

THE MORMON IMAGE IN LITERATURE

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IN  
LITERATURE

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THE MORMONESS;  
OR,  
THE TRIALS OF MARY MAVERICK  
A NARRATIVE OF REAL EVENTS

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BY  
PROFESSOR JOHN RUSSELL  
OF BLUFFDALE

1853

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Edited and Annotated by  
Michael Austin  
and Ardis E. Parshall

GREG KOFFORD BOOKS

Published in 1853, the first American novel about the Mormons is also one of the best. John Russell, an Illinois journalist and educator, witnessed the persecution in Missouri and Illinois and generally sympathized with the Saints. *The Mormoness* tells the story of Mary Maverick, the heroine of the novel, who joined the Mormon Church when her husband was converted in Illinois. Though not initially a believer, Mary embraces her identity as “the Mormoness” when her husband and son are killed in a Haun’s Mill-like massacre—and at the end of the novel, she must find a way to forgive the killer.

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CLAUDINE LAVALLE;  
OR,  
THE FIRST CONVICT.

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ALTON:  
COUBIER STEAM PRESS PRINT.

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But is the learned, the enlightened, noble Varus,  
The victim of delusion?—It cannot be!  
I'll not believe it."—*The Martyr.*

"*Halloo! Halloo!*" uttered in the loudest tones of the human voice, instantly brought the little family of James Maverick to the door. At the gate was the well-known son of a neighbor, mounted upon a shaggy, half-broken colt, which he was fond of riding because it was his own. The animal seemed resolved, by his rearing and pitching, of which the boy was not a little proud, to give his rider no opportunity of performing his errand. But, at length, with many interruptions, intermingled with the frequent cry of "who-a! who-a, Tecumseh," the message was delivered, and the youth and his steed were on their way to the next neighbor's, to deliver there the same tidings.

That young man was the son of Deacon Hezekiah Cobb, a worthy old farmer of that settlement, whose house was known far and near to the religious community by the expressive name of "*Pilgrim's Tavern.*" Not only preachers of the gospel, but professors of religion of every stripe, found a welcome under his hospitable roof. The very sight of his well-filled barn often made the veriest "*backslider*" devout. Many and many a church member, seldom suspected, at home, of being righteous overmuch, has driven his weary horses ten miles beyond a tavern to put up for the night with the good deacon, rather than stay with "the people of the world."

He had sent his son to acquaint the inhabitants of the settlement, far and near, that a Mormon had arrived at his house, and would preach in the school-house that night, at early candle light.

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GREG KOFFORD BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

# John Russell of Bluffdale and the Trials of Mary Maverick

In his famous *Autobiography*, Parley P. Pratt recalls that he and fellow missionary William E. McLellin faced considerable opposition from Baptist ministers when they started preaching in Green County, Illinois in the winter of 1833. He reports that a preacher named “Dotson” took great offense to the Book of Mormon and “opposed us with much zeal . . . both in public and in private, and from house to house.” John Mason Peck, perhaps the most famous Baptist in Illinois, engaged them in lengthy disputes designed to humiliate them.<sup>1</sup>

But one of the Illinois Baptists was different from the others. Pratt reports that “a Baptist minister by the name of John Russell, a very learned and influential man, invited us to tarry in the neighborhood and continue to preach.” He continues that Russell “said that his house should be our home, and he called a vote of the people whether they wished us to preach more. The vote was unanimous in the affirmative.”<sup>2</sup> This generosity of mind and spirit was typical of the man who extended it. John Russell was one of the most formidable educators, editors, and writers of Western Illinois during the first half of the nineteenth century. But he was also famous for his open mind and his willingness to defend those whom others had determined to attack.

Born and educated in Vermont, Russell came to the frontier with his family at a time when “going West” was simply what young people did if they wanted opportunities for advancement. After graduating from Vermont’s Middlebury College in 1817,

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1. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 6th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 84–92. “Dotson” is almost certainly “Elijah Dobson,” a local Baptist leader and friend of John Russell. It was Dobson who signed Russell’s license to preach the same year.

2. *Ibid.*, 84.

Russell first went South to teach classics, literature, and modern languages in Georgia. He soon left that position, however, when it became apparent that his anti-slavery views were incompatible with the community he served. He spent eight years in the St. Louis area as a teacher and private tutor before settling permanently with his family in Illinois in 1828. He purchased land in Green County that he called “Bluffdale,” which eventually became the name of the surrounding town. The town merged with the man, and, for the rest of his life he wrote and interacted with people as “John Russell of Bluffdale.”

We know from their letters to each other that both Russell and his wife Laura were impressed with Pratt and not entirely opposed to Mormonism in its earliest incarnation. In April of 1833, John wrote Laura from nearby Alton to tell her that “Mormonism is the main theme of inquiry” and that “[i]t was circulated in this region that I had joined them.” He went on to say that several of his acquaintances “said it was actually a fact that I had been baptized and joined. . . . I have said nothing against either them or any one else, and so you must hear no fears that I have said anything hard, as I know you would have.”<sup>3</sup> A year later, in another letter, Laura told John that “Mr. Pratt has been in Bluffdale again, accompanied with an Elder by the name of White, a very smart man.” She commended both their preaching and their understanding of scripture and closed the letter with the observation that “the Mormonites preach some truths that sink with weight on my mind. If it is (as some affirm) fanaticism I like to hear it.”<sup>4</sup>

No member of the Russell family ever joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but they continued to receive Mormon missionaries cordially whenever they passed through Green County. When the Saints were expelled from Missouri, a

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3. John Russell to Laura Ann Russell, April 27, 1833. John Russell and Family Papers, 1792–1927, box 1, folder 4. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, Illinois.

4. Laura Russell to John Russell, Bluffdale, January 5, 1834. John Russell and Family Papers, box 1, folder 4.

number of Latter-day Saints, including Pratt and Sidney Rigdon, took refuge in the Russell's home, and it was from them, his son later wrote, that John heard "the heartrending stories and barbarity of the cut-throat Missourians." One of these stories in particular stayed with Russell for a long time: the story of the Merrick family—Levi Merrick and his nine-year-old son Charley, who were killed by the mob that attacked Haun's Mill in October of 1838, and Philinda Clark Eldredge Merrick, the Mormon mother who watched as her husband and son were murdered for their beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Fifteen years later, Russell would imagine the life of Philinda Merrick before and after Haun's Mill as he wrote one of the first fictional accounts of Mormonism in American history.

Long before writing *The Mormoness*, Russell tried to use his influence to help the Latter-day Saints in Illinois. One of his most frequent correspondents in the 1830s and 1840s was Thomas Gregg, a prominent journalist who was associated with the *Warsaw Signal*—a Hancock County newspaper that adopted a harsh anti-Mormon tone in 1841 under the editorship of Thomas Sharp. In a letter to Gregg dated July 7, 1841 (See Appendix B), Russell took great exception to the *Signal's* anti-Mormon editorial policy. "I do not believe that it is your intention to excite a mob against these deluded fanatics," he wrote to his friend, "but you could not pursue a more direct course to affect that object, if such was your design."

Even as he made it clear that he rejected the Mormons' theology and their claims of revelation, Russell devoted seven handwritten pages to criticizing the paper's rhetoric. Russell criticized what he saw as two major flaws in the paper's position. First, he insisted that American citizens had the right to be wrong in religious matters without being subjected to violent attacks. "Joe Smith is an American citizen," he lamented, "and shame on the people—all that can tamely stand by and see the sacred rights of any American cloven down."

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5. Spencer G. Russell, "John Russell of Bluffdale, Illinois," *Transactions of the Illinois Historical Society* 6 (1901): 103–7.

Russell also argued that the *Signal* would end up strengthening Mormonism by causing it to be persecuted and, thereby, validated. Speaking of Nauvoo, he wrote, “I have not a doubt but that the *Signal* will destroy the settlement and town of the Mormons. I am fearful that on opening the next number I shall see that event announced in starring capitals.” But he also felt that “the excitement will soon fade away and the deepest feelings of sympathy be awakened for that people. Their errors will all be forgotten in their sufferings.”<sup>6</sup>

A year later, when Gregg took over publication of the *Signal* from Sharp, he did substantially moderate the paper’s editorial policy towards the Mormons, though there is no way of knowing what, if any, influence Russell’s letter had on that decision.

### John Russell the Writer

Like many educated people of his day, John Russell could not completely support himself and his family as a writer, an editor, a teacher, a minister, or a public intellectual—so he pieced together a livelihood combining all of these vocations into a single career. Twice after moving to Bluffdale, he left home for extended periods of time to take positions as a newspaper editor in Kentucky (1841–1842) and a school master in Louisiana (1843–1849), which meant that he was away from Illinois during most of the time that the Mormons were in Nauvoo. For two years (1837–1839), he edited his own newspaper called *The Backwoodsman*, based in Grafton, Illinois. And for the entire time that he lived in Bluffdale, his income was supplemented by his position as the local postmaster.

More than most frontier intellectuals, however, Russell was able to earn a good portion of his income by writing for local publications. He wrote his first book when he was only nineteen years old—a historical work called *The Authentic History of the Vermont State’s Prison* (1812), which was commissioned by the state government to comply with a federal law. In his introduc-

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6. John Russell to Thomas Gregg, Bluffdale, 7 July 1841. John Russell and Family Papers, box 1, folder 6.

tion, Russell acknowledged that his only motivation for writing the book was “the aid that the sale of the copyright would afford the author in obtaining a collegial education.”<sup>7</sup> And it worked. The money that he earned from the book allowed him to begin studies at Middlebury College in 1814 and launched him in his career as a man of letters.

Russell contributed many pieces of fiction and nonfiction to the frontier presses in Missouri and Illinois, including novels, novellas, and at least one extended work of comparative theology. However, throughout his life, he was known as a writer, primarily as the author of “The Venomous Worm”—a 450-word cautionary message about the evils of alcohol, published in a Missouri newspaper sometime between 1819 and 1821. In 1838, this obscure little parable was included in the first edition of the fourth grade *McGuffey Reader*. For the next fifty years, nearly everybody in the United States who made it to the fourth grade read at least one work by John Russell of Bluffdale. Nearly fifty years after Russell’s death, it was reprinted by the Illinois State Historical Society in its official journal, with the following preface: “The Secretary of the Illinois State Historical Society has had many requests from interested persons for copies of ‘The Venomous Worm,’ which is perhaps the most famous of Prof. John Russell’s writings. We accordingly reprint it in order that it may be easily accessible to interested persons.”<sup>8</sup>

The bulk of Russell’s fiction was written for three different kinds of publications in three roughly defined periods of his life. Between 1833 and 1836, he wrote a group of short stories for the *Western Monthly Magazine, and Literary Journal*, a historical-literary journal published by Judge James Hall and centered in Vandalia, Illinois.<sup>9</sup> In the early 1850s, he published several works of fiction in the

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7. *The Authentic History of the Vermont State’s Prison* (Wright and Sibley Printers, 1812), unpaginated introductory material.

8. John Russell, “The Venomous Worm,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 4, no. 3 (October 1911): 349–50.

9. Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 595–98.

*Alton Courier* in nearby Alton, Illinois. And in the late 1850s he wrote a number of stories and novellas with religious themes for the American Baptist Publication Society of Philadelphia.

*The Mormoness, or, the Trials of Mary Maverick* belongs to this middle group of works. It was originally published in six installments in the *Alton Courier* in August and September of 1853. As soon as it finished its run, it was combined with another of Russell's serials called *Claudine Lavalley, or, The First Convict* and published in book form by the *Courier's* press.<sup>10</sup> When published in this form, *The Mormoness* became arguably the first, and undoubtedly one of the most important fictional accounts of the Mormons by somebody who had been an eyewitness to their struggles.

### The Trials of Mary Maverick

We can call *The Mormoness, or, The Trials of Mary Maverick* “the first novel to treat Mormonism” only with two important qualifications. In the first place, it is not quite a novel. At about 25,000 words, it is better described as a novella, though very few Americans in 1853 would have known or cared much about the difference. And it is not quite the first sustained work of fiction about Mormons. That designation goes to a book written ten years earlier: *Monsieur Violet* (1843) by the British adventure writer Frederick Marrayat, which incorporates a visit to Nauvoo in its main character's sprawling odyssey across the American West.<sup>11</sup>

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10. John Russell, *Claudine Lavalley, or, The First Convict; [and] The Mormoness, or, The Trials of Mary Maverick* (Alton [Ill.]: Courier Steam Press, 1853). It is likely that Russell wrote *Claudine Lavalley* specifically for this volume. It is the only one of his longer works whose handwritten manuscript is preserved in his papers, and there is no record of an earlier publication.

11. Kent Larson raises the possibility of a novella or narrative poem published in 1840 or 1841 by the Mormon Nauvoo resident Lyman Omer Littlefield. In 1841, Littlefield published a poem entitled *The Latter Day Saints* under the name “Omer, author of *Eliza, or, the Broken Vow*.” This earlier work is presumed to have been published in the *Illinois Republican* before 1841, but no copies have ever been found, and we can only make guesses about its genre. See Kent Larson's “Desperately



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## CHAPTER I.

“Delusion! Ah! The *weak* may be deluded,  
But is the learned, the enlightened, noble Varus,  
The victim of delusion?—It cannot be!  
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{37} *Halloo! Halloo!* uttered in the loudest tones of the human voice, instantly brought the little family of James Maverick to the door. At the gate was the well-known son of a neighbor, mounted upon a shaggy, half-broken colt, which he was fond of riding because it was his own. The animal seemed resolved, by his rearing and pitching, of which the boy was not a little proud, to give his rider no opportunity of performing his errand. But, at length, with many interruptions, intermingled with the frequent cry of “who-a! who-a, Tecumseh,” the message was delivered, and the youth and his steed were on their way to the next neighbor’s to deliver there the same tidings.

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1. *The Martyr* is an 1826 poetic drama by the Scottish poet and playwright Joanna Baillie (1762–1851).

{38} This intelligence excited the most intense interest all over the populous settlement of Sixteen Mile Prairie, for the Mormons were then comparatively few in number, and nothing known of them in that region, except from report. Rumor indeed with her hundred tongues, had informed the public that Joe Smith, the founder of the sect, was regarded by his infatuated followers as a prophet—that he pretended to have dug up a set of Golden Plates inscribed with Hebrew characters, which, by miraculous agency, he had translated—that these writings were received by them as a Revelation, and were printed as such under the name of the "*Book of Mormon*." It was likewise known that these self-styled "*Latter-Day Saints*" claimed the power of healing the sick, and of working various other miracles. A thousand reports were in circulation, that exhibited both their doctrines and practices in a very unfavorable light, and these rumors, however absurd or contradictory, gained implicit belief. It was a subject of wonder that any human being of sane mind could be deluded into a belief in Mormonism.

The secret enemies of the Christian religion, whom a regard for their own reputation restrained from uttering their sentiments openly against divine revelation, were loud against the Mormons. In assailing their claims to working miracles and other professions, they leveled many a blow, safely, that bore equally hard upon the miracles of the Scriptures. Among the truly pious, Mormonism was regarded with sorrow, not unmingled with indignation against its leaders.

Such was the state of public opinion at that period upon the subject of the new sect, generally. In Sixteen Mile Prairie there could probably have been found one, in the whole length and breadth of the settlement, who would not have resented, as a gross insult, the bare suggestion that he might one day become a friend to the Mormons.

Even at this early period in their history, the Latter-Day Saints were met at every point with a most deadly hostility. Hundreds who had lived godless lives suddenly felt so much zeal for pure and undefiled religion, that they could not endure the false doc-

trines of the Mormons, and would gladly have exterminated the whole sect.

Among all the enemies of this deluded sect, there could hardly have been found one more determined, more unrelenting in his opposition, than James Maverick. He was an intelligent, well-informed man, and had read, with eager interest, every thing upon the subject with which the newspapers of his day teemed. With the history of the sect he was familiar, and had pondered upon every incident of it, from the discovery of the Golden Plates down to the last feature which this ever-varying delusion had assumed. {39}

No phrenologist accustomed to the study of human character would have doubted, for a moment, that the feelings of young Maverick would be deeply excited upon every subject that enlisted his attention. His high, broad forehead and prominently developed mental organs displayed, in no ordinary degree, firmness of mind, reverence and conscientiousness, traits of character so conspicuous in the early martyrs. His large blue eyes, fringed with long and drooping eye-lashes, gave to his countenance, especially when he was buried in silent thought, a faint shade of melancholy.

And yet, these manly and even stern traits of character were not unmingled with milder developments. The veriest stranger would have read in his frank, open countenance, kindness of heart and disinterested benevolence.

Almost from childhood, like his wife, he had been a church member, and his deportment through all that period attested the sincerity of his profession. Even the most unblushing scoffer paid an involuntary tribute to James Maverick. Judge Maverick, his father, who belonged to the same denomination, had held many important offices in one of the Eastern States, where, by industry and economy, he had acquired a competency. A few years previous to the opening of this story, Judge Maverick had removed to Greene country, Illinois and purchased a large tract of land in Sixteen Mile Prairie. He gave to James, his eldest and only married son, a quarter section, distant some three miles from his own

residence, erected for him a neat dwelling house, enabled him to place a part of his farm under cultivation, and supplied him liberally with stock. Active, enterprising and intelligent, aided heart and hand by his little wife, whom he devotedly loved, their farm and every thing around them soon assumed an air of successful industry and rural happiness, that often drew from the passing traveler involuntary expressions of admiration. An old neighbor of theirs frequently declared that the sun actually shone brighter upon the farm, and especially around the dwelling of James and Mary Maverick, than it did anywhere else in the whole settlement. It is quite possible that the old man, had he been a chemist skilled in the analysis of kindly affection, would have discovered that much of the sunshine around the cottage of the Mavericks was merely the sunshine of their own hearts.

Be that as it may, it must nevertheless be confessed that no object seen in all the wide landscape of Sixteen Mile was more pleasing to the eye than that simple cottage. All along its sides the scarlet trumpet {40} flower, the Bignonia and the Lonicera, had been trained by Mary to climb to the very eaves. In early summer, when the broad, bell-shaped blossoms hung in festoons along the walls, and over the windows, troops of humming birds were seen, from early dawn till sunset, darting from flower to flower. The busy, pattering feet of "Little Eddy" stood still in speechless admiration, as he watched the hummingbirds as they hung quivering in air over the blossom for a moment, and then darted away, swift as a ray of light, to sip the honey from some other flower. He gazed with absorbed attention upon the bright-winged butter-flies, and the wild bees that hovered around, drinking the fragrance of the flowers. At such times the young mother, almost as childlike as little Eddy himself, would often watch with absorbing interest the varying expression of his features, without uttering a word, or daring to stir, so fearful was she of breaking the spell. Her eyes not unfrequently grew moist as she thus gazed upon him, and her lips moved, but uttered no sound audible to mortal ears.

The brief snatches of time which more serious duties did not claim were usually devoted by her to ornamenting their home,

that she might render it more attractive to her husband and child. With a broad sun-bonnet upon her head, and little Eddy at her side, as a special reward to him for being good, she tended the flowers and shrubs she had planted in the yard. Rare plants, that required but little care beyond daily watering, ornamented her windows in summer, and in the cold, leaf-less season of winter afforded an air of cheerfulness to the parlor. Aside from her own love of the beautiful, she had still another object. She was desirous that her child, with the earliest dawn of a wakening mind, should acquire a love for the cheap pleasures which nature has poured out with so liberal a hand to all who know the value of her rich treasures. She believed that the youth who can derive enjoyment from the beautiful and the sublime of nature, whether seen in the rushing torrent, the towering cliff, the rifted storm-cloud, the lofty oak whose broad top had bid defiance to the tempests of many a century, the wide sweep of a western prairie, or the humble flower, had acquired not only a source of unfailing enjoyment, but also no mean safe-guard of virtue. She wished to render all the early and most hallowed recollections of his childhood, in after years, endearing memories of his mother and his home.

We trust that our readers, should we be so fortunate as to have any, will pardon us for dwelling thus long and minutely upon the character of Mary Maverick, for we are describing a real personage, and not an {41} imaginary being. At the risk of being tedious, we shall attempt to lay her character open to the reader, that he may know fully the heart of the little woman who is doomed to meet the buffeting of the storm.

Let it not be imagined that Sixteen Mile Prairie so nearly resembled paradise, that the ambition of Mary Maverick to render her home attractive excited no envy, malice, or ill-will. To some of her neighbors, and especially of her own sex, the shrubbery and flowers of the little woman were really gall and wormwood. Unkind remarks upon the subject were not unfrequently made to Mary herself, but more frequently they reached her ear through the officious zeal of some visitor, who professed to be the defender of the abused little woman. These reports produced

but a slight and momentary impression upon the mind of Mrs. Maverick, who listened to them with a smile, and not unfrequently, when anything more than usually spiteful was uttered, burst into a merry laugh, and in ten minutes forgot all about it. It was far otherwise with her husband. He felt these carplings of envy and malice more deeply than he was willing to confess; and it sometimes required all her soothing influence, which she knew well how to exert, to induce him to refrain from openly expressing his resentment to her detractors. One evening a neighboring lady called upon them, at a time when Mrs. Maverick chanced to be watering a large and beautiful moss rose, whose numerous blossoms filled the whole room with their fragrance. "Is not that beautiful, Mrs. Jones?" exclaimed the delighted husband to their visitor, pointing to the rose. The walk of that lady through the yard, between rows of shrubs and flowers, had already excited her ill-humor, which instantly broke forth at the remark of the gratified husband. "Oh, yes," she exclaimed, "beautiful, no doubt; but anybody can have just such, if they choose. I could plant shrubbery just as well as your wife, Mr. Maverick, but I have something else to do. Mary finds time every day to read, teach her boy, tend flowers, and paint these pictures that hang up here on the wall; but while she is doing this, I am making butter and cheese, using my needle, or attending to my work." This broad and undisguised insinuation that Mary neglected her household duties for these amusements, was rather more than the patience of her husband could bear. It was the drop too much that made the cup overflow. Maverick instantly sprang from his seat, and, in spite of the look of entreaty from his wife, bowing with mock deference and humility to Mrs. Jones, begged her to accompany him and Mary. He led their visitor into their little dairy, where everything was perfectly neat and in order, and showed Mrs. Jones the rows of rich {42} cheese that adorned the shelves. He then conducted her to the cellar, where, in a cool place, jars of butter were packed, yellow as gold.

On their return to the parlor, Maverick remarked: "I do not know how much sewing you have done this year, Mrs. Jones,