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William Law, Nauvoo Dissenter

Lyndon W. Cook

Dissent is not a novel topic in Mormon history. Nor is it the most urgent issue confronting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today. Nonetheless, for the student of Latter-day Saint history the disaffection of its members, and especially its leaders, has a peculiar interest and significance. Indeed, the pages of early Mormon history are filled with undulations of dissent and apostasy. The tragedies at Kirtland and Far West are vividly remembered. When a conflict of position occurs, it is often accompanied by a clash of passion. In such circumstances it is not always easy to discern who is at fault. William Law, a member of the First Presidency of the LDS church in Nauvoo, Illinois, became an apostate in 1844, shortly before Joseph Smith was murdered at Carthage. According to his own statements and actions, William Law had developed a genuine commitment to Mormonism before becoming a schismatic. However, by the spring of 1843 his commitment began to waver, and by early 1844 he had concluded that the Mormon leader Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet. Because many of William Law's statements are vindictive and self-serving, they must be weighed accordingly. Some crucial comments regarding his apostasy were made in moments of tremendous fear and anger; others were offered after many years of reflection. This paper will attempt to identify the fundamental causes of William Law's apostasy.

Born in 1809, William Law was a native of Northern Ireland. The Laws (William was the youngest of five brothers) immigrated to America about 1819–1820, finally settling in western Pennsylvania. Easily obtained land and the opportunity for financial improvement lured young William to Upper Canada (Ontario). At Churchville (located twenty-five miles northwest of Toronto), William acquired farming ground, operated a mill along the Credit River, and served as local postmaster. Here in Upper Canada, at the age of twenty-four, William married his only wife: nineteen-year-old Jane Silverthorn.

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The attractive Canadian-born daughter of Thomas Silverthorn would be married to William Law for nearly half a century and would give birth to at least eight children.¹

A spin-off from Parley P. Pratt's missionary success in Toronto, Churchville was a temporary stronghold of Mormonism.² William and Jane Law were converted to the Mormon church in 1836 through the efforts of John Taylor and Almon W. Babbitt. In April of the following year William was ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood by Elder Pratt and assumed the leadership of the branch in Churchville. Joseph Horne, who first became acquainted with William Law while accompanying the Prophet Joseph Smith on a visit to Churchville in 1837, remembered the Irish convert as "a very good man."³

The Prophet's visit to the Toronto area in 1837 coincided with a period of unrest in Ontario and Quebec. Revolts broke out in both Upper and Lower Canada with the rebels demanding responsible government from the British. One source reported that during Joseph Smith's 1837 visit to Ontario he "told his Canad[ian] brethren . . . to sell while they could get out of the place or blood would be upon their heels."⁴ The faithful few who did not leave Canada for Missouri in 1837–1838 were detained only because of extenuating circumstances. William and Jane left Ontario in 1838 and located temporarily in Mercer County, Pennsylvania, where they waited for the Silverthorn estate to be divided and their share to be sold. William remarked at the time that he was anxious to "be gathered with the people of God" and informed his friend James Mulholland that as soon as the exiled Missouri Saints "fixed [a] place of resting" he would "endeavour to move there."⁵

Jane Law's interest in the Silverthorn estate was secured on 4 September 1839, but the Laws may have departed for Nauvoo

¹Biographical material is cited from Lyndon W. Cook, "'Brother Joseph Is Truly a Wonderful Man, He Is All We Could Wish a Prophet to Be': Pre-1844 Letters of William Law," *Brigham Young University Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 207–18. Two items of biography cited in the above source need correcting: (1) The best evidence now available identifies William Law's mother as Ann Hunter Law; Mary Wilson appears to be his paternal grandmother, and (2) William's death date should be 19 January 1892. Jane Silverthorn, William's wife, was born about 1814 and died 8 September 1882. The names and birthdates of William and Jane's eight children are—Richard, b. 28 February 1834; Rebecca, b. 30 March 1836; Thomas J., b. 4 March 1837; Helen, b. 17 March 1839; William, b. 31 January 1841; John, b. 14 June 1844; Wilson, b. 1 September 1846; and Cys, b. 29 May 1848.

²*The Christian Examiner* was published monthly in Toronto by the Presbyterian church. One of their ministers had preached in Churchville in late 1838 and noted that "this village was for a time the stronghold of Mormonism. . . . There they had frequent meetings both on Sabbath and week days, and a considerable number were baptized by their preacher." (*Christian Examiner*, 11 December 1838.)

³Diary and Reminiscences of Joseph Horne, pp. 1–2, Library–Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as Church Archives.

⁴Correspondence of Hepzibah Richards, Kirtland, Ohio, 28 January 1838, Church Archives.

⁵William Law to James Mulholland, 27 March 1839, Church Archives, cited in Cook, "Pre-1844 Letters of William Law," p. 216.

before the final papers were signed.⁶ The Prophet's history indicates that William led a seven-wagon caravan of Canadian Saints to the new gathering place, arriving the first week of November 1839.⁷ A complete list of names of those traveling under his direction has not survived, but it is known that, in addition to his own immediate family, William's non-Mormon brother, Wilson, was among the group.⁸ The aggressive Law brothers would play an active role in the Mormon community until the summer of 1844.

William's abilities as a committed follower and leader as well as his improved financial status made him a natural choice for church service at Nauvoo. In 1841, with divine confirmation, the Prophet Joseph Smith selected him as a counselor in the First Presidency.⁹ Shortly after this calling, one observer noted that "no man could be better fitted to his station" in the Presidency. William Law was considered to be a man having "great suavity of manners and amiability of character," "correct business habits," and "great devotion to the service of God."¹⁰ At the time of his call as Joseph Smith's counselor, the blue-eyed Irishman was thirty-one years old, five feet eight and one-half inches tall, and one hundred and seventy-five pounds. He would serve in the Presidency until the first week of January 1844 when his disgruntlement resulted in his being released.

Who would have guessed in January 1841 (when he was called to the Presidency) that within three years William Law would be a bitter enemy of Joseph Smith? Certainly there is nothing in his earlier writings that suggests any tentativeness in his commitment to the Restoration. It is perhaps significant that the reasons Law offered for his disaffection and schismatic behavior are remarkably similar to those given by other prominent Mormon dissenters of the same general period. These reasons essentially related to a growing "concentration of authority" in the hands of the President of the Church and the extension of that authority into the areas of politics and economics.¹¹

⁶The Thomas Silverthorn Estate Papers are located at the Land Registry Office, Brampton, Ontario, Canada.

⁷Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932-1951), 4:20; hereafter cited as *History of the Church*.

⁸Contrary to some reports, William's brother Wilson was baptized and ordained an elder in Nauvoo. Wilson Law came to Nauvoo a single man and left a widower. His marriage to Nauvoo schoolteacher Elizabeth F. Sikes (on 25 December 1842) ended abruptly when she died 31 March 1844 (see Lyndon W. Cook, comp., *Civil Marriages in Nauvoo and Some Outlying Areas: [1839-1845]* [Provo, Utah: Liberty Publishing Co., 1980], p. 19).

⁹See Doctrine and Covenants 124:91. The *Times and Seasons* 1 (1 February 1841): 310 included the following statement: "William Law has recently, by revelation, been appointed one of the first Presidency in the place of Hyrum Smith."

¹⁰*New York Herald*, 19 February 1842.

¹¹See Marvin S. Hill, "Cultural Crisis in the Mormon Kingdom: A Reconsideration of the Causes of Kirtland Dissent," *Church History* 49 (September 1980): 286-97.



William Law

The opposition manifested by Mormon dissenters during the late 1830s and early 1840s was actually consistent with the political and religious milieu of the day. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized at a time when much of American thought was pervaded by a democratic spirit that challenged authoritarianism and autocracy in government as well as in religion. One authority of the period has written that “the democratic revolution was at its height” in 1830.¹² Although the Book of Mormon and the written revelations gave the fledgling church an unmatched “popular authoritative appeal,” its first decade, nevertheless, was characterized by a certain democratic spirit and lack of defined theology.¹³

It is true that the high priests and more particularly their presidency (the Presidency of the High Priesthood) had assumed supremacy as a presiding elite in the Church during 1831–1834. But an organizational change occurred in 1835 that equally dispersed presiding priesthood authority among five quorums of church government and essentially abandoned the title “Presidency of the High Priesthood” in favor of “First Presidency.”¹⁴ This decentralizing action was apparently effected to calm the vocal opposition to alleged elitism and authoritarianism in the priesthood government.¹⁵ Beginning in 1837–1838, control of power again began to gravitate toward a single quorum: the First Presidency. As a result, the earlier democratic elements of the society gave way to a much more centralized church government during the remainder of Joseph Smith’s leadership. Events which served as prelude to this consolidation of power were undoubtedly related to the widespread apostasy in Ohio and Missouri in 1837–1838; the Prophet’s Missouri incarceration in 1838–1839; the founding of Nauvoo as a city–state; and Joseph Smith’s frustrating trip to Washington, D.C., in 1839–1840. This administrative metamorphosis in church government actually thrust the Mormon community towards a closed theocratic society and away

¹²Gordon S. Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” *New York History* 61 (October 1980): 381.

¹³The conversion of the early Mormon was obtained as much by a reliance on authority (i.e., written revelations and witnesses of angelic appearances) as through personal experience with the supernatural.

¹⁴See Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith: A Historical and Biographical Commentary of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Provo: Seventy’s Mission Bookstore, 1981), pp. 136 and 216. D&C 107, received 28 March 1835, confirmed this decentralization of authority.

¹⁵See “Orson Hyde and Hyrum Smith to The Bishop, His Council and the Inhabitants in Zion,” 14 January 1833, cited in *History of the Church*, 1:318–19. The Missouri Saints had charged Joseph with seeking “monarchical power and authority” (p. 318). David Whitmer’s *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, Mo.: n.p., 1887) details his objections to the office of high priest (pp. 62–67). See also William E. McLellan to Joseph Smith III, 10 January 1861 and July 1872 (both letters located at Library–Archives, The Auditorium, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Independence, Mo.).

from the more popular elements of democracy that were then finding expression in America. Some converts, like William Law, were uncomfortable submitting to this kind of ecclesiastical control.

It is not altogether clear why William Law was attracted to Mormonism. His former religious affiliation has not been ascertained,¹⁶ but it does seem evident that he saw himself as a religious man. He believed that his own salvation required he live a moral life and assist in saving others through preaching the gospel. Each conversion to Mormonism contained common elements but also differences. While it may be difficult to establish a rigid continuity in the process of conversion to Mormonism, the announcement of the appearances of Moroni, the reception and translation of the gold plates, and the unique LDS claim to authority figured prominently. William Law certainly was captivated by these component parts of the latter-day message.¹⁷ A letter written in 1837, one year after Law's conversion, gives insight into his feelings at that time. Corresponding with his friend and one-time idol, Isaac Russell, the twenty-eight-year-old convert witnessed a maturing commitment to Mormonism:

Although trials persecutions, privations and sorrows await the Saints, yet God will not forsake them; yea, in the hour of their greatest need, he will stand by them to deliver. . . . Bro Joseph is truly a wonderful man he is all we could wish a prophet to be—and Bro. Sidney what Eloquence is his, and think how he has sacrificed for the Truth. . . . I am aware we must endure affliction, but I wont shrink from my calling though I should have to sacrafice [*sic*] all things—¹⁸

Persecution and suffering—normally recognized as negative feelings—often create “a sense of mutuality” among members of a religious society by giving focus to group sentiment. Like any emergency, persecution tends to make people more aware of their common interests and to draw attention to those values which make up the “collective conscience” of the society.¹⁹ For William Law, religious persecution resulted in a stronger commitment to Mormonism because he regarded such persecution as God's test of his worthiness. In March 1839 William wrote to a fellow-Saint it was “wisdom

¹⁶Like his older brother James Law, William may have been a Presbyterian before joining the Mormon church (see *History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania* [Chicago, Ill.: Brown, Runk and Co., Publishers, 1888], p. 1157).

¹⁷The importance of modern revelation and proper priesthood authority to act in God's name are notions which consistently find expression in William Law's writings.

¹⁸William Law to Isaac Russell, 10 November 1837, Church Archives, cited in Cook, “Pre-1844 Letters of William Law,” pp. 211–12.

¹⁹Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans—A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), p. 4.

in the Almighty” the Saints had been exiled from Missouri. Through it all, he said, the Church would “be purged and made clean.”²⁰

Although American society was very fluid during this period, converting to Mormonism and “gathering to Zion” often upset religious tradition and broke up families. William’s writings after his conversion reflect the new emphasis of this period on “the value of the individual” and a faith in the “ability of the common person.”²¹ He informed an esteemed fellow-convert in 1839 that his family’s antagonism to his new religious interests had not dissuaded him. “My father is much opposed to [Mormonism] from evil reports &c. which he has heard,” wrote William, but this does “not discourage us, as we know in whom we trust, we are determined to hold out to the end though we may have to suffer all things.”²²

William Law wasted little time putting down roots at Nauvoo. With his brother, Wilson, as partner, he purchased properties, opened a store, and proceeded to build a much-needed steammill. A man of enterprise, William was dedicated to self-improvement through shrewd investment and hard work. He saw in the large influx of Mormons to Nauvoo an opportunity personally to take advantage of the economic growth of the community. Though he was not wealthy, the native Irishman was a man of means, and his influence among the Canadian Saints now began to expand Churchwide as he assumed his new calling in the Presidency.

Evidence that William Law had unreservedly thrown his lot with the Saints can be demonstrated by itemizing even a few of his church-related activities after arriving in Nauvoo. In early 1840 he apparently became Joseph Smith’s creditor when he promised the Mormon prophet one hundred dollars to defray traveling expenses to Washington, D.C.²³ This was only the beginning of an extensive

²⁰William Law to James Mulholland, 27 March 1839, Church Archives, cited in Cook, “Pre-1844 Letters of William Law,” p. 215.

²¹Carl N. Degler et al., *The Democratic Experience: An American History*, 2 vols. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1981), 1:179.

²²William Law to Isaac Russell, 17 January 1839, Church Archives, cited in Cook, “Pre-1844 Letters of William Law,” p. 214.

²³*History of the Church*, 4:51. In the spring and summer of 1840 William and Jane Law extended an affectionate hand to Edward Partridge’s family during the Bishop’s final illness. Emily Partridge remembered the kindness of the Laws during her family’s distressed condition at Nauvoo: “While my father lay sick, my sister Eliza and I, and some of the other children were sick also, and it was very unpleasant for so many sick to be in one small room. Brother and Sister Law took Eliza and I home with them and showed us every kindness. I felt as though I had almost got to heaven, after all the years of suffering that we had endured, and now to be in such a good house, and to have a comfortable bed to lay upon, with nourishing and palatable food, I almost thought that it was too pleasant to be true.

“After father’s death, Brother Law took our whole family home and administered to our wants, and with such good and kind care we began to improve in health, and when we had sufficiently regained our health we went back into our little hut once more.” (“Autobiography of Emily D. P. Young,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14 [15 July 1885]: 26.)

credit–debit relationship which would continue between the two men for the next four years.²⁴ In January 1841 William accepted a call to serve in the First Presidency, and in June through August of that year he took a mission to Philadelphia with Hyrum Smith.²⁵ From 1840 through 1843 William made his home available for church meetings of all kinds, and during approximately the same time period he filled regular preaching assignments at Nauvoo and in Lee County, Iowa Territory.²⁶ The First Presidency counselor defended Joseph Smith's character in 1842 by issuing public statements condemning John C. Bennett's licentious conduct at Nauvoo, and later that same year (September–November) William made a second mission to the Eastern States to preach the gospel, regulate church affairs, and counter Bennett's allegations of immoral conduct on the part of the Prophet.²⁷ With eight others Law received the ancient endowment from Joseph Smith in May 1842 and continued to meet in private councils with the Prophet until January 1844.²⁸ William aided Joseph Smith immeasurably during the latter's hiding from law-enforcement officers during August through December 1842, and both Law brothers extended moral and financial support to the Prophet during his trial in Springfield, Illinois, in January 1843.²⁹ Finally, when Joseph was arrested in Dixon, Illinois, in June 1843, for treason, William and Wilson Law were again numbered among those who rendered valuable assistance in his rescue.³⁰

These activities of faith and friendship brought William Law closer to Joseph Smith, resulting in an increased identification with

²⁴See Nauvoo Day Book of William Law (27 April 1841–9 July 1842), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; and Nauvoo Day Book of Joseph Smith (1 July 1842–24 July 1843), Cedar Rapids, Iowa Masonic Lodge (microfilm copy in Church Archives).

²⁵*History of the Church*, 4:284–86 and 5:37; Journal of George A. Smith, 21 June 1841, Church Archives.

²⁶The Nauvoo High Council Minutes, Church Archives, show that the High Council often met at Law's house. (See also *History of the Church*, 4:340 and 583; Journal of Wilford Woodruff, 10 April 1842, Church Archives; and *Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton 1840–1842*, ed. James B. Allen and Thomas G. Alexander [Santa Barbara, Calif.: Peregrine Smith, 1974], p. 212.)

²⁷*Times and Seasons* 3 (1 August 1842): 872–73, and *History of the Church*, 5:146, 160, and 183. See also *Affidavits and Certificates, Disapproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters* (Nauvoo, 31 August 1842).

²⁸Heber C. Kimball Journal 1840–1845, "Strange Events," Church Archives: "[On 4 May 1842] I was anointed into the ancient order was washed and anointed and Sealed and ordained a Preast, and Soforth. in company with nine others. Viz Joseph Smith Hiram Smith Wm Law Wm Law Marks Judge [James] Adams, Brigham Young Willard Richards, George Miller N K Whitney." In December 1845 Heber C. Kimball recalled the inauguration of the temple endowment: "About 4 years ago next May nine persons were admitted into the Holy order 5 are now living—B. Young—W[illard] Richards George Miller—N. K. Whitney & H. C. Kimball two are dead [James Adams and Hyrum Smith], and two are worse than dead [William Law and William Marks]" (Heber C. Kimball Journal 1845–1846, 21 December 1845, in the handwriting of William Clayton, Church Archives).

²⁹See *History of the Church*, 5:103 and 119. See also Wilson Law's bill of expenses against the "Estate of Joseph Smith, dec'd," 23 May 1845, original in possession of Steven G. Barnett, Salt Lake City.

³⁰See "William Patterson McIntire Report of Joseph's Arrest at Dixon as Near as He Can Remember," dated 3 October 1843, Church Archives.

the Saints and a deepening feeling of commitment to Mormonism. In November 1840 William confidently informed a temporary convert that the Mormon church was the “only organised Church on the Earth [that] God now acknowledges.” After living in close proximity to the Prophet for a year in Nauvoo, William penned his appraisal of the Mormon leader:

I have carefully watched his movements since I have been here, and I assure you I have found him honest and honourable in all our transactions which have been very considerable I believe he is an honest upright man, and as to his follies let who ever is guiltless throw the first stone at him, I shant do it.³¹

All this clearly suggests that before his apostasy William Law had achieved a high level of commitment to Mormonism (especially to Joseph Smith). Yet for all his apparent willingness to take greater risks and to tolerate suffering for his new religion, William’s loyalty to the Mormon prophet was critically and decisively tested in 1843–1844. William must have imagined that the place of a living prophet was only to restore a New Testament church, with proper authority to perform essential ordinances and promulgate Christian teachings; however, Joseph Smith’s mission was to restore a dispensation of the fulness of ancient times, with plenary power to institute ancient practices and ordinances and to speak authoritatively on all issues, including political, economic, and social matters. As a result, William Law was constrained to question the validity of his religious experience as a Latter-day Saint. For some, like Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young, the truth of Mormonism existed in such a magnified form that they were willing to pursue it despite increased suffering—each commitment or new encounter became both more bitter and more sweet. To these men, the essential proof of their commitment was total submission to the leader. However, William Law’s democratic spirit evidently would never allow him to reach that transcendent level of commitment. The native Irishman’s faith in the Restoration and the latter-day prophet turned out to be the mortal *ignis fatuus* of his religious career.

William Law perceived Joseph Smith’s religious views to be antithetical to good law and order. Not unlike that of Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, Thomas B. Marsh, and others, William’s disaffection coincided with a spiritual departure from the essential purposes of the Kingdom. Law opposed a growing ecclesiastical control over

³¹William Law to Isaac Russell, 29 November 1840, Church Archives, cited in Cook, “Pre-1844 Letters of William Law,” p. 218.

his economic, political, and social life. According to his own statements (made just prior to and after his excommunication), William Law turned against the Mormon prophet because of William's perception that (1) Joseph was totally ungovernable and defiant and was determined to obey or disobey the law of the land at his convenience (i.e., a claim to higher law); (2) Joseph united church and state, both as mayor of Nauvoo (in the passage of city ordinances and the use of police power) and as an influential religious leader by manipulating or seeking to manipulate politicians for private purposes (i.e., breakdown of the rule of law); (3) Joseph had allowed the established judicial order of church government to be trampled under foot; (4) Joseph had attempted to control the temporal (financial) interests of the Mormon people by ecclesiastical authority; and (5) more importantly, Joseph had corrupted the Church by introducing "false and damnable" doctrines such as a plurality of Gods, a plurality of wives, and the doctrine of unconditional sealing up unto eternal life (i.e., Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet).

Despite a growing antagonism, William had restrained his feelings and dissembled his opposition as best he could. He was hoping things would change for the better. Although at first Law found himself occupying a middle ground between rational conviction and emotional uncertainty, he became progressively more confident that Joseph Smith was in transgression. It was not until perhaps April or May 1844 that he organized his thinking in such a way as to systematically attack his enemy. Even then he was not assailing the validity of the Restoration. The vehemence with which William Law denounced the Prophet in 1844 was not due to disbelief in Mormon polity, but to his conviction that the Mormon leader had plunged into apostate practices. It was Joseph Smith's influence that Law sought to destroy.

William Law's justification for his position of dissent was based on at least five points of contention. First, he alleged that Joseph Smith was defiant of state laws. His particular reference was to the 1842 and 1843 attempts by the state of Missouri to extradite the Mormon prophet on charges of (1) being an accessory to an attempted murder (in 1842) and of (2) committing treason (in 1843). Although he initially assisted Joseph Smith in avoiding imprisonment and extradition during this period, William later believed that this was wrong.³² Law's changing attitude on this matter betrays an essential loss of commitment. In 1842–1843, he recognized Joseph

³²See *History of the Church*, 5:89–97, 103–19, 144, and 209–48. See also "The Law Interview" (Dr. W. Wyl interview with William Law in Shullsburg, Wis.), 30 March 1887, published in *The Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1887, [p. 6]; hereafter cited as "Law Interview," 30 March 1887.

Smith as the Lord's prophet and as innocent of any wrongdoing, while in 1844, after his disaffection, his anger and disillusionment led him to believe otherwise.

Specifically, William accused Joseph of uniting church and state in the 1842 extradition attempt. For example, a provision of the Nauvoo Charter gave the Nauvoo Municipal Court "power to grant writs of habeas corpus in all cases arising under the ordinances of the City Council."³³ A broad interpretation of this provision would have given the court power to investigate, within the city of Nauvoo, any confinement, state or local, that was in violation of the provisions of a valid city ordinance.³⁴ The state officers who arrested Joseph Smith on 8 August 1842 held that the city court did not have authority to investigate the arrest and were chagrined when the Nauvoo court granted the Prophet a writ of habeas corpus.³⁵ After the departure of the state officers, the Nauvoo City Council, responding to an uncertainty of their own jurisdiction in the Mormon leader's case, passed an ordinance that authorized the city court to investigate not only local arrests but the case of any person who might be *under arrest* at Nauvoo.³⁶ While the municipal court was clearly attempting to keep Joseph from extradition and inhumane treatment from his Missouri enemies, Governor Thomas Carlin viewed the city court's actions in releasing the Prophet as "most absurd and ridiculous" and a "gross usurpation of power that cannot be tolerated."³⁷ It is not known whether William Law had any reservations at the time concerning the doings of the city council, but by 1844 he was interpreting this ordinance as an action of expediency and as wholly illegal.³⁸

Another piece of evidence which Law used to show that the Prophet had united church and state was the latter's release by the Nauvoo Municipal Court in another Missouri extradition attempt on

³³See "An Act to Incorporate the City of Nauvoo," Section 17. The charter is cited in full in *History of the Church*, 4:239–45.

³⁴See Dallin H. Oaks, "The Suppression of the *Nauvoo Expositor*," *Utah Law Review* 9 (Winter 1965): 878 and 880.

³⁵George Miller, writing on this matter in September 1842, said: "The officers that apprehended them (Smith & Rockwell) premitorally refused to acknowledge the validity of any city ordinance in the case" (George Miller to Governor Thomas Reynolds, 4 September 1842, cited in Lyndon W. Cook, "'A More Virtuous Man Never Existed on the Footstool of the Great Jehovah': George Miller on Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 19 [Spring 1979]: 406).

³⁶See *History of the Church*, 5:87.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 5:154.

³⁸See *Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844, p. 2; William Law to *The Upper Mississippian*, August 1844, cited in *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 25 September 1844; "Law Interview," 30 March 1887, [p. 6]; and William Law Affidavit, 17 July 1885, cited in Charles Augustus Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy*, 2d ed. (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Co., 1914), pp. 124–28 (hereafter cited as "1885 Affidavit of William Law"). Although in later life William Law freely confessed Joseph Smith's guilt in the 1842 Missouri charges, he never admitted his own complicity in the matter. These accusations were clearly self-serving because it is known that he greatly assisted the Prophet during his 1842 hiding, and if Joseph Smith committed any crime, William Law was certainly an accessory.

charges of treason in June–July 1843. In December 1843, five months after the Nauvoo court had discharged the Mormon leader, the city council approved an ordinance that sought to protect Joseph Smith from further Missouri harrassment. The purpose of the law was to subject any officer of the law to a mandatory life sentence for attempting to arrest the Prophet on the “old Missouri charges.” The city ordinance stipulated that such an “offending” person, if convicted, could be pardoned only by the governor of the state with the “consent of the Mayor” of Nauvoo.³⁹ Again the city council, composed predominantly of Mormons, sought to bar by city ordinance Joseph’s extradition. William characterized this action as illegal and declared the Prophet’s unfriendly attitude toward the state of Missouri as contrary to true Christian principles:

The hostile *spirit* and *conduct* manifested by Joseph Smith, and many of his associates towards Missouri . . . are decidedly at variance with the true spirit of Christianity, and should not be encouraged by any people, much less by those professing to be the ministers of the gospel of peace.⁴⁰

A second allegation by William Law was that Joseph Smith sought to manipulate politicians for his own purpose. When the Mormon prophet was arrested in Dixon, Illinois, 23 June 1843, he was successful in acquiring the talented legal services of lawyer Cyrus Walker of McDonough County, Illinois. A Whig candidate for the United States House of Representatives, Walker effectively pledged his influence in securing Joseph’s release in exchange for the Prophet’s support in the August election.⁴¹ The Irishman was present in July 1843 when (in Law’s words) “Joseph promised Walker that he should have nine out of every ten Mormon votes.”⁴² Within thirty days, however, Church leaders had decided that it would be in their interest politically to vote for Walker’s opponent, Joseph P. Hoge. William Law violently disagreed with this so-called “trickery.”

On Saturday, 5 August 1843, two days before the election, Hyrum Smith addressed the citizens of Nauvoo advising them to vote

³⁹*History of the Church*, 6:105–106. Henry Brown, in his *History of Illinois from Its First Discovery and Settlement to the Present Time* (New York: J. Winchester, New World Press, 1844), p. 398, characterized the 8 December 1843 Nauvoo ordinance as a “direct attempt to set the laws of the State, and of the nation, at defiance [and] an attempt to legislate without authority.”

⁴⁰*Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844, Resolution 4, p. 2.

⁴¹The *Quincy Herald*, 28 February 1845, reminded its readers of “a prominent whig [who] procured the release of Joseph Smith from the custody of the messenger of the State of Missouri, by pleading the validity of [a section of the Nauvoo] Charter, giving the right to the Mayor to issue writs of habeas corpus in certain cases, knowing the while, as he certainly did, that the section had no reference to cases arising without the limits of the city. This prominent whig wanted the Mormons to send him to Congress.”

⁴²“Law Interview,” 30 March 1887, [p. 6].

for Hoge.⁴³ William had earlier warned Hyrum that because of Joseph's promise he would not tolerate such an action. After the Patriarch's talk, Law spoke and "showed the people how shamefully they had treated" the politician. "I made such an impression," remembered William, "that they began to shout for Mr. Walker."⁴⁴ Hyrum then took the stand and "declared that he had a revelation from the Lord, that the people should vote for Mr. Hoge."⁴⁵ On Sunday morning (6 August) the day before the election, William informed Joseph of what had occurred. "We went over to the meeting," continued Law, and "Joseph told Hyrum what I had said. Hyrum insisted that he had had a revelation. Oh, said Joseph, if this is a revelation, then it is all right and he went on the stand" and told the Saints to vote for Hoge.⁴⁶ The Prophet's diary account of this occasion confirms some of the details provided by Law: "Bro Hiram tells me this morning that he has had a testimony that it will be better for this people to vote for hoge & I never knew Hiram say he had a revelation & it failed. [I] never told Bro Law to tell my private feelings. (Let God speak and all man hold their peace.)"⁴⁷

Third, the First Presidency counselor charged that Joseph Smith had allowed the established order of the Church to be ignored in the excommunication trial. Beginning in 1831, rules were laid down which governed trials involving members of the Presidency of the High Priesthood.⁴⁸ A revelation published in 1835 stipulated that if a member of the Presidency of the High Priesthood (later known as the First Presidency) were found in transgression his case must go before the "common council" of the Church (i.e., a bishop with counselors, assisted by twelve high priests).⁴⁹ In January 1838 a newly established procedure governing trials made it much more difficult to remove a member of the First Presidency. The new law, given by revelation, stated that three separate witnesses "of long and faithful standing" whose testimonies were "unimpeachable" must bring evidence of wrongdoing against a member of the Presidency. This accomplished, the common council could hear the case, and if

⁴³See Diary of William Clayton, 6 August 1843, cited in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1980), p. 237: "[Joseph] stated that Hyrum had had a manifestation that it was for our interest to vote for Hoge."

⁴⁴The election returns show that not all Nauvooans voted for Joseph P. Hoge. Of 1773 votes cast, Hoge received 1083 and Walker received 90. (See *Chicago Democrat*, 25 January 1843.) Joseph Smith probably voted for Cyrus Walker as he had promised.

⁴⁵"Law Interview," 30 March 1887, [p. 6].

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Diary of Joseph Smith, kept by Willard Richards, 6 August 1843, Church Archives.

⁴⁸D&C 107:59–100 (with some exceptions) was received in November 1831, in Cuyahoga County, Ohio (see "Kirtland Revelation Book," pp. 85–86, Church Archives).

⁴⁹D&C 107:76 and 82.

the person involved were convicted, the verdict had to be approved by a majority of stakes of the Church.⁵⁰ In July 1840 one additional piece of protocol relating to Church courts was fixed by the Prophet:

No case [shall be tried] without both parties being present or having had an opportunity to be present, neither should they hear one parties complaint before his case is brought up for trial, neither should they suffer the character of any one to be exposed before the Council without the person being present and ready to defend him or herself that the minds of the councellors be not prejudiced for or against any one whose case they may, possibly, have to act upon.⁵¹

Sufficiently aware of the essential requirements needed to remove a counselor in the First Presidency from office and from membership in the Church, William Law reeled under the apparent abuses of these procedures in his own removal from the Presidency. On 8 January 1844, when Joseph Smith informed his second counselor that he had been “dropped” from the First Presidency, the latter exasperatedly declared: “I confess I feel ennoyed very much by such unprecedented treatment for it is illegal, inasmuch as I was appointed by revelation (so called) first [and was sustained] twice after by unanimous voice of the general Conferences.”⁵²

William Law requested his case be heard at the April 1844 general conference but was denied because of the explosive nature of things at Nauvoo resulting from the mounting opposition of the dissenters.⁵³ Because Church leaders knew that the detractors could not be contained, they felt their only recourse was excommunication.

The trial of excommunication (18 April 1844) involved thirty-two male members.⁵⁴ Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and Sidney Rigdon were conspicuously absent; and while Church Bishop Newel K. Whitney did participate in the trial, it was Brigham Young, President of the Twelve Apostles, who presided.⁵⁵ Because William Law had been “dropped” from the First Presidency by the Prophet in early

⁵⁰The unpublished revelation, dated 12 January 1838, is located in “The Scriptorium Book of Joseph Smith,” pp. 51–53, Church Archives.

⁵¹“Nauvoo High Council Minutes,” 11 July 1840, Church Archives.

⁵²William Law, “Record of Doings at Nauvoo in 1844,” 8 January 1844, in private custody; hereafter cited as Diary of William Law.

⁵³Joseph Smith was reported as saying to the conference “that it had been expected by some that the little petty difficulties which have existed, would be brought up and investigated before this conference, but it will not be the case; these things are of too trivial a nature to occupy the attention of so large a body” (cited in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 339). Wilford Woodruff recorded the Prophet as saying: “He Should not occupy time in Speaking of any difficulties that might have occurred in our midst, Said He was not a fallen prophet” (Journal of Wilford Woodruff, 6 April 1844, cited in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 340).

⁵⁴Mention of the trial and the names of the men present is found in the Diary of Joseph Smith, kept by Willard Richards, 18 April 1844, Church Archives.

⁵⁵A very abbreviated (almost cryptic) account of the trial, in the hand of Willard Richards, is located in the Brigham Young Papers, under date, Church Archives.

January 1844, the court handled the case as if William were a private member. Law argued that such was not the case. He insisted that without being convicted of wrongdoing he was still a member of the Presidency, and he protested that he could not be summarily excluded from the Church *in absentia*.⁵⁶

William Law learned of his excommunication from William Marks the day after the trial.⁵⁷ Law's democratic individualism and Irish passion were registering high marks as he recorded his sentiments in his diary: "We consider this cutting off as illegal, and, therefore corrupt."⁵⁸ Nettled that he had been excluded from the Church without being officially charged or notified, William demanded in writing the names of his accusers, the nature of the indictment, "who the witnesses were, [and] what they proved."⁵⁹ The following day William Law asked Willard Richards, the Prophet's clerk, for a transcript of the minutes of the trial but was informed that "there was no record." An entry in Law's diary summarizes his evaluation of these actions: "By the above the Church has as a body transgressed the laws of the Church and of God & every principle of justice and are under deep transgression."⁶⁰

Fourth, William Law alleged that Joseph Smith had sought to control, by ecclesiastical authority, the financial affairs of the Saints. Immediately after their arrival in Nauvoo, William and Wilson Law set out to make money. William's desire to find financial success among the Saints had prompted him to inquire concerning the commercial aspects of Illinois and the Upper Mississippi Valley before joining the Saints. In March 1839, Law had written to Robert B. Thompson, an old friend and fellow-convert from Upper Canada:

As to the Merchantile business I wish you would give me, all the information you can on that subject as early as possible as my brother wishes to go to the West this season, let me know how the people pay, what kind of goods is most suitable, how much capital would be needed whether there are many stores there and where the best situation would be for doing business in that line—give me a description of the country,

⁵⁶William Law, conversant with the rules of Church courts, wrote that the trial was "illegal" and that "B. Young ha[d] no right to preside" (Diary of William Law, 21 April 1844). See also *Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844, p. 2: "The court, however, was a tribunal possessing no power to try Wm. Law, who was called by special Revelation, to stand as counsellor to the President of the Church, (Joseph), which was twice ratified by General Conferences, assembled at Nauvoo, for Brigham Young, one of the Twelve, presided, whose duty it was not." The *Expositor* stated that William Marks, Nauvoo stake president, should have directed the proceeding.

⁵⁷Notice of the excommunication was printed in *Times and Seasons* 5 (15 April 1844): 511: "Nauvoo, April 18, 1844, Robert D. Foster, Wilson Law, William Law, and Jane Law, of Nauvoo . . . for unchristian-like conduct, were cut off from the Church . . . by the authorities of said church, and ordered to be published in the Times and Seasons, W. Richards, Church Recorder."

⁵⁸Diary of William Law, 19 April 1844.

⁵⁹Ibid., 21 April 1844.

⁶⁰Ibid., 22 April 1844.

climate &c. &c. and tell me where the Saints are going to settle if you know, would a first rate new horsepower for grinding and sawing be useful there is a new invention come out that is excellent.⁶¹

Since by the time the Laws arrived in Nauvoo building lots in the lower part of the town were available for purchase from only Joseph Smith, William and his brother invested in the upper part of Nauvoo and on the outskirts of the new city.⁶² While the financial interests of the Laws and the Prophet were in competition in 1842, Joseph encouraged them to become prosperous in ways not prejudicial to the Church.⁶³ Moreover, both parties maintained tolerably good relations because Joseph and William were in the Presidency. However, by 1843 the fundamental economic interests of the native Irishmen and the Mormon leader were in definite conflict. Brisk competition caused the Prophet to insist that the Saints purchase building lots from only the Church.⁶⁴ Although most recognized this as a sacrifice which would assist in liquidating Church debts, to William Law it sounded too much like totalitarianism. In 1844 the Laws publicized their opposition to this “injunction” requiring the Saints to purchase from the Trustee-in-Trust.⁶⁵ And in later life William testily remembered that after their alienation he and his brother were effectively unable to sell their property.⁶⁶

Finally, William Law charged that Joseph Smith had introduced into the Church false doctrines (publicly) and corrupt practices (secretly), thereby perverting his “priestly authority” and “forfeiting the holy priesthood.”⁶⁷ Specifically, the Irish convert manifested his repugnance to (1) “a plurality of Gods . . . , [i.e.] other gods as far above our God as he is above us [and] that he wrought out his salvation in the flesh with fear and trembling the same as we do”;⁶⁸

⁶¹William Law to Robert B. Thompson, 27–29 March 1839, Church Archives, cited in Cook, “Pre-1844 Letters of William Law,” p. 217.

⁶²The Law brothers did own a few lots in the lower part of town where their residences were located (blocks 139 and 148). These lots, together with fractional block 152 (where the steammill was situated), had been purchased from Joseph Smith. However, the great majority of their real property was farm ground located east of Nauvoo (580 acres) as well as a dozen full-sized building lots near the temple (Nauvoo Trustees Land Book, B, Church Archives).

⁶³Soon after William’s arrival in Nauvoo, Joseph advised him to “buy lands, build mills and keep a store to keep you running” (“Law Interview,” 30 March 1887, [p. 6]). William McIntire records Joseph as saying: “The Lord had told him [the Prophet] that Bro. Law would Do well [financially if], he would Go & preach the Gospel (William P. McIntire Minute Book, cited in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 61).

⁶⁴The *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 20 December 1843, requested “all the brethren . . . when they move into Nauvoo, [to] consult President Joseph Smith, the trustee in trust, and purchase their lands of him.” Extreme financial difficulties undoubtedly prompted the Prophet to say privately that “those who come here having money and purchased without the church & without council Must be cut of[f]” (Diary of Joseph Smith, kept by Willard Richards, 13 February 1843, Church Archives).

⁶⁵*Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844, Resolution 10, p. 2.

⁶⁶“Law Interview,” 30 March 1887, [p. 6].

⁶⁷*Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844, Resolution 2, p. 2.

⁶⁸Diary of William Law, 15 April 1844. The Prophet’s teaching on the plurality of Gods is best evidenced in his 16 June 1844 Nauvoo discourse (see Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, pp. 378–83).

(2) “unconditional sealing up to eternal life”⁶⁹ by the power of the priesthood, and (3) a plurality of wives.

The Prophet began to take additional wives in Nauvoo in April 1841. By June 1844, when the Mormon leader was killed, as many as 150 men and women had received temple-related ordinances including the sanctioned, though secret, practice of plural marriage.⁷⁰ William’s unwillingness in 1843 to accept the *sub rosa* practice of plural marriage especially worked a hardship on him.⁷¹ As a member of the First Presidency of the Church, William Law had been selected by Joseph Smith to receive the “ancient order of the priesthood” (4 May 1842). The sacred nature of this order (the group was known by its members as the “quorum”) was explicitly detailed upon reception, and the specially chosen initiates were placed under covenants of strict obedience. To receive the fulness of the “ancient order” was to be married eternally to one or more women and eventually be sealed up unto eternal life by the power of the priesthood.⁷² The full implications of the order were not explained all at once, and plural marriage aspects do not appear to have been discussed in the meetings of the quorum.⁷³

William Law’s initiation into the ancient order in 1842 did not coincide with his awareness of polygamy.⁷⁴ Yet, by the spring of 1843, the connection between the doctrine of sealing and a plurality of wives was becoming clearly evident to him. The First Presidency counselor came to know that his file leader was involved in some kind of polygamous relationship. Moreover, based on their then-limited knowledge of the Prophet’s practice of plurality of wives, William Law, Nauvoo Stake President William Marks, and Patriarch Hyrum

⁶⁹*Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844, Resolution 2, p. 2.

⁷⁰Heber C. Kimball (*Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. [London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–1886], 10:166) and Erastus Snow (St. George Stake General Meeting Minutes, 17 June 1883, Church Archives) both indicate that as many as 130 men and women had received priesthood marriage blessings during the Prophet’s lifetime. However, Andrew F. Ehat, who shared these sources with me, has specifically identified 150 individuals who received these ordinances. It is possible however that not all of these were practicing plural marriage since only the theory of polygamy, not the actual practice, needed to be accepted.

⁷¹Other personal matters which undoubtedly troubled William and had a negative effect on him were the deaths of his father and daughter, Helen, after the quorum had prayed for their recovery, and the fact that he was denied the blessings of the fulness of the priesthood (Diary of Joseph Smith, 27 August and 11 September 1843).

⁷²William’s wife, Jane, had been admitted to the endowment quorum by 1 October 1843 (Ibid., 1 October 1843).

⁷³“Mayor [Joseph Smith] said he had never preached the revelation in private as he had in public—had not taught it to the anointed [quorum] in the church in private which many confirmed” (Nauvoo City Council Minutes, 10 June 1844, Church Archives, cited and discussed in Andrew F. Ehat, “An Overview of the Introduction of Eternal Marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” 1979, privately distributed, p. 27; hereafter cited as Ehat, “Eternal Marriage,” 1979).

⁷⁴For example, sometime early in 1843 Joseph broached the subject of plural marriage in a private meeting. William Law was present and passionately declared: “If an angel from heaven was to reveal to me that a man should have more than one wife, if it were in my power I would kill him” (Brigham Young Address, 8 October 1866, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives).

Smith had decided to bring the matter before the Mormon populace so Joseph Smith would make a full disclosure of his private teachings and practices.⁷⁵ However, it was about this time (26 May 1843) that Hyrum Smith (with the assistance of Brigham Young) became convinced that plural marriage had been divinely revealed to the Prophet.⁷⁶ This unexpected turn of events estranged William from Hyrum as well as from Joseph.⁷⁷

William claimed he was shocked when the particulars of the law of plurality were explained to him. The marriage practice was especially embarrassing to him as he had publicly ridiculed such fears a year before. He had spoken against John C. Bennett's licentiousness in 1842, assuring the Nauvoo populace that neither "spiritual wifery" nor anything like it was condoned by Church leaders.⁷⁸ Law's official introduction to plural marriage came from the Church Patriarch (July–August 1843): "Hyrum gave it [the revelation] to me in his office, told me to take it home and read it, and then be careful with it, and bring it back again." "[Jane] and I were just turned upside down by it," related William. "We did not know what to do."⁷⁹

Notwithstanding his public statements opposing plural marriage and his shock upon learning that the secret priesthood order was sanctioned by revelation, William Law's own diary for this period

⁷⁵William Clayton recorded that on 23 May 1843 he had a conversation with Heber C. Kimball "concerning a plot that is being laid to entrap the brethren [involved in plural marriage] . . . by bro. H[yrum]. and others" (Diary of William Clayton, under date). In 1866 Brigham Young recounted the difficulties the Prophet experienced in introducing the practice of plural marriage. He confirmed that William Law, William Marks, and Hyrum Smith were "operat[ing] against the prophet Joseph" (Address, 8 October 1866, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives). Hyrum Smith publicly preached against a plurality of wives in Nauvoo on 14 May 1843: "A.M. Hyrum Smith addressed the people—subjects from the Book Mormon 2d Chap. Jacob. . . . Said there were many that had a great deal to say about the ancient order of things as Solomon & David having many wives & Concubines—but its an abomination in the Sight of God." (Diary of Levi Richards, under date, Church Archives.) I am indebted to Andrew F. Ehat for my understanding of Hyrum Smith's opposition to the Prophet regarding plural marriage (Ehat, "An Overview of the Introduction of Eternal Marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 1840–1843," [November 1980], privately distributed; hereafter cited as Ehat, "Eternal Marriage," 1980).

⁷⁶Ehat, "Eternal Marriage," 1980.

⁷⁷Sometime after William's official introduction to plural marriage (July–August 1843) he found a sympathetic ear in Emma Smith. The deep sentiment of opposition to polygamy that each possessed singly was effectively multiplied as they mutually vented their feelings in private. Law's negative influence on Emma must have been significant because Joseph later stated that "all the sorrow he ever had in his family had arisen through the influence of Wm. Law" (*Nauvoo Neighbor*, Extra, 17 June 1844). Their conniving was vividly remembered by Newel K. Whitney in July 1844 when he reminded William Clayton that "Law & Emma [had been] in opposition to Joseph & the quorum" (Diary of William Clayton, 12 July 1844). Law's subsequent derogation of Emma Smith derived not from her general opposition to and sporadic denunciation of plural marriage, but her irrational ambivalence regarding the practice.

⁷⁸See *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 August 1842): 872–73, and *Wasp*, 27 July 1842.

⁷⁹"Law Interview," 30 March 1887, [p. 6]. On another occasion William Law reported: "I took it home and . . . after reading it I went directly to Joseph Smith and showed him the document. He looked at it, and said it was all right. . . . I remarked that it was in contradiction to the 'Doctrine and Covenants' [and] he seemed much disappointed in my not receiving the revelation. He was very anxious that I would accept the doctrine and sustain him in it. He used many arguments at various times afterward in its favor." ("1885 Affidavit of William Law," cited in Shook, *True Origin of Mormon Polygamy*, p. 126.)

This denial of eternal marriage deeply wounded the Laws and embarrassed the First Presidency counselor by casting a shadow of doubt on his integrity as a Church leader.

By January 1844 William's anger, together with his distaste for secret polygamous relationships, brought him to a crucial point in his religious experience as a Latter-day Saint. However much he desired the sealing ordinance, and notwithstanding his alleged commitment to the latter-day Prophet, William claimed he could not assent to the implications of plural marriage. He did not insist on an infallible prophet, but his faith unequivocally required that the prophet admit error and be willing to change. He said: "If he [Joseph] sins is there no room for repentance, can not God forgive him, and can not we forgive him very often in a day."⁸³

In his last encounter with Joseph Smith, on 8 January 1844,⁸⁴ William boldly declared that polygamy "was of the Devil and that [Joseph] should put it down."⁸⁵ But when the Prophet insisted that his practice of the ancient order of marriage was by revelation, any remaining hope for a reconciliation was destroyed. Richard S. Law, William's son said his father, "with his arms around the neck of the Prophet, was pleading with him to withdraw the doctrine of plural marriage. . . . [William] pleaded for this with Joseph with tears streaming from his eyes. The Prophet was also in tears, but he informed [William] that he could not withdraw the doctrine, for God had commanded him to teach it, and condemnation would come upon him if he was not obedient to the commandment."⁸⁶

William was further informed on 8 January 1844 that his rebellion had resulted in his being excluded from the anointed quorum and dropped from the First Presidency.⁸⁷ While William

⁸³See William Law to Isaac Russell, 29 November 1840, Church Archives, cited in Cook, "Pre-1844 Letters of William Law," p. 218. A similar statement was advanced in the *Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844, p. 1.

⁸⁴The Diary of Joseph Smith, kept by Willard Richards, 8 January 1844, briefly notes that Joseph "had an interview with Wm Law in the street," in front of William W. Phelps's house, but gives no particulars of what transpired.

⁸⁵Diary of William Law, 8 January 1844. At a special meeting of the Nauvoo City Council, 3 January 1844, Bishop Daniel Carn stated that he and William Law had had a "conversation about stories afloat on spiritual wives. he [Law] thought it was from the devil.—and we must put it down that he knew such a thing was in existence" (*original* Nauvoo City Council Minutes, 3 January 1844, Church Archives).

⁸⁶"An Interesting Testimony," *The Improvement Era* (May 1903), pp. 507–10.

⁸⁷William and Jane Law last attended a meeting of the quorum on 23 December 1843 (see Diary of Joseph Smith, under dates 30 December 1843 and 7 January 1844). Bathsheba W. Smith, wife of George A. Smith, recalled being present (on 7 January 1844) when "William Law, Joseph Smith's counselor, was dropped from [the] quorum by each one present voting yes or no in his turn. He was the first member that was dropped who had receive his endowments. One member hesitated to vote, which called forth earnest remarks from the Prophet Joseph. He showed clearly that it would be doing a serious wrong to retain him longer. After his explanation the vote was unanimous." ("Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor* 27 [1 June 1892]: 345.)

indicates that he later seriously entertained thoughts of entering into the practice.⁸⁰ This intention may well have been related to his desire to be eternally sealed to Jane since Joseph had used the acceptance of plural marriage (in theory or in practice) as a test for eternal marriage sealings.⁸¹ At any rate, Hyrum Smith claimed that Joseph's refusal to administer the sealing blessing to the Laws had initiated the rupture between the two men: "Law wanted to be sealed [to his wife] & J[oseph] told him he was forbid—which begun the hard feeling."⁸²

⁸⁰Diary of William Law, 1 January 1844: "Fearful and terrible, yea most distressing have been the scenes through which we have past, during the last few months. . . . Through our religious zeal we harkened to the teachings of man, more than to the written word of God; yea, (for a short moment) even in contradiction to the Commandments of the most high; but his spirit prevailed and before the fearful step was taken . . . we saw and learned that justice and truth, virtue and holiness, could alone bring us into the presence of God."

⁸¹Ehat, "Eternal Marriage," 1979. Although William's official introduction to plural marriage was from Hyrum Smith, it is clear that the Prophet also taught him the particulars of the ancient practice. In 1845, in the Kirtland Temple, "Joseph Smith and others had attempted to get him [William Law] into it [plurality], and in order to do so had made him acquainted with many things about it" (Sidney Rigdon to the Editor, February–March 1845, *Latter Day Saint's Messenger and Advocate* 1 [15 March 1845]: 145).

⁸²Diary of William Clayton, 12 June 1844. It is not clear whether or not William and Jane were ever sealed. Alexander Neibaur, a close friend of the Prophet, said that "Mr Wm Law—wisht to be Married to his Wife for Eternity Mr [Joseph] Smith said would Inquire of the Lord, Answered no because Law was a Adulterous person. Mrs Law wandet to know why she could not be Married to Mr Law Mr S said would not wound her feeling by telling her, some days after Mr Smith going toward his Office Mrs Law stood in the door beckoned to him more the once did not Know wheter she bekoned to him went across to Inquire yes please to walk in no one but herself in the house. she drawing her Arms around him if you wont seal me to my husband Seal myself unto you. he Said stand away & pushing her Gently aside giving her a denial & going out. when Mr Law came home he Inquired who had been in his Absence. she said no one but Br Joseph, he then demanded what had pass[ed] Mrs L then told Joseph wandet her to be Married to him." (Journal of Alexander Neibaur, 24 May 1844, Church Archives. See also Hyrum Smith's statement in *Nauvoo Neighbor*, Extra, 17 June 1844, regarding Law's adulterous conduct.) Yet at Law's trial of excommunication, Jack (John) Scott, a Canadian convert, testified that to ameliorate conditions between William and Joseph (possibly because of the accusations that the Prophet had made advances to Jane Law) Joseph Smith had sealed William Law and his wife (Minutes of meeting, 18 April 1844, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives).

Some early accounts allege that a permanent rupture between Joseph and William resulted when the Prophet attempted to take Jane Law as a "spiritual" wife (see Joseph H. Jackson, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Experience of Joseph H. Jackson in Nauvoo* [Warsaw, Ill.: n.p., 1844], p. 21; Thomas Ford, *History of Illinois* [Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Co., 1854], p. 322; and Edward Bonney, *The Banditti of the Prairies: A Tale of the Mississippi Valley* [Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1881], p. 18). Regardless, it is known that Joseph Smith did ask for other men's wives as part of an "Abrahamic test." And while he "did not want every man's wife he ask[ed] for," nevertheless, he was sealed for eternity to a few of them (Jedediah M. Grant discourse, 19 February 1854, *Journal of Discourses*, 2:13–14). Though Joseph, as reported in Neibaur's journal, denied that he asked for Jane as a plural wife, William Law believed otherwise: "[Joseph] ha[s] lately endeavored to seduce my wife, and ha[s] found her a virtuous woman" (Law Diary, 13 May 1844).

A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that Neibaur's account (cited above), though reasonably accurate, is simply incomplete. Obviously, Jane Law's frustration over not being permitted to be eternally sealed to her husband might have prompted her to request eternal marriage to the Mormon leader (say, in late 1843), and (as per Neibaur) she was rebuffed. Subsequently, possibly to gratify and assuage the Laws, Joseph might have finally agreed to seal the couple near Christmas 1843 (as per John Scott). Then later, just before or soon after the Laws' excommunication, Joseph Smith might have sought to have Jane Law sealed to him in an attempt to keep her from following her apostate husband (as per Law's diary and other published sources noted above). Bathsheba W. Smith, one of the anointed quorum who was conversant with all the ramifications of plural marriage in Nauvoo, believed that Jane Law may well have been sealed to the Prophet (Bathsheba W. Smith Deposition, Eighth Circuit Court, 1892 Temple Lot Case, carbon copy of original, Church Archives). However, if this were the case, it was short-lived because Jane, who was expecting her sixth child, did remain with her husband, William Law. In July 1867, John Hawley reported that Wilford Woodruff had said, "When Brigham Young got the records of the Church in his hands, after the death of Joseph Smith, he found by examination that . . . [William] Laws wife and [Francis] Higbys wife and [Lyman] Wights wife and [Robert D.] Fosters wife had all been Sealed to Joseph, as their Husbands could not Save them" (John Hawley, *Autobiography*, January 1885, p. 97, RLDS Library–Archives).

considered these actions as “unjust and dishonourable,” he believed that his dismissal had released him from a compromising position: “I feel relieved from a most embarrassing situation. I cannot fellowship the abominations which I verily know are practiced by this man, consequently I am glad to be free from him.”⁸⁸

William seemed willing to be freed from the incubus of polygamy, but it would take time for him to abandon Mormonism altogether.⁸⁹ The next few days and weeks provided an opportunity for deep reflection. His diary reveals that he was racked with self-doubt, and he realized that the cardinal underpinnings of his faith in Mormonism were being wrecked. On 13 January 1844 he bewailed his awful condition: “What my feelings have been I cannot relate, various and painful at times almost beyond endurance; a thousand recollections burst upon my burning brain, the past, the present, and the future, disappointed hopes, injured feelings, where they should have been held sacred . . . these things are as poison’d arrows in my bleeding heart.”⁹⁰

William was contacted by Hyrum Smith in March 1844 and by Almon W. Babbitt in April 1844 requesting a reconciliation. But the wounds could not be mended. William’s terms were simple: a discontinuance of the practice of plural marriage. But neither man was able to meet this demand.⁹¹ Finally, on Monday, 13 May 1844, nearly a month after Law’s excommunication, Sidney Rigdon went to William’s house “fully authorized to negotiate terms of peace.” The visit was probably a response to the publication of the “Prospectus”

⁸⁸Diary of William Law, 8 January 1844.

⁸⁹Few prominent dissenters from Mormonism were ready to dispense altogether with the theology and polity of the Church. Many who organized splinter groups often demonstrated a penchant for a theocentric rather than a democratic administrative structure. For more than a year after leaving Nauvoo, William Law doggedly held on to the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants as necessary taproots to any reorganization of the Church. A contemplated coalition with Sidney Rigdon in 1845 failed, in part, because “Law & Rigdon differed in fifteen points of doctrine” (Diary of William Clayton, 3 May 1845). Regarding this proposed reorganization Sidney Rigdon wrote: “We had a conversation, last winter in Ohio, with Mr. William Law whom we unexpectedly met on the way to visit his brothers, in Mercer co. in this state. The conversation was a friendly one, but terminated in convincing both parties that our religious views were so widely different that no union could exist, and so we parted, agreeing to disagree.” (*Messenger and Advocate of the Church of Christ*, Pittsburgh, 15 July 1845.) William E. McLellan figured most conspicuously in this matchmaking attempt (see, for example, William E. McLellan to Sidney Rigdon, 23 December 1844, Hampton, Illinois, cited in *Latter Day Saint’s Messenger and Advocate*, 15 January 1845). Soon thereafter, however, Law divorced himself completely from Mormonism. He affirmed in 1885 that he was thoroughly convinced that “it never was a Church of Christ, but a most wicked blasphemous humbug gotten up for the purpose of making money” (“1885 Affidavit of William Law,” cited in Shook, *True Origin of Mormon Polygamy*, p. 127).

⁹⁰Diary of William Law, 13 January 1844.

⁹¹Ibid., under dates 29 March and 15 April 1844. After his excommunication, William contemptuously reported that he had left the Church because he “had only one wife and could obtain no more, but yet to gain eternal life one must have half a score” (Affidavit of Joseph A. Knelting, 11 September 1903, “Affidavits on Plural Marriage,” Church Archives).

of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, released the previous Friday⁹² (see reproduction of broadside on p. 69). But the Irishman remained adamant:

I told him that if they wanted peace they could have it on the following conditions, That Joseph Smith would acknowledge publicly that he had taught and practised the doctrine of plurality of wives, that he brought a revelation supporting the doctrine, and that he should own the whole system (revelation and all) to be from Hell.⁹³

Sidney Rigdon admitted that he was not authorized “to go so far” and could only promise the Laws a restoration of their membership.

The question that had plagued William Law was how far to push his denunciation of polygamy. Seeing no hope of a reconciliation, William resolved to save the Church from error by exposing the leviathan to the Nauvoo populace.⁹⁴ He seized upon his “damning evidence,” and in late May and early June 1844 he legally charged Joseph Smith with adultery and publicized the nature of the Prophet’s polygamous teachings and practices in the pages of the *Nauvoo Expositor*.⁹⁵ But William Law badly misjudged the mentality of the Mormon people. He had not recognized their corporate solidarity or the tremendous love and support extended to Joseph Smith as the Lord’s mouthpiece.⁹⁶ Much to his dismay, his open attack on the Church leader further alienated him and labeled him as a bitter enemy of the Restoration.

The destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* provided the malcontents their first hard evidence with which to condemn Joseph Smith for illegal acts. It was during his detention at Carthage, on a

⁹²The “Prospectus” of the *Nauvoo Expositor* informed its readers that the forthcoming weekly would advocate the repeal of the Nauvoo Charter, seek the separation of church and state, champion pure principles of morality, and decry political revelation and unit power. In summary, the columns of the new paper would “give a full, candid, and succinct statement of FACTS, AS THEY REALLY EXIST IN THE CITY OF NAUVOO—Fearless of whose particular case the facts may apply.”

⁹³Diary of William Law, 13 May 1844.

⁹⁴The *Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844, p. 1, claimed that “many of us have sought a reformation in the church . . . but our petitions were treated with contempt.” As early as 3 April 1844 the *Warsaw Signal* announced the rupture between Joseph Smith and William Law: “It is said . . . that a difficulty originated some time since between the Prophet and some of his most conspicuous followers, in relation to the doctrine of spiritual wives” (under date given).

⁹⁵Despite his position of power and prestige, William Law (and his cohorts) failed to exert a significant force against Joseph Smith among the masses at Nauvoo. It was with the non-Mormon community that the malcontents found a listening ear. As the Prophet said on 10 June 1844, “[This] is a paper (Nauvoo Expositor) that is exciting our enemies abroad” (*Nauvoo Neighbor*, Extra, 17 June 1844). The indictment (mentioned above) was based on the sworn testimony of William and Wilson Law and was filed in Hancock County Circuit Court on 23 May 1844. It charged Joseph Smith with having lived with Maria Lawrence “in an open state of adultery” from 12 October 1843 to 23 May 1844. The single issue of the obnoxious *Nauvoo Expositor* was dated 7 June 1844. William Law claimed that in addition to the copies of the *Expositor* that were distributed in Nauvoo, as many as five hundred copies were mailed out of the city: “This day the Nauvoo Expositor goes forth to the world, rich with facts, such expositions as make the guilty tremble and rage. . . . 1000 Sheets were struck and five hundred mailed forthwith.” (Diary of William Law, 7 June 1844.)

⁹⁶On this point see David Brion Davis, *Antebellum American Culture: An Interpretive Anthology* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1979), pp. 222–24.

PROSPECTUS

OF THE

NAUVOO EXPOSITOR.

The "NAUVOO EXPOSITOR" will be issued on Friday of each week, on an Imperial sheet, with a new Press and materials of the best quality, and rendered worthy of the patronage of a discerning and an enlightened public.

The Expositor will be devoted to a general diffusion of useful knowledge, and its columns open for the admission of all courteous Communications of a Religious, Moral, Social, Literary, or Political character, without taking a decided stand in favor of either of the great Political Parties of the country. A few of its columns will be devoted to a few primary objects, which the Publishers deem of vital importance to the public welfare. Their particular locality gives them a knowledge of the many **Gross abuses exercised under the "pretended" authorities of the Charter of the City of Nauvoo,** by the Legislative authorities of said city; and the **Insupportable OPPRESSIONS of the MINISTERIAL powers, in carrying out the Unjust, Illegal, and Unconstitutional Ordinances of the same.** The Publishers, therefore, deem it a sacred duty they owe to their country and their fellow citizens, to advocate, through the columns of the Expositor, the **Unconditional REPEAL of the NAUVOO CITY CHARTER—**to restrain and correct the abuses of the UNIT POWER—to ward off the Iron Rod which is held over the devoted heads of the citizens of Nauvoo and the surrounding country—to advocate unmitigated **DISOBEDIENCE to POLITICAL REVELATIONS,** and to censure and decry gross moral imperfections wherever found, either in the Plebian, Patrician, or **SELF-CONSTITUTED MONARCH—to advocate the pure principles of morality, the pure principles of truth, designed not to destroy, but strengthen the main-spring of God's moral government—to advocate, and exercise, the freedom of speech in Nauvoo, independent of the ordinances abridging the same—to give free toleration to every man's Religious sentiments, and sustain ALL in worshipping their God according to the monitions of their consciences, as guaranteed by the Constitution of our country, and to oppose, with uncompromising hostility, any Union of CHURCH and STATE or any preliminary step tending to the same—to sustain ALL, however humble, in their equal and Constitutional rights—and oppose the sacrifices of the Liberty, the Property, and the Happiness of the MANY, to the Pride and Ambition of the FEW. In a word, to give a full, candid, and succinct statement of FACTS, AS THEY REALLY EXIST IN THE CITY OF NAUVOO—Fearless of whose particular case the facts may apply—being governed by the laws of Editorial courtesy and the inherent dignity which is inseparable from honorable minds, at the same**

time exercising their own judgment in cases of flagrant abuses, or moral delinquencies—to use such terms and names as they deem proper, when the object is of such high importance that the end will justify the means. In this great and indispensable work, we confidently look to an enlightened public to aid us in our laudable effort.

The columns of the Expositor will be open to the discussion of all matters of public interest, the productions of all correspondents subject to the decision of the Editor alone, who shall receive or reject at his option. National questions will be in place—but no preference given to either of the political parties. The Editorial department will contain the political news of the day, proceedings of Congress, election returns, &c., &c. Room will be given for articles on Agriculture; the Mechanic Arts; Commercial transactions, &c.

The first number of the Expositor will be issued on Friday, the 7th day of June 1844. The publishers bind themselves to issue the paper weekly for one year, and forward 52 copies to each subscriber during the year. Orders should be forwarded as soon as possible, that the publishers may know what number of copies to issue.

The publishers take pleasure in announcing to the public; that they have engaged the services of SYLVESTER EMANS, Esq., who will have entire charge and supervision of the Editorial department. From an acquaintance with the dignity of character, and literary qualifications of this gentleman, they feel assured that the "Nauvoo Expositor" must and will sustain a high and honorable reputation.

TERMS of the "NAUVOO EXPOSITOR."

The TERMS of the paper will be
\$2,00 per annum, in advance.
\$2,50 at the expiration of six months.
\$3,00 at the end of the year.

Six copies will be forwarded to one address for \$10,00 in advance—Thirteen copies for \$20,00, &c., &c.

All Letters and Communications must be addressed to "CHARLES A. FOSTER, Nauvoo, Ill.," *post paid*, in order to insure attention.

WILLIAM LAW,
WILSON LAW,
CHARLES IVINS,
FRANCIS M. HIGBEE,
CHAUNCEY L. HIGBEE,
ROBERT D. FOSTER,
CHARLES A. FOSTER. } PUBLISHERS.

Nauvoo, Ill, May 10th, 1844.

SUBSCRIBER'S NAMES.	POST OFFICE.	NUMBER OF COPIES.
<i>Wm. B. Brown</i>	<i>Farmington Iowa</i>	<i>175</i>
<i>Chas. A. Foster</i>	<i>Nauvoo Ill</i>	<i>52</i>

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"Prospectus of the Nauvoo Expositor"

charge of riot in the *Expositor* matter, that the Prophet was killed. Although William Law insisted on payment for damages of his wrecked press⁹⁷ and actively sought to have the Mormon leader punished by the civil law, he denied complicity in any plot to have Joseph Smith assassinated.⁹⁸

Law's private diary shows that he was not at Carthage when the Smiths were murdered. But while he characterized the murders as an "outrage," yet he believed the horrid deaths were actually the result of a "blasphemed God" who had taken vengeance. William wrote in July 1844 that the murders were "very shocking" to his feelings,

yet, as they [Joseph and Hyrum] brought it upon themselves, and I used my influence to prevent any outrage even from the commencement of the excitement, believing that the Civil Law had power to expose iniquity, and punish the wicked. I say consequently I look on calmly and while the wicked slay the wicked I believe I can see the hand of a blasphemed God stretched out in judgement, the cries of innocence and virtue have ascended up before the throne of God, and he has taken sudden vengeance.⁹⁹

In the final analysis, William Law's strong feelings for Mormonism were not enduring. His rejection of Joseph as a true prophet was not just a rational decision based on any one thing. It was a complex transferral of loyalty. The decision to break with the Mormon leader seems to have been only the final stage of a psychological reorientation that had begun early in 1843, even before William first suspected the Prophet was involved in polygamy. In order for one's loyalty to be irreversible it "must seize [his] feelings and thoughts to the exclusion of almost all else."¹⁰⁰ Law's commitment to individualism and democracy precluded this. The Irishman's motives for apostasy appear to have stemmed from a perception (real or imagined) that his civil and religious liberties were being threatened within the Mormon community.¹⁰¹ By 1838 the administrative power

⁹⁷The Laws claimed that their loss in the destruction of the *Expositor* press and equipment amounted to about \$1000, and while Edward Hunter did give a note to the Laws, Fosters, and Higbees in the amount of \$500 to assist in cancelling the claim, it is uncertain if the proprietors actually collected on the note (see William and Wilson Law to Edward Hunter, 1844–1845, typescript, and Edward Hunter bond, 2 May 1846, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah).

⁹⁸After the Martyrdom, warrants were issued for the arrest of William and Wilson Law as accessories to the murders. On 29 September 1844 William was taken into custody at Hampton, Illinois, but mysteriously released by the officers the following day. Some believed that the arrest was actually a farce. (See *The Upper Mississippian*, 5 October 1844.)

⁹⁹William Law to Isaac Hill, 20 July 1844, Church Archives.

¹⁰⁰Silvan S. Tomkins, "The Psychology of Commitment: The Constructive Role of Violence and Suffering for the Individual and for His Society," *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, ed. Martin Duberman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 273.

¹⁰¹In 1885, forty-one years after he left Nauvoo, William Law claimed that "Joseph Smith required every man and woman to believe in him, believe in all his revelations, believe in all his teachings, and uphold and sustain him in every thing" ("1885 Affidavit of William Law," p. 126).

of the Church had concentrated into the hands of one man—the Prophet Joseph Smith. Some notable converts were not willing to allow this ecclesiastical domination in their economic and political affairs. Nor would they condone what they considered to be defiance of the law of the land. William Law believed that new doctrines had corrupted the Church. Not unlike Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Lyman Johnson, he believed that the established laws of the Church and the revelations had been trampled underfoot for expedience in order to remove undesirables. Indeed, he maintained that the written revelations—the scriptures—were superior to the living prophet.¹⁰² These men were more comfortable with the then popular values of evangelical Protestantism.

A widely known scholar of religious dissent in America has argued that the pervasive democratic spirit of this period did not encourage institutional good order but tended rather to foster a determination to hold fast to civil and religious liberties. In religious communities, self-reliant frontier life was often expressed in differences over pure doctrine, novel practices, and the use of authority. Not infrequently, the western settler was intolerant of externally imposed authority, and schism would occur when doctrines or practices seemed too intricately reasoned or too far-fetched.¹⁰³ Thus it would appear that William Law's case of religious dissent in Mormon Nauvoo was not unique, but instead uniquely American.

In the end, William Law's disillusionment with Mormonism resulted in a complete rejection of institutionalized religion. William spent the remainder of his life seeking to implement Christian principles in his own way.

After he left Nauvoo, he continued another decade as a merchant in northern Illinois (Hampton and later Galena) but eventually turned his attention to medicine. Regionally acknowledged as a competent physician and surgeon, Dr. Law practiced nearly forty years near Apple River, Illinois, and at Shullsburg, Wisconsin. He died of pneumonia at the age of eighty-two.¹⁰⁴ By design, William Law's

¹⁰²A comparison of proof texts cited by William Law reveals a basic inconsistency. In 1838–1839 he cited passages of the Doctrine and Covenants in support of the Mormon prophet; in 1844 he cited scripture (D&C 101 [1835 ed.] and Jacob 2 in the Book of Mormon) in justification of his complete rejection of Joseph Smith. An infallible scripture was quoted as authority in both cases, and yet in 1844, it was made to prove exactly the reverse of what it was made to prove in 1839. This doctrine of an absolutely infallible scripture (once entertained by Hyrum Smith also) actually resulted in Law's self-stultification.

¹⁰³Edwin Scott Gaustad, *Dissent in American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 13–22.

¹⁰⁴William and Jane Law moved to Shullsburg, Wisconsin, in early 1866 where they remained until their deaths (William died 12 January 1892, and Jane died 8 September 1882). Although inclined to remain withdrawn from public life, William Law, nevertheless, was a prominent and respected citizen in his community. In later years he served as one of five directors of the Shullsburg Bank.

post-Nauvoo years were quiet and reserved. Any publicity naturally would have resurrected a past that he wished not to remember.