



# *Llyfr Mormon:* THE TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON INTO WELSH

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RONALD D. DENNIS

O that we, the Welsh, might have  
The Book of Mormon in our own tongue,  
So that we might have greater light  
And comforts on our sojourn.  
Also, the Book of the Doctrines  
Which would certainly provide teaching  
To the officers of the church of Jesus  
And the monoglot Saints in their midst.

O na feddem ni, y Cymry,  
Ein Llyfr Mormon yn ein iaith,  
Fel y caffem fwy o 'leuni  
A chysuron ar ein iaith;  
Hefyd, Llyfr yr Athrawiaethau,  
Hwn yn ddiau roddai ddysg  
I swyddogion eglwys Iesu,  
A'r Saint uniaith yn eu mysg.

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In June 1850, Thomas Conway, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in North Wales, expressed in the above verse the longing of many Welsh Saints to have the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants in a language they could understand.<sup>1</sup> At that time the Welsh converts to the church numbered more than 4,000, the vast majority of whom could not read or speak English.

Latter-day Saint missionaries proselytized in Wales for more than a decade without the benefit of a Welsh translation of the Book of Mormon, a key tool for conversion. In the fall of 1840 the first branch of the church was established in the little town of Overton in North Wales, very near the border with England.<sup>2</sup> The Welsh language was not widely spoken in this farming community and surrounding areas, so a Welsh Book of Mormon was not needed.

Just over two years later, when Elder Lorenzo Snow sent William Henshaw to the heartland of Wales, to the industrial town of Merthyr Tydfil,<sup>3</sup> there was a definite need for proselytizing materials in Welsh. Not only did Elder Henshaw go about his missionary work without such Welsh-language tools, but he did not speak a word of the ancient Celtic tongue. Fortunately, however, Merthyr Tydfil was becoming quite cosmopolitan and had a fair

number of English speakers. Many of these English-speaking residents, such as William R. Davies,<sup>4</sup> came from among the native Welsh. Davies, his wife Rachel, and their two teenaged sons, George and John, were all baptized in February 1843, the first-fruits of Elder Henshaw's efforts.

Davies and his sons were instrumental in the conversion of some of their fellow coal miners, the majority of whom spoke only Welsh. New members introduced family members and friends to the church, and within a few months there was a growing nucleus of the church in Merthyr Tydfil. However, with the exception of one small pamphlet in Welsh on the first principles of the gospel,<sup>5</sup> the only church literature available to the branch members was in English.

The person who would eventually initiate the printing of Welsh-language materials was Captain Dan Jones. On 11 May 1843, four months after being baptized in the Mississippi River and one month after meeting the Prophet Joseph Smith, Dan Jones was called to serve a mission to Wales.<sup>6</sup> More than a year later, shortly before the Prophet Joseph Smith was martyred, he told Jones: "I have a check in the house for \$1200; as soon as I can get it cashed you shall have \$1100 of it, and the start for Wales, not with your fingers in your mouth but prepared to buy a press, and do business aright."<sup>7</sup>



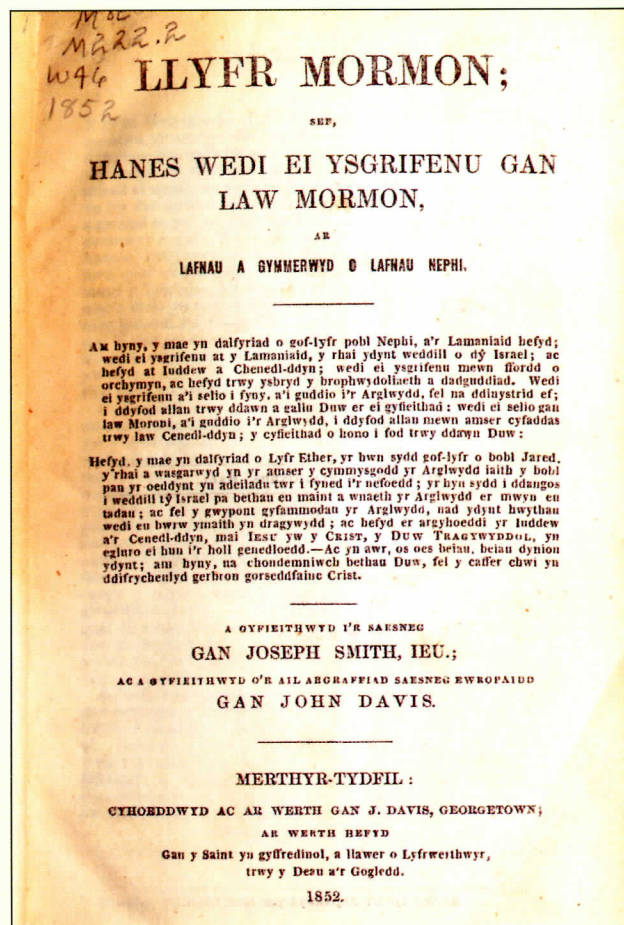
Because of the confusion resulting from the martyrdom, the promised money was never given to Dan Jones. However, Brigham Young sent an order for \$500 to the Liverpool office of the church, and Jones was permitted to draw from that fund to cover his living and publishing expenses as a missionary in Wales.

In April 1845, just three months after beginning his mission, Elder Jones published his first pamphlet, a 48-page treatise on the immutability of the kingdom of God, printed by the William Bayley press in Wrexham, North Wales.<sup>8</sup> Eight months later he wrote to Brigham Young about another publication:

After so long a silence I take the liberty thus to reintroduce myself, and send you & each of the Twelve, a copy of the Welsh translation of yr [your] "Proclamation," tho' now near midnight, tis but a few minutes since I finished printing 4000, with my own hand, on a borrowed Press.<sup>9</sup>

The "borrowed Press" belonged to Jones's brother John, an ordained Congregationalist minister in Rhydybont, a village near Llanybydder, Carmarthenshire. Other members of the Welsh clergy irreverently referred to the Reverend John Jones's press as the "prostitute press" because he allowed LDS materials to be printed on it.<sup>10</sup>

With the exception of his first pamphlet, all of Dan Jones's church publications during his first mission (1845–49) were printed on his brother's press at Rhydybont. Working at the press during the latter part of 1845 and the first part of 1846 was a 23-year-old employee by the name of John S. Davis. While



Title page of the Welsh translation of the Book of Mormon. Courtesy L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

setting the type for some of Dan Jones's early publications, Davis took a serious interest in the doctrines of the church and requested baptism. Five years later he would translate the Book of Mormon into Welsh.

During his first mission, Dan Jones produced a variety of publications: several pamphlets, a 580-page periodical titled *Prophet of the Jubilee*, a 288-page scriptural commentary, a 104-page history of the church, and a small hymnal.<sup>11</sup> Noticeably absent from this impressive list is a Welsh translation of the Book of Mormon. Jones undoubtedly wanted to make this standard work of his faith available to his fellow countrymen, nearly 4,000 of whom had received baptism into the church before Jones's release from his mission at the end of 1848. Had

Jones published the Book of Mormon in Welsh during his first mission to Wales, it would have been the first translation of that book besides Joseph Smith's original English translation. Perhaps sufficient funds were not available for that undertaking, or perhaps Jones's church leaders in Liverpool were simply reluctant to authorize such a huge, pioneering project.

Oddly enough, the Doctrine and Covenants appeared in the Welsh language before the Book of Mormon.<sup>12</sup> John Davis, selected to oversee all printing activities for the church in Wales when Dan Jones emigrated in early 1849, announced in August 1850 that he had been "counseled" to translate and publish the Doctrine and Covenants. His announcement appeared in *Udgorn Seion (Zion's Trumpet)*, the official Mormon periodical in Wales and successor to *Prophet of the Jubilee*.<sup>13</sup> His intention was to send out a 16-page "signature" of the Doctrine and



Covenants in Welsh every other week with an issue of the periodical. He proudly announced in the 22 February 1851 issue of *Zion's Trumpet* that the first signature of the *Llyfr Athrawiaeth a Chyfammodau* was off the press. He also wrote, "If the Saints in general wish it to be published every week instead of every fortnight for one-and-a-half pence, let us know."<sup>14</sup> The response to Davis's idea was positive, for in 27 weeks from that time the 20th and final signature was sent out with the 23 August 1851 *Zion's Trumpet*. These 20 signatures were then to be bound together for the final product.

About a month before finishing the Doctrine and Covenants, Davis announced the following in the 26 July 1851 *Zion's Trumpet*: "We wish for all the Presidents and the Distributors to gather subscriptions for the Book of Mormon without delay. It will come out in the same manner as the 'Doctrine and Covenants,' until it is complete, for a penny and a half per signature. It will probably contain from 30 to 32 signatures."<sup>15</sup> Sent out with that issue of the periodical was a flyer containing a list of publications in Welsh on one side and a prospectus for the Book of Mormon on the other. In the prospectus, Davis outlined the procedure for producing his translation and proudly stated, "The entire book will be printed with completely new type, and on good paper, and each Signature will contain more reading than the Signatures of the 'Doctrine and Covenants.'"<sup>16</sup>

In *Zion's Trumpet* John Davis offered strong encouragement to his team of distributors and church leaders throughout Wales to be very aggressive in obtaining a large number of subscriptions:

9 August 1851—Now is the time for the Presidents and the Distributors, and all the Saints, to strive for the sale of the Book of Mormon among our nation; be as one man. We have begun to translate it, and pray for us that we might have every gift necessary for such an important task. Let us know, *without fail*, by the 31st of August, what number will be received in each place. Do not neglect this. It is quite likely that a signature will come out every week, although we cannot promise that every time.<sup>17</sup>

6 September 1851—BOOK OF MORMON AGAIN.—We are sorry that we have but 1,223 subscribers at this point. We must delay until more are obtained. The little branch of

Pontypridd has requested 138, which represents true effort; and if every branch and conference were to do as this branch has done, we would have over 5,000 subscribers. Brethren, strive harder; our Father is all-wealthy, and he will give money to you.<sup>18</sup>

20 September 1851—BOOK OF MORMON.—The number of subscriptions for the Book of Mormon has almost reached 1500, not counting the order from Liverpool for 200 after it is finished. The 1st Signature will come out with this Trumpet; and if the number of subscribers increases to *two thousand* by the 10th signature, the signatures from the 20th on will be priced at one penny each! Please take note, brethren.<sup>19</sup>

After receiving the first few signatures of the Welsh translation of the Book of Mormon, Thomas Conway sent John Davis his appreciation in verse:

Rejoice, all you monoglot Welshmen,  
We shall have the wish of us all,  
Namely the translation of the BOOK OF MORMON  
Into our harmonious and unfading language:  
The fulness of times has come,  
For the God of heaven to give to us,  
The secrets he gave to Mormon,  
And his dear associates.

Here is the book that for many years,  
Namely for fourteen hundred,  
Was in the earth at Cumorah,  
Like some fair and beautiful treasure;  
It was like the setting sun  
For such a long time:  
Now it is like the shining sun  
Rising to do its work.

Its light is spreading,  
Through different languages of the world,  
Now it is coming to the Welsh,  
Oh, how lovely it gladdens our hearts;  
"And at that day the deaf  
Will hear the words of this book,  
The eyes of the blind will see out  
Of the cloud and darkness," I know.  
The light of the Book is so dazzling,



That it darkens the weak eyes,  
But the eyes will grow strong again,  
They will see better presently;  
An object of great surprise to the Welsh,  
Will be the Book of Mormon when it comes,  
In the language of their birth;  
Now it is almost here.<sup>20</sup>

Two weeks after Thomas Conway's letter and poem, John Davis also expressed his enthusiasm for the project:

BOOK OF MORMON.—We would like to notify the subscribers of the Book of Mormon, that its signatures, from the 20th on, will be *a penny* each! We congratulate our brethren for the effort they have made in its behalf. We think it best to refrain from cutting its pages before binding it, lest some of them be lost, and that some will not be in order. Since it will be out in about six months, it is best for the most careless not to read it, rather put the signatures safely aside for binding, and after that to remember to read it.<sup>21</sup>

In the 21 February 1852 issue of *Zion's Trumpet*, Davis inserted the following notice:

BOOK OF MORMON.—We wish to notify the distributors of the Book of Mormon that the profit from the 20th signature to the end will be the same as for the Trumpet; and generally the profit with respect to the Welsh Book of Mormon, to all the distributors, will be more than that for the English.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, on 17 April 1852, 31 weeks after the distribution of the initial signature, Davis sent out the final signature with his periodical. He proudly announced:

We are happy to inform our readers that the last number of the Book of Mormon, in Welsh, is being sent out with this TRUMPET; and we feel gratitude in our hearts to God, for providing us with health and abilities to complete a task that was so important in our sight. The Welsh nation has reason to rejoice, that they have this treasure in their own language, and that they now in many respects stand equal with others of their brethren in privileges. We believe that public thanks should be given to God for his goodness toward us as a nation.<sup>23</sup>

He also gave some advice concerning the binding procedure:

Since the ink in new books requires time to dry, it will not be wise to bind the Book of Mormon too soon, unless you warn the binder not to push too hard on it, so as not to cause it to be printed double. We will receive the Book of Mormon here to bind it, the same as we did for the "Doctrine and Covenants," and for about the same price; and whoever wishes to get a handsome and inexpensive binding done in London may send us the volume, and we shall endeavor to take care of it. We will need to raise the price for those who do not come to request their volumes promptly, after we have let them know of their arrival from London, for we have to pay for them when we receive them.<sup>24</sup>

At that time the periodical appeared every two weeks, so an average of two signatures of the Book of Mormon in Welsh accompanied each issue of *Zion's Trumpet*.

Two interesting sidelights to the translation are preserved in a biographical sketch of John Davis in Orson F. Whitney's *History of Utah*: first, the entire translation was written with one quill pen; second, Samuel Evans, editor of *Seren Gomer* (*Star of Gomer*), a Baptist periodical for which Davis worked before becoming a Latter-day Saint, said that it was a "pity such valuable labor in producing so perfect a translation had been bestowed upon so worthless a work as the Book of Mormon."<sup>25</sup>

In his foreword to the Welsh edition of the Book of Mormon, titled "Foreword to the Welsh" and dated 6 April 1852, Davis stated that the translation was "the best that could be done under disadvantages which the majority of translators do not labor under." He explained that "perspicuity and plain language" had been sought more than "any kind of adornment." Davis also declared to the antagonists of Mormonism in Wales: "Many of you have freely given your opinion of this book and condemned it without ever having seen it; but now after [our] laboring so long under disadvantages, you can read it for yourselves and see whether your former opinions were correct."<sup>26</sup> Davis did not specify what those disadvantages were. Perhaps he had reference to the lack of qualified typesetters and proofreaders from among church members, the vast majority of whom had but little formal education. Or perhaps he



meant the very cramped conditions where the press was located in his home on John's Street, in an area of Merthyr Tydfil known as Georgetown.

John Davis was one of the most highly educated converts to the church in mid-19th-century Wales. His education came not as much from years of formal schooling as it did from years of setting type and reading proof of numerous publications in both Welsh and English. He became a printer's apprentice at the age of 13. During his apprenticeship his exposure to proper grammar, to exposition of ideas, to logic in arguing points of view, and to the world of printing in general equipped him well to serve as editor of the church's Welsh-language periodical in 1849 and to assume at that time the responsibility for all church publications in his native tongue.

When permission was granted to prepare a translation of the Doctrine and Covenants in August 1850, Davis had already produced 18 issues of *Udgorn Seion*, 21 pamphlets of various sizes, a dozen poems, a large register book for keeping membership records, and a 104-page hymnal. In the 27 weeks from 22



John S. Davis almost single-handedly translated the Book of Mormon into Welsh. Courtesy Ronald D. Dennis.

February 1851 to 23 August 1851, Davis published all 20 signatures of the Doctrine and Covenants. And in the 31 weeks from 20 September 1851 to 17 April 1852, he published all 31 signatures of the Book of Mormon. During this period of time, Davis married Elizabeth Phillips on 30 December 1850, moved from Nantygwenith Street to John's Street by 11 January 1851,<sup>27</sup> became a father on 8 December 1851, and served as counselor to William S. Phillips during his five-year tenure as mission president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Wales from January 1849 to December 1853. He emigrated to Utah in 1854, where he continued as a printer and later as a merchant. Orson F. Whitney characterizes John Davis as being of "a retiring

disposition, gentle but impressive in manner, a deliberate thinker, and a vigorous writer."<sup>28</sup>

Davis's work in translating and publishing the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon is nothing short of remarkable, especially considering the narrow time frames and the labor-intensive conditions.<sup>29</sup> No further Welsh translations of either of these volumes of scripture have been made.<sup>30</sup>