

Early Mormonism in Finnish Newspapers, 1840-1849

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Introduction

Contemporary Finnish Latter-day Saints are used to seeing both positive and negative newspaper articles about their church. Up to this point, however, next to nothing is known about the public image of Mormonism perpetuated by Finnish media in the eighteenth hundreds.

On the one hand, the low amount of published research on early Mormonism in Finnish media stems from the lack of scholars of Mormonism and comparative religion proficient in the Finnish and Swedish languages, the main languages of Finland. On the other hand, the primary sources in this case, i.e. the newspapers, are very plentiful. Thus even a preliminary analysis of the source material requires painstaking research in order to first find the pertinent articles and notices from the 19th century.

Recent developments at the Helsinki University Library have brought considerable advantages for finding the source material. Funded by the Scandinavian TIDEN-project, the University is digitizing all Finnish newspapers from 1771-1890. The project will be finished in 2007, and thanks to optical character recognition (OCR), the material in this "Historical Newspaper Library" is searchable by keywords. It is thus possible to find information about any subject of interest by running queries in the Library database on the internet.¹ This brief note seeks to raise interest in studying the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Finland by demonstrating how the Historical Newspaper Library can be used to gather information about the earliest mentions of Mormonism in Finnish newspapers. Although it took the Mormon church nearly 120 years from its inception to firmly establish itself in remote Finland, its image among the Finns was being shaped already during the 1840s.

How should these early newspaper reports be viewed? What were their sources? How were American things generally viewed in Finland at the time? When looking at the early mentions of Mormonism to be presented below, it must be kept in mind that the Finnish newspaper scene was still in its infancy in the 1840s. Activities were increasing, but as an example of the state of 19th century Finnish journalism, no foreign correspondents were used to get foreign news. Instead, editors used stories from books and from foreign

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papers originating in places such as Stockholm, St. Petersburg, France, Germany, and Belgium, a fact reflected in the term “scissor journalism.”²

There is currently no knowledge of Mormon-related books or magazine articles in Finland during the 1840s, and thus the probable source for the Mormon notices are foreign newspapers or books. However, source information is often missing and it is thus difficult to trace the provenance of the reports that are given in the papers. A general image of the United States of America had not been formed in Finland at this early time either, and thus it is dangerous to generalize about how Finns of the time felt about American phenomena.³ Despite these difficulties of interpreting and contextualizing what one is reading, the texts do provide an interesting window into some attitudes that early Mormonism encountered.

Calm beginnings

The first Latter-day Saint missionaries to Great Britain arrived in 1837, and their doings soon became public knowledge in the rest of Europe. When *Finlands Allmänna Tidning* at the end of 1840 reported news from England, it included a notice about a “new dreaming religious sect” that had established itself in some parts of England. The notice also shortly described some of the new church’s doctrines:

Their teachings are based, in addition to the Bible, also on the Mormon book. Its contents are inscribed on copper plates, and it is said to have been found in the inner parts of America ... They themselves have been sent into to the world to prepare the way for the Son of Man.⁴

**I särskilda delar af England skall en ny svär-
misk religiös sect hafva bildat sig, under namn af:
”den yttersta dagens heliga.” De visade sig först i
Herfordshire och Leicestershire, hvarifrån de ut-
bredde sig till Lancashire och Yorkshire, samt vidare
till Durham och Northumberland. Deras läror stödj-
a sig, utom på bibeln, äfven på Mormon-boken, hvars
innehåll är inristadt i kopparplåtar och hvilken bok
skall hafva blifvit funnen i de inre delarne af Ame-
rika. Enligt deras åsigt känna endast de den sau-**

Figure 1. The first known mention of Mormonism in Finland. An excerpt in Swedish from *Finlands Allmänna Tidning*, 23 November 1840, p. 2. Source: Helsinki University Library, Historical Newspaper Library.

Finlands Allmänna Tidning was the government's official paper, and thus it held an important place among other papers. It was the largest and most printed paper in the nation until the 1840s. Although it had only about 1,000 subscribers, it was still a prestigious venue for this short notice of Mormonism's existence to be published in.⁵

At the same time many Latter-day Saints in the United States had fled from Missouri to Illinois, where the town of Nauvoo was established in 1839. With the blessing of the state legislature, a Mormon-dominated military organization called the Nauvoo Legion was formed.⁶ The legion was to be available for both city and state usage, and it is clear that many Mormons were happy about its creation. However, the legion also raised suspicion and may have been one reason for 1842 comments in *Borgå Tidning*, a newspaper targeted to clergy and teachers.⁷ Among the news from abroad was the following:

A society of religious dreamers calling itself Mormonites has been formed in the latest years in the United States, which has fallen apart into sects. They have 100,000 members and a 2,000-man army, a power comparable to the US front troops. This state within a state threatens with destruction everything that sets itself against it.⁸

The newspaper also mentioned that "apostle Joe Smith" had a public discussion with an Episcopal minister in June 1842. According to the reporter, thoughtful people saw the true nature of the Mormonites, but he acknowledged that the Mormonites had gained new followers due to the publicity that the matter had gathered. The scary membership statistic was contradicted by the same paper the next year on June 25th. At that time the newspaper said there are 12,000 Mormons. The same was reported by *Helsingfors Morgonblad* on August 21st.

The genesis of oppositional writing

These four references to Mormonism by the end of 1842 were with some qualifications largely neutral and did not go into details. However, *Borgå Tidning* accelerated the pace in August 1845, when it used a lot of space to cover issues related to Mormonism. The subject was thought to be so important that it was dealt with in just over

four pages, more than half the space available in two consecutive issues. This two-part article may be thought of as the genesis of anti-Mormon writing in Finland.

It is, perhaps, significant that this two-part article would appear in *Borgå Tidning* instead of some other paper. Founded in 1838, the paper's central audience was the clergy of the Lutheran church's Borgå diocese,⁹ and thus it covered more religious items than most other Finnish newspapers of the day. It had only a little less than 500 subscribers. When considering the type of the audience, however, the impact of this negative article was arguably quite significant, because it was read by important opinion-makers of the day within the field of religion. Considering the venue it is perhaps not completely surprising that the coverage of Mormonism would be negative.¹⁰

The presentation was titled "The Mormons, an armed religious sect in the United States."¹¹ The narrative began with a description of a recent religious scam enacted in the state of New York. Ministers of a certain church had been preaching sermons of both encouraging and "hellfire-and-damnation" content. In order to remove all doubt in the minds of their hearers, the ministers had promised that angels would appear to the believers:

And – oh wonder! – barely had these prophetic words sunk down into them, when two citizens of another world, clothed in white, hovered with their shiny wings on the other side of the river ... A rumor of this miracle spread like lightning, and on the next day thousands of new listeners and spectators streamed to the venue. Neither of the high beings declined to appear to the multitude of people that day either. But who could describe the disappointment of the believers, when the angels on the third day came out of the forest again, but escorted by some other "emissaries," tough policemen. They were imprisoned for their deceit.

Having thus set the stage and biased the minds of the readers, the writer noted that a larger and more important scam had entered the stage. The paper reported that "a certain Josef Smith" had appeared in Ohio some years ago and described briefly a few pieces of Mormon history. The Nauvoo temple and its proxy baptisms were also mentioned. For example, an older man was said to have accepted baptism in behalf of some celebrities and earlier presidents of the United States. The writer thought this was "a pretty clever way to realize fast and glorious growth in the sect's membership rolls," seemingly unaware that proxy baptisms did not affect the membership numbers of the Mormon church. In addition, the paper informed its readers that Mormons exhibited blind obedience towards their prophet, and that their status as Christians was questionable. The article also mentioned

the attempted assassination of Missouri governor Lilburn W. Boggs and suspicions regarding Joseph Smith having something to do with it.¹²

Ett dylikt bedrägeri, af en vida större betydhet, så väl med afseende på utsträckning, som inflytelse och varaktighet, har emedlertid visat sig, och hotar med allvarsamma följder; det är den så kallade *Mormonismen*.

I Staden Ohio, som öfver hufvud taget tyckes äga en fruktbar mark för religiösa och socialistiska experimenter, uppträdde för några år sedan en viss *Josef Smith*, påstående sig utrustad med en ny gudomlig uppenbarelse. Han företedde en i gammal stil författad bok, hvilken sades innehålla grunden till

Figure 2. The beginnings of oppositional writing, calling Mormonism a “fraud.” An excerpt in Swedish from *Borgå Tidning*, 20 August 1845, p. 2. Source: Helsinki University Library, Historical Newspaper Library.

Because the year was 1845, the news about Joseph Smith’s death had made it to Europe. *Borgå Tidning* presented, perhaps based on rumors, a very interesting account of Smith’s death. When Joseph Smith, his brother, and two friends were in Carthage jail, the newspaper said that:

... a Mormon, more courageous than the others, tried to break into the prison unnoticed despite the heavy guarding. When he encountered resistance, he fired his pistol at the head of a militia member. Thus the sign for a general battle had been given.

Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum are then told to have fired a few shots from the prison window and to have tried to escape through the window during a general confusion.

But hardly had they prepared to do this, when the militia noticed their plans and sent them a rain of balls, so that they, hit by hundreds of balls, fell down from high up.

The article also mentioned that Joseph's and Hyrum's brother Samuel Smith had become the new prophet of the Mormons in the beginning of July 1844.

Towards the end, the reporter took issue with the contents of the Book of Mormon, saying that the Mormons "put aside our holy scripture as the source of revelation, taking in its stead their prophet's bible and that book's revelations." Especially the writer criticizes the Book of Mormon for saying that "our Savior would be born of Mary, in Jerusalem." The words "at" (which the passage in Alma 7:10 in reality uses) and "in" can in one sense be translated in the same way into Swedish, and it is thus not clear if the article's original writer has actually misread the text or not. The article ends with a summary dismissal saying that a multitude of "equally clear" arguments could be presented against Mormonism, that "most shameless fraud."

In 1849, *Helsingfors Tidningar* described the gold-digging circumstances of California.¹³ The paper said that a "notorious Mormon sect" was active in the neighborhood, and this was a reason for fearing "bloody conflicts." This particular newspaper was read mostly in the Helsinki area and in southern Finland, and by the end of the 1840s it had become the largest paper of the country, with a subscriber base of about 1,100.¹⁴ Although the depiction of the Mormons is not very charitable, it was buried within a larger article and its negative effect should probably not be exaggerated.

When thinking of the article's depiction of gold-mining Mormons, though, it is ironic that the gold rush began in earnest only after *a Mormon* in San Francisco went public with the knowledge of gold finds.¹⁵ In fact, just a couple of weeks earlier, the government-sanctioned *Finlands Allmänna Tidning* said that the Mormons had spread knowledge of a gold find.¹⁶

According to current knowledge, there was no Mormon news related to Scandinavia in Finnish newspapers in the 1840s. Most probably this has to do with the fact that Mormon missionaries had not yet arrived in Scandinavia. Some people of Scandinavian origin did join the Mormons in the United States already during that decade, but the Mormon church itself took the next decisive step towards Finland in 1849. This was when Brigham Young called Erastus Snow and Peter Hansen to open the Scandinavian mission.¹⁷

Future work

Since the formation of the Finnish mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1947, newspaper articles have been collected by the mission office and

Mormon Church Public Affairs, sometimes with the help of media-observing companies. The clippings are available at the Finnish Historical Archive of the LDS Church in Hämeenlinna, Finland. The number of available clippings from 1946 forward number far over 1,000, but to date, very little work on them has been made.¹⁸ Newspaper clippings are also available at the Finland Helsinki mission office and at LDS Church Archives in Salt Lake City, Utah.

The clippings come from both secular and sectarian sources and deal with issues such as LDS missionary basketball teams, Mormon doctrines from Lutheran or Evangelical Protestant viewpoints, United States ambassadors to Finland who were Mormon, “atrocities stories” by former Latter-day Saints, accounts of conferences, general articles about the church, interviews of missionaries, information about temple work and the Helsinki temple, etc. Although a lot of neutral and positive articles have appeared, the Mormon church to this day has a problem with its image in Finnish media.

These newer clippings along with the hundreds of 19th-century articles that have recently become easily available form an interesting field for studying the reactions of the religiously very homogeneous Finnish society to Mormonism. What impact have these articles had on Mormonism in Finland? How consistent with reality is the image of Mormonism given in these articles? One especially interesting venue of study utilizing the new digital library would be the newspaper recitals and descriptions of early Mormon missionary activities in Finland between 1875 and 1890, because comparative material is available in the Scandinavian mission’s manuscript history.

The study of Mormonism in Finland and of international Mormonism in general is still in its infancy, but sources are increasingly becoming available. Although the lack of knowledge of foreign languages may be an obstacle for many, it can only be hoped that more academics and other people will become interested in studying Mormonism’s story in and relationship with its numerous host countries. The acculturation processes and the reactions of the host countries will shed valuable light on the future of Mormonism, as it continues to spread into non-US areas. In these studies, newspaper articles will continue to be an invaluable resource as a window into ordinary people’s minds.

References

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an historical study of Finland's newspapers.

3. Keijo Virtanen, *Atlantin yhteys: Tutkimus amerikkalaisesta kulttuurista, sen suhteesta ja välittymisestä Eurooppaan vuosina 1776-1917* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1988), p. 79-89.
4. "Tidningar från utrikes orter, England," *Finlands Allmänna Tidning*, November 23, 1840, p. 2. English translation by this author.
5. Ulla Ekman-Salokangas, Eeva-Liisa Aalto, and Raimo Salokangas, eds., *Hakuteos Aamulehti – Kotka Nyheter* (Kuopio: Kustannuskiila, 1988), p. 78-79. This is volume 5 in *Suomen lehdistön historia*.
6. For basics on the Nauvoo Legion, see Philip M. Flammer, "Nauvoo Legion," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), vol. 3, p. 997-998.
7. Tommila et al., *Sanomalehdistön vaiheet vuoteen 1905*, p. 154.
8. For the original text in Swedish, see "Utrikes," *Borgå Tidning*, September 24, 1842, p. 3. English translation by this author.
9. Salokangas et al., *Hakuteos Aamulehti – Kotka Nyheter*, p. 45-46. Borgå is Swedish for the city of Porvoo in southern Finland.
10. However, although *Borgå Tidning* every now and again contained reports on foreign religious movements, it doesn't seem that the reports were automatically negative. See for example a report on British Puseyism in "Ytterligare om Puseyismen," *Borgå Tidning*, February 25, 1843, p. 2-3.
11. "Mormonerna, en beväpnad religionssekt i de Förenta Staterna," *Borgå Tidning*, August 20, 1845, p. 1-4, and August 23, 1845, p. 2-3. English translations by this author. According to a footnote, the article comes from Wilhelm Grisson's original text "Beiträge zur Charakteristik der Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika." Unfortunately I have been unable to find Grisson's original publication and explore its aftermath.
12. More information on the attempted assassination can be found for example in Harold Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), p. 67-82 and D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1994), p. 113.
13. "Kaliforniens guld," *Helsingfors Tidningar*, February 14, 1849, p. 2. English translation by this author.
14. Salokangas et al., *Hakuteos Aamulehti – Kotka Nyheter*, p. 127-129.
15. Eugene E. Campbell, *Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847-1869* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), p. 41. More information on how the Mormon church reacted to the gold findings can be found in *Establishing Zion*, p. 41-55 and Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), p. 64-95.
16. "Tidningar från utrikes orter, England," *Finlands Allmänna Tidning*, January 29, 1849, p. 2.
17. John Thomas, "Scandinavia," in Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan, eds., *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), p. 1072-1073.
18. One example of work partly based on the clippings is a Master's thesis in sociology that examines Mormonism's image and Mormon conversion in Finland: Risto Kurra, "Mormonikäntyminen ja mormonismin kuva Suomessa," (M.A. thesis, University of Tampere, 1971).