for Liverpool. After five months, he returned to Winter Quarters and left soon after, on June 21, 1847, leading a company of over 1,500 Latter-day Saints to the Salt Lake Valley, where they arrived on October 5, 1847.¹⁴

After being in the valley a few months, John Taylor was called to serve another mission, this time to France. While in France, he oversaw translation of the Book of Mormon for the first time into French,¹⁵ and then introduced the gospel to Germany. During this mission he wrote and published a volume titled *The Government*

CHAMPION OF LIBERTY

of God, a two-hundred-page book that demonstrated his ability and power as a moral philosopher. From 1854 to 1856 he was called upon to serve a mission to the Eastern States. There he again published a periodical; this one entitled the *Mormon*, and helped new immigrants on their way to Utah.

For the next twenty-five years, John Taylor worked diligently as an Apostle of the Lord in behalf of the kingdom of God. Serving for twenty-two years in the Utah Territorial Legislature, he also was elected Speaker of the House for a number of years. He labored as Utah County's probate judge, and, at the time he became President of the Church, was the territorial superintendent of schools.

On August 9, 1877, when President Brigham Young passed away, John Taylor became the leader of the Church, first as the President of the Quorum of the Twelve, and later as President of the Church, when he was sustained on October 10, 1880. During his presidency the Primary Association was established. Also in 1880 President John Taylor established the Jubilee Year for the Church, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the organization of the Church. Following the Old Testament tradition, he proposed to forgive one-half the debt of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company and one-half of the delinquent tithing of the Church owed by the poor. In addition, he redefined the seventies quorums and revitalized the office of stake president by clearly defining stake president's duties.

When Senator Edmunds of Vermont began to push legislation through Congress to curtail polygamy, President John Taylor, in typical fashion, took a firm stand in defense of this principle of the gospel. As each of the series of laws sponsored by Senator Edmunds became more stringent, President Taylor continued to take a strong stand: "His argument was not against

Prologue

his country, but against those who would use its power to abuse the rights of others.”¹⁶

Immaculate and fastidious in grooming, John Taylor always presented a striking appearance, being about six feet tall, muscular, energetic, and with an erect carriage. He often sported a worsted jacket with a velvet collar, waistcoat, and striped trousers, and had a shock of white hair and a deeply tanned complexion.

His last public appearance took place in the Tabernacle on February 1, 1885. Afterward, President Taylor was forced into hiding with other General Authorities, moving from place to place to avoid detection by federal authorities. During this time much of the business of the Church was accomplished through correspondence. This was a very difficult time in the life of John Taylor, but he held true to his convictions during his time in hiding. He had earlier said:

I expected when I came into this Church that I should be persecuted and proscribed. I expected that the people would be persecuted, but I believed that God had spoken, that the eternal principles of truth had been revealed, and that God had a work to accomplish which was in opposition to the ideas, values, and notions of men, and I did not know but it would cost me my life before I got through. Was there anything surprising in all of this? No. If they killed Jesus in former times, would not the same feeling and influence bring the same results in these times? I had counted the cost when I first started out, and stood prepared to meet it.¹⁷

Truly the “Champion of Liberty,” President Taylor devoted his life to the kingdom, suffering in his later years because of the federal persecution. Up to his late seventies, he was a very active man. He had liked to farm, work with his hands, and especially

CHAMPION OF LIBERTY

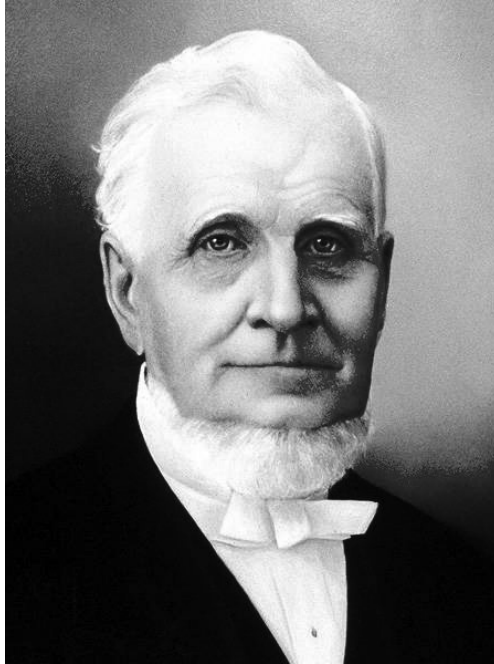
take long, vigorous walks. When he was forced into hiding, he was often confined in secluded locations that curtailed his walking. This lack of exercise sapped his vitality, and he began to dwindle. For him, it was like dying a little every day. On July 18, 1887, President Taylor and his counselors met together for the first time in three and a half years. That meeting would prove to be their last. Precisely one week later, on July 25, 1887, John Taylor died in exile in Kaysville, Utah.

John Taylor left a great legacy. It is the purpose of this book that his legacy might be remembered. The Prophet Joseph Smith told John Taylor, “Elder Taylor you have received the Holy Spirit and if you heed promptings of the same it will become within you a Fountain of Continuous Revelation from God.”¹⁸ John Taylor’s words, as we study them in this volume, will become a continuous fountain of revelation for the reader. I would hope that this book would answer John Taylor’s hope when the *Improvement Era* commenced. On the flyleaf of the magazine, he wrote, “What you young people want is a book that can be bound and kept with something in it worth keeping.” Certainly the essays about the life and teachings of John Taylor bound in this volume are worth keeping.

NOTES

1. John R. Winder to Bishop J. F. Richards. “A letter from John Rex Winder to the family of the late President John Taylor,” MSD 4975, Church History Library, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; transcription in author’s possession.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Dedication of the John Taylor Building,” 3.

Prologue



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3. Paul Hyde and Dennis Wright, “John Taylor,” in *Presidents of the Church: The Lives and Teachings of the Modern Prophets*, ed. Craig Manscill, Robert Freeman, and Dennis Wright (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2008), 68.
4. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1857), 4:34.
5. Matthias F. Cowley, “Reminiscences of President John Taylor,” address given at LDS University, October 4, 1925, 4, Americana Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo Utah; cataloging in process, see reference desk.

CHAMPION OF LIBERTY

6. T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), 664.
7. B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 9–10.
8. Cowley, “Reminiscences of President John Taylor,” 2.
9. Richard L. Jensen, “The John Taylor Family,” *Ensign*, February 1980, 50–51.
10. Hinckley, “Dedication of the John Taylor Building,” 3.
11. B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 423; John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 343.
12. Hyde and Wright, “John Taylor,” 73.
13. Hyde and Wright, “John Taylor,” 74.
14. Hyde and Wright, “John Taylor,” 74.
15. See Richard D. McClellan, “Traduit de L’Anglais: The First French Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11, no. 1 (2002): 29–34.
16. Hyde and Wright, “John Taylor,” 65.
17. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:86.
18. Cowley, “Reminiscences of President John Taylor,” 5.