

LEPETIT RICHARDS AND  
THE BIG DIPPER CARPET—  
AN AMUSEMENT BASED ON  
A REWORKING OF WHITTLE'S  
RESEARCH NOTES

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*Author's note: "LePetit Richards and the Big Dipper Carpet" is a fictional story, but there are some things the reader should know. Whittle is real, as am I. Benson Whittle and I grew up in the four-by-four-block square neighborhood known as the Fifth Ward in Provo. Later, being the smart guy that he was, he would turn up at Oxford, where, as part of his academic work, he created the engaging character of LePetit Richards, an early convert to Mormonism, purportedly backed up by Richards's journals and other materials, all fiction. Whittle published the Richards story as part of a special addendum to *The Dictionary of Alternative Biography* (1973). Now, I have refurbished that story, used the struts of Whittle's original work to refashion the early parts of this piece, then extended it. Along the way, I have enlarged on what Whittle did, even put him into the story, and introduced several new elements—including a second "conjuring" of the stars in the constellation Ursa Major, a carpet containing the same, and an inventive tract by Richards—then expanded the whole story of Richards's exploits to cover his mission years in late-nineteenth-century Canada. Three parts of this contribution are not fiction: a woodcut print, the likeness of LePetit; calculations made by Orson Pratt on the number of spirit children created in the premortal life; and J. Wilford Booth, who comes in at the very end.*

This was not the only time that Richards, originally born Neville Colyer, the son of a millwright in Oxfordshire, had worked through the imagery of the stars. He had once at an earlier date, while taken with zeal for his newfound religion, tried to predict the future movement of the Mormons *after* they settled the American West. He did this by superimposing the constellation Ursa Major right-side-up, slightly askew but to scale, on an 1860s map of the United States and its Territories. Some stars fell on Mormon historical sites.

The placement of the twenty or so stars had him deciphering that rather than return to Jackson County, Missouri (“Adam-ondi-Ahman” in Mormon parlance) in the last days, as assured in the Doctrine and Covenants, the final move would be west beyond Salt Lake City to Big Sur, near Monterey Bay in California, where the bear’s tail and the last star in the sequence would have come to rest. That effort lies recorded somewhere no doubt but is held in total disregard as it contradicts common Mormon belief and scriptural history.

The second time around, he applied the constellation, containing the Big Dipper, to the 1870 map of Canada, the Dominion, as a way for setting the path for his mission there later in the same decade. To do this, Richards drew, more or less to scale, the Great Bear on the map as if he had grabbed it from the sky by the near shoulder and the hip, then dipped it “into an imaginary third dimension,” one naked to the eye, superimposing the now upside-down Bear on the map. This maneuver slightly distorted the shape of the constellation. But the placement of the supine Bear made sense to him, given the population settlement pattern of Canada. The tip-of-the-tail Star A was set in British Columbia, somewhere on Vancouver Island, then other stars scattered more or less in a line along the tail, spine, neck and head (Star I, at the nose, landed on St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, far to the east). The legs reached into the northern Arctic zones.

His initial aim was to do faithful missionary work for the Mormons with a group of colleagues, but at times they went instead

carousing around the domain, just a decade or so after Confederation (1867), living what they came to call “the robust life” at the sites matched to the way the stars settled on the map. Imagining the map to be divine direction, they followed it as they moved around, even though at times it took them to places that were unsettled. They, too, as we shall see, might have been thought of as being a bit “unsettled” themselves.

Out of all this, though, it is for a carpet featuring this same constellation, and the rather interesting backstory it represents, that Richards’s life is noteworthy, bears dressing up and retelling beyond what Whittle was able to do. But, curiously, unlike most stories, it is necessary to start at what might have been the end before making a beginning.

Richards, not surprisingly from what we now know from Whittle’s biography of him, turned out to be a bit of a rogue, a man-child, a true outlier, so much on the borderline of an independent, unpredictable ruffian despite his maudlin English upbringing that, once a Mormon and having got to Salt Lake Valley in the mid-1850s, he was refused membership in Brigham Young’s elite group of bodyguards, enforcers, and vigilantes, perhaps remnants of the earlier Danites, by none other than Porter Rockwell himself.

It is generally thought that Richards disappeared from this sphere in the late spring of 1893, when a buckboard driven by one of his wives, TokaNebo, a Paiute woman he brought with him from Utah a few years before, struck a rock while rounding a bend at speed on a narrow canyon road near Cardston, Alberta, “bucking” him off the wagon bed and into a raging river gorge of the Saint Mary River. Richards had joined the early Mormon settlers who had been called to go there by President Taylor in the late 1880s, part of the effort to take the Mormons out from under the federal government’s crusade to quash the practice of polygamy. The practice persists to this day among some of the more fundamentalist “Saints” in Canada, especially in the area of Bountiful, British Columbia, a Book of Mormon name.

He was, at the time, bound in a Turkish carpet—well, Armenian really—specially made for him by sister Saints in the Ottoman Empire at the request of a cousin as a memorial to the imagery of Richards’s Canadian mission years. Richards’s wives had hidden him in it as they fled from a family of angry Gentile ranchers, whose herds normally roamed closer to Lethbridge. He had, ingeniously, added “ds” to the brand “Rch” to make their cattle appear his, then driven them nearer to Cardston for grazing. Richards was convinced that his actions were righteous, indeed sanctioned by principles of the gospel of prosperity that was then coming to the fore in Mormon thinking—it focused on individual ingenuity and the attainment of goods in this life as evidence of God’s approval, not on obedience, repentance, and atonement. Some of its teachings, and their application, persist in the present.

In the moment of the swerve, family oral history says, Richards tumbled down the slope into a swift-moving stream and was swept away, presumed to have been killed or drowned or, if possible, both. He would have been sixty-three years of age at the time. But Richards was, if nothing else, a tough old bird. So perhaps this was not his untimely demise. And there are hints that it was not. The carpet, with its blue field and the faint outline of the bear encircling the constellation Ursa Major, was found days later a few miles downstream, empty, dry, wrapped around a solitary quaking aspen. It was retrieved, washed, and put back into service by the family. Richards, on the other hand, may or may not have been. These lines, writ in the Deseret alphabet, which Richards had learned at the behest of Brigham Young, had been incised into the tree’s bark, one word having been obscured by poor knifemanship. Here is the translation:

*Sway with the Poplars in her country lanes,  
They have known exile too  
And reach for their Old World home  
As you might for your [own?] in absentia.*

If by Richards's own hand, these might be a vague but teasing clue that he was yet alive and headed back to England, the reference to "poplars" perhaps alluding to the Oxfordshire of his baptism. But there is some ambiguity here. We might never know for sure; there is a gap in his journals—though it is known that around this time he did appear in Oxford to take possession of an inheritance received from a professor there.

Somehow, the rug made it to the central valleys of Utah.

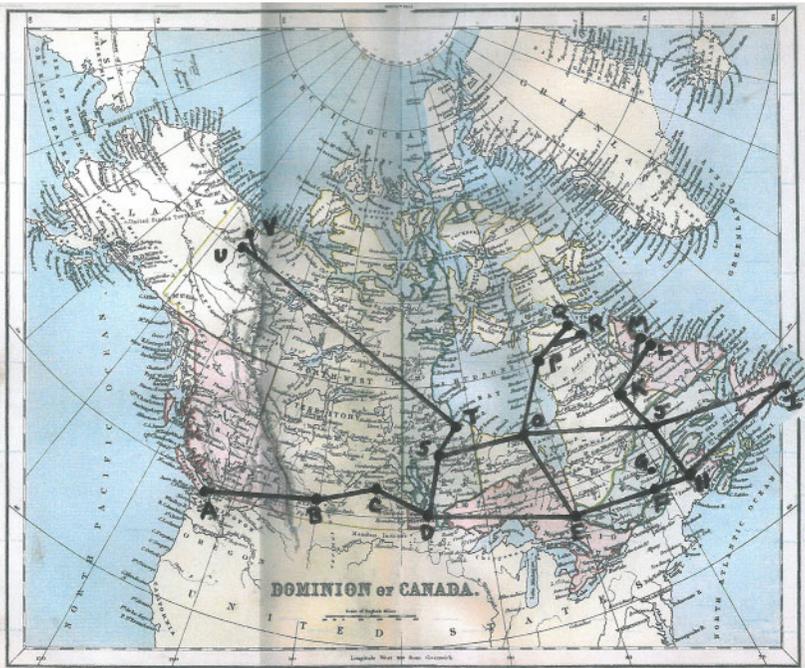
As a young man, Whittle first saw that carpet, or one like it, in the front room of Richards's granddaughter's home at the corner of First East and Second North in Provo as he was collecting fast offerings for the Church on a Sunday afternoon in the mid-1950s. The family professed the rug's history, whether fanciful or true, to him in person even as he stood on it as a thirteen-year-old. It had *Ursa Major* and the North Star, *Polaris*, woven into its blue field and, when turned right-side-up and put on the wall, was often used to teach children at the Parker School, across the street, about the place, structure, and purpose of this important constellation. As an exercise, the students there were often given a sheet with the early map of Canada (1870) and asked to plot the stars as Richards had done. They showed Whittle one of the "projects," a copy of which is now part of his research papers. (See example below, though the student seems to have gotten the structure of the rear legs a bit off and skipped a letter in the alphabet, so there is no Star N. She or he, no doubt, had points taken off for these errors.)

In addition, the family pointed out that in the lower right corner there was a large K stitched in white into the field, along with the small but decipherable text: "If I could hie to . . .," a reference to Kolob, it turns out, a star in the Mormon celestial firmament. This was an homage to Richards and probably had been added later by some family member, as it seems not to have been part of the original tight weave. Richards, it seems, learned the words in the carpet at an earlier time from the song written by W. W. Phelps, once the publisher of the

*Evening and Morning Star*, an early Mormon newspaper. One stanza scans:

If you could hie to Kolob in the twinkling of an eye,  
 And then continue onward with that same speed to fly,  
 Do you think that you could ever, through all Eternity,  
 Find out the generation where Gods began to be?

These lines from the song raise massively interesting questions about the “Great Beginning” and the place and origin of Time, so much the interest of theoretical physicists today. They also imply that there was a time when Gods did *not* exist. This insight alone is as intriguing as it is challenging. The song itself appeared in the first Mormon hymnal



John Bartholomew, cartographer. *New map of the Dominion of Canada*. Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1870. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015591054/>.

(1835). According to family folklore, it was Richards's modest wish to eventually go there, to Kolob, that is, perhaps be its god. There is more to say about this idea a bit later.

And the family swore that there were papers at Oxford to support all of what they had told Whittle. This sighting of the carpet, and the accompanying explanations, made a deep and enduring impression on Whittle. The story of the carpet and its imagery was seared into his memory, would influence him later to search for the Richards's papers once he himself got to England.

For the captivating, though convoluted, story of the Richards carpet, including its origins, the consequences of the star plotting, and the theological notions that spurred Richards into joining the Mormons, we can now go back to the beginning of this story, to a time when his surname was actually Colyer. All of this history is recorded in his journals, found serendipitously later in the twentieth century by Whittle. When the journals of LePetit Richards and other supporting documents came to light, including a truncated version of the Book of Mormon in French, Whittle started to compact Richards's story, writing *A Précis of the Life of LePetit Richards*, which was to become a contribution as an addendum to *The Dictionary of Alternative Biography* (1973), a compilation of the biographies of interesting but relatively obscure Britons.



As a teenager in the late 1840s, Neville Colyer, as Richards was first known, had secured through an uncle, a prosperous London book-binder, a position as a scout (a “step-and-fetch-it” and tidier for the college's students) in one of the oldest of Oxford's colleges—Merton. His own academic career had been short-lived, though he had distinguished himself for being the first adolescent taken, for his perceived brightness, from the working classes into the New Henley Middle School. Then, further, for being the first pupil sent down by the school—“rusticated”

is the word the English used then; its obliqueness hides the harshness of the word we use, “expelled.”

Colyer, it turns out, was inquisitive, a chap of innate ingenuity, but one with a propensity for counter-authoritarian delinquency. He was cited for providing fellow students with pieces of leather—some a quarter of an inch in thickness—which, when put into the backside of underwear against the skin, created an elephant-hide-like armor that made the practice of caning “ineffectual if not risible,” as Whittle’s notes say. Colyer had apprenticed with a local tanner for a summer before going to school.

Because he was not a “student” at the college, Colyer was spared the boredom of attendance at lectures, sherry parties, chapel, and hall during his employ, not to mention the pressure of learning. After six years of employment, Colyer could truthfully claim that, officially, he had never attended a lecture, had “never sat with, nor for, any tutor, academic or moral. Never written an essay nor taken an exam.” He might well have written the rhyming lines, now attributed to a fourteenth-century Cambridge monk to the effect that “Aft’ seven years of sleep and ease, I slowly lost all my degrees!” Colyer had no degrees at all to lose, so perhaps this mention, however succinct, is extraneous.

Yet, this did not mean that he was not, in fact, learning a thing or two along the way.

Aided by a friend employed in the scullery, Colyer was able to begin to assay the contents of rooms above but next to the kitchen—a collection of curious, but then very contemporary, theological texts. On his own initiative, he began spending some of his evenings there reading, having soon been befriended by the professor, an eminent theologian named de Freitas, whose library Colyer had been quietly rifling. This was all in the early 1850s. It was here that de Freitas introduced him to a stack of texts categorized with the rubric “God’s Kingdom in the Tops of the Mountains, America.”

His interest piqued by de Tocqueville's writing on religion in America, de Freitas had journeyed there, even to Nauvoo before the Saints had departed just after Joseph Smith's death in the mid-1840s, to look into the emergence of this new "American religion." It was a chaotic time, but he was able to get a firsthand sense of the evolving "Church." The de Freitas collection was quite up-to-date at the time, as he was able to add things from the Mormon missionary tracts that were then flooding England. This included a copy of the very telling Articles of Faith and some bits and pieces of the Book of Mormon, which were appearing in print as though they had been serialized like a Dickens story in newspapers. De Freitas would eventually bequeath all these papers to Richards (né Colyer).

Colyer found, among other things, a section of the papers denoted as "Words of Wisdom," though to his dismay they spoke endlessly only of health matters rather than any other unique knowledge that he might have wanted to cultivate. He was expecting something more sage. Those who followed these "advices," the text said, carried away the promise of being able to "run without being weary or faint." The same section carried an admonition against the use of spirits (alcoholic beverages in this case), except for their medicinal purposes, and tea and coffee (caffeinated hot drinks)—a ban essentially on inebriants and hot stimulants. The ambiguity of refreshing, ice-cold, caffeinated Coca-Cola had yet to present itself.

The advice about not drinking tea, he thought, would not likely go over well with the Twinings, one of whose sons was a member of the very college, Merton, where Colyer served. He thought it unwise to say anything about what he was learning in this regard, choosing to keep the suggested prohibitions to himself. The English, after all, love their tea, sherry, port, and ale, and sometimes, when they are feeling safe from rebellion, will admit to drinking Irish or Scottish whiskey. He kept thinking, though, about what those "medicinal" purposes might

be that would exempt alcohol from the ban, permit its consumption free of condemnation.

References in other parts of the documents to multiple “celestial” marriages—on earth the day-to-day adventure of Mormon polygamy—aroused his interest as he imagined, righteously of course, the possibility of having his own harem-like clutch of women at his service or vice versa. Neither the morality, the weighty responsibilities, the bullish sexuality, the paternalism, nor the inherent exploitive, or even oppressive, nature of such a practice ever crossed his mind. Later, he would come to follow the practice devotedly, even though he was not one of the select among the Mormons “officially” authorized to do so. He embraced the practice enthusiastically, seemed to flourish within it. Eventually, he took four wives on his own authority.

Naturally, being something of a mystic and an earnest egoist though yet young, Colyer was drawn to the detailing of the “three degrees of glory” in the afterlife and the chance, referred to from time to time in the papers, that he, Colyer, could himself become as God, be in charge of (perhaps even create) his own planet or star, like Kolob, at some time in the far future if he could be assigned to the highest heavenly realm, the Celestial Kingdom, in the afterlife and do well there. It did not occur to him that Kolob might only be an illusory image used to prompt members to conform to the religion’s rules in the hope of receiving some high but unseen reward.

On one piece of paper he found these words scribbled in de Freitas’s hand, “As Man is, God once was. And as God is, Man may become” (no attribution, though we now think of it as being authored by Lorenzo Snow, who came years later. So the idea might have been circulating for some time previously). In another part of one manuscript, Colyer found the words to another song that implied that there is a Mother in Heaven, just as there is a Father. This made implicit sense to him. How would all those spirit children make up their numbers in the premortal existence without some sort of conjugation between godly genders? He

could not bring himself to believe in spontaneous generation or that his very own existence was cosmically haphazard, the mere result of chance. So, this was a powerful idea.

We could forgive Colyer if he had begun to take the view that key parts of Mormon theology are derived from song. It is, of course, the other way around. The song the papers refer to here, whose lyrics were written by Eliza R. Snow, contains words to the effect that “Truth Eternal tells me I’ve a Mother there,” speaking of the premortal spirit world.

Colyer appears not to have been startled in the least, rather was intrigued, by the story of Joseph Smith’s gold plates being the origin of the Book of Mormon, parts of which he was seeing for the first time. Nor by Smith’s visions or conversations with God and angels. Colyer loved mysticism, metaphysics, and metalanguage, even magic, was beginning to have his own interesting dreams.

After some months, he came to the view, though, that ideas like these were all things that would scare the pants off of the dreary Protestants and Papists of his day and were therefore intrinsically lovely *and* praiseworthy, even of good report. And this after only one reading of the thirteenth article of faith! The article would become a keystone in Colyer’s arching beliefs, it being the one he liked best, especially for its embrace in the future of new but complementary ideas. Colyer had slowly recognized that he was in possession of entirely original material within Christianity. This gratified him. He now understood, at least in some small measure, why de Freitas undertook to collect the materials and follow the evolution of this new religion. It was fascinating!

Colyer himself was not without ambition, and this would be his undoing at Merton. He was eventually sacked from the college, a short time after his first publication came to the attention of college authorities, though the tract had almost nothing to do with the Mormons. He had been able, it seems, through a set of adroit but biblically-based calculations, to reduce the number of angels who can dance on the head of a straight pin simultaneously—one of the more pressing theological

puzzles that children of the day were fond of contemplating—from seventeen to five (four if one of them had one of those long, heralding trumpets in hand). He had discovered, it appears, that angels are much larger by several micromillimeters than had been previously thought. There was some curious arithmetic reasoning to his calculations, based on miniscule subsets of the cubit, used to measure the pieces for Noah's ark, which had led him to this conclusion. Both a hypotenuse, or was it a diameter, and a circumference, and, of course, a *sin* (a sign?) and a couple of cotangents seem to have been involved. A skilled mathematician would surely be able to decipher it all.

Further, and even more remarkably, he was able to intuit the dance the angels do while on the pin head itself—a traditional English Morris dance, legging-bells, thumping drums, and whistles, with ragtag red and black costume included, in the style associated with the boisterous, ruffian dance troop named the Shropshire Bedlam. He never says whether the angels wear this costume or not. And, there is no hint as to how he came to this surprising finding, though the editors might have deleted the normal “show your work” explanation over concerns for the article's length.

A copy of his article, with his own illustrations and some of his calculations, can be found in the *Royal Journal of Christian Minutiae and Impractical Formulae* (1852 or 53) archived at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The journal was published on the first of April each year. (Had Colyer been writing a century or so later, he might have been granted one of the Ig Nobel Prizes for Improbable Mathematics and Science that a bunch of fun-loving professors at MIT now give out. The reasoning behind the infamous five-second rule for safely rescuing food dropped on the floor by children at feeding time, for example, has won the prize, as has the science behind karaoke.)

When the dons of Merton College discovered what Colyer had been up to, they moved swiftly to mute him. He was roundly discredited among his would-be peers and dispatched from the college, another

victim of form over substance. Apparently, it was his daring to publish as a single author, *without* a university degree, that offended the college most—presumption, it was thought in that time, being nothing if not a dangerous thing. Colyer was condemned essentially for aspiring “above his station,” an offense of grave seriousness in the stratified society of the England of that day.

Those associated with the college missed, of course, the inside humor embedded in the date of publication of the *Royal Journal*. The joke was on them, poor fools, and they never figured it out. But, in the end, after a demoralizing startle, it all worked out to the good for Colyer.

By coincidence, the very day after his dismissal in late January of 1854, Colyer went to hear a preacher, who claimed to represent the unique American “kingdom” he had been studying in de Freitas’s library. The preacher, a stormy little petrel of a man who carried the surname of Pratt, was badly treated for what he had to say, jeered by the assembled crowd of several hundred and chased away by a hail of wilted, frostbitten Brussels sprouts and smelly abandoned goose eggs. It being winter, squishy, over-ripe tomatoes were out of season, unavailable as missiles. This, for what had happened, could have been the origins of the derisive insult used to this day, “What a prat!” But I digress. (For those who want to know more, though, please consult the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)

Anyway, Pratt’s description of the children of God (he referred to them also as “Saints” several times) wandering the wide plains and high mountain valleys of a faraway continent, wending their own way toward Deseret, a settlement in the isolated area of what is now Utah, caught his fancy. It whetted Colyer’s nascent appetite for the heretical and the adventuresome in equal doses, meant that there was something new that he could easily devote himself to.

Colyer followed the preacher as he retreated, and, even on that day having been “singed by the heat from the Flames of the Holy Spirit” (his

own words), was baptized into this new religion, “immersed” in the name of the Trinity in a shallow but very chilly pool, witnessed by a row of leafless, river-edge poplars, alongside the bicycle path of a tributary of the Thames, just next to the Oxford Boathouse. He was then blessed by the power of some fantastically named priesthood that he could neither spell nor pronounce, Melchizedek, for the priest who received Abraham’s tithes. At the very moment of his immersion, someone had yelled from the river, “Coming about!! Stern side row!!” Indeed. Colyer had come about and was ready to be on the move, very much apace. He later told colleagues that this was the moment he felt he was put on God’s side, a feeling he would have the whole of his life.

Colyer told the Mormon officiates at his baptism, wishing to put his most recent unhappy set of missteps and experiences behind him, that his name was LePetit Richards. Why he did this has never been made clear. There is no specific explanation for the Christian name he chose, LePetit, though it seems to be filled with its own dose of irony. Richards was a burly, slightly red-headed, young man, now nearly in his mid-twenties, muscular, broad-shouldered, imposing, well over six feet tall. It was on this day, after his baptismal blessing, that “Richards” began keeping the journals that Whittle would later find. Richards liked the idea that he could create his own scripture of sorts by making a record of his ideas, pronouncements, and experiences as though they were some kind of sacred but personal text.

Whittle, in his *Précis*, no doubt overly thorough in detail and thought, set about to enumerate what he thought were the reasons for Colyer’s sudden conversion under the heading “Motives.” These are enlightening and multiple, though not surprising. In a sense, through his study of the documents, Colyer had been amply “prepared” to embrace the moment of his conversion, had been “singed by the Holy Spirit” already even if he hadn’t recognized its more subtle forms and influence. Here is a summary of what Whittle thought, speaking of Colyer’s conversion, all of which appears in the *Précis*.

First, “The Movement” (de Freitas’s term) Colyer joined was organized on the sixth of April, 1830, *the exact date of his own birth*. The simple congruity of births confirmed for him that he was doing the right thing. In fact, there was another parallel. Colyer began working at Merton, where he would eventually come to know the Mormons, on July 24, 1847, the very day that Brigham Young stood and pronounced the Salt Lake Valley to be “the Place!”

Second, among the many papers he had reviewed in the “rooms next the kitchen” were references to the stars. Somewhere these were referred to, Whittle says, as “rococo cosmologies.” (“One wonders why not churriguesque?”—*Dictionary of Alternative Biography*, editor’s note.) Colyer was familiar with some of these, but one named Kolob he knew nothing of. Likely this intrigued him, gave him pause. He liked the idea, as the papers implied, that if he got to Kolob he could either be near God or become one. This all was another congruency, or as Colyer came to call it, “a fortuitous conjunction of circumstance,” astronomy being among his fascinations.

And third, it is possible that his penury at that very moment—Colyer was now without income—crystallized his faith as much as anything else, humbled him enough to join “The Movement.” The preacher Pratt offered him, if he would convert in “short order and without quibble” over details and theological discrepancies, free passage to the Great Basin of America with a group of fellow Saints scheduled to depart in less than a month’s time from Liverpool. He rushed to put what little of his affairs he had left in order so he could transit to the New World.

As it turns out, religion aside, Colyer and the preacher Pratt had an affinity. They both liked the challenge of calculating the incalculable. For his part, Pratt—Orson it was, not Parley—was used to dealing with larger numbers and higher levels of speculation. He had himself by this time calculated the number of spirit children created in the premortal existence necessary to people the thirty or so worlds he posited existed in the galaxies. First, he asserted that one quadrillion, twenty trillion

spirit children had been “born” in the premortal life. A truly staggering figure.

By 1853, though, he had tried something more modest. Using the biblical model for the age of the Earth *only*—seven thousand years or so—he put the number of spirits at just 100 billion for this planet alone. (To put things in perspective, it is presently estimated that from the beginning of humankind, Adam and Eve if you like, to the present, somewhere in the neighborhood of 108 billion people have lived on this Earth [Population Reference Bureau estimates, 2020]. It would have been about 94 billion by 1850. So, he was not so far off “reality” for this world.) Colyer, for his part, preferred his smaller-scale calculations, noting that they were meant to be more entertaining, easier to handle, though he appreciated that the two of them had experience in dealing with mathematical riddles. So, in this way they amused each other as they traveled to Liverpool.

“Richards,” as we know from the *Précis* and other papers, eventually found his way to the Mormons in Utah, where after twenty years or so, having been stymied, forever it seemed to him, at the level of an Elder, and passed over repeatedly for Church office, he eventually thought to call *himself* on a “mission” in the mid-1870s. In aid of this, he named a set of seven male companions to go with him to Canada, out of the way of the main body of the Church, where he thought he would be left to do much good on his own initiative. Seventy, an important number in Mormonism and the next rank in the priesthood, would have been too many to take with him, so he settled on a tenth of that figure, a “tithes’ worth of the Priesthood” he said. They would minister, in a little over four years, to the twenty or so sites identified at the sketching of Ursa Major onto the map of Canada, memorialized later in the carpet.

So, now to the mission of Richards and others, the path of which was set out by the stars.





Courtesy Louisa Hare. A woodblock print, thought to be the likeness of LePetit Richards, found by an urban archaeologist in the attic of a commercial building off of West Center Street in Provo, Utah. But, depending on how you view it, this can also be either the uncanny look of Whittle himself or of Martín Fierro, hero of the epic Argentine poem of the same name. Whittle loved that poem as much as he loved ambiguity. (The woodcut has recently been attributed to Whittle's real second wife, Louisa Hare, and, in fact, is reprinted here with her permission.)

There is luscious detail, some would say “poetic prose,” whatever that might be, in the journals Richards kept during these mission times about the customs, peoples, and settings in the far reaches he and his companions traveled in Canada during the mission, especially those passages that describe the Far North, the Arctic, all on the upside-down legs of the Bear. The stark beauty of the tundra landscape with the caribou, polar bears, the snowy owls, Arctic foxes, seals, and deep freezes all feature. As do *inuksuk*, stone piles in stylized, near-human form that mark travel routes and hunting grounds in the otherwise nearly uncharted far Northland. In his journals, Richards worked himself into

a state of high literacy, in fact sometimes wrote poetry, to describe these surroundings.

Any reader with a smidgen of a sense of juvenile delinquency would also likely be entranced by the shenanigans the group got up to as part of the “robust life” they attempted to live. This sometimes brought them to the edge of being merry pranksters. For example, they took the lungs, leftover from the slaughter of cattle and, despite their lopsidedness, blew them up, tied them off at the windpipe with bailing wire, and used them to float up the Red River, near Winnipeg (Star D) late in the summer of 1876, much as children now use those foam noodles at the swimming pool as floaties. Had they been there one year later, they would have seen the delivery of the first locomotive by steamboat up the river for the inaugural rail line to St. Paul, Minnesota.

A couple of years later, by the time they arrived at Fort McPherson (Star T in the correct alphabetical star alignment) just north of the Arctic Circle in late spring, they found themselves competing with the Catholics and Anglicans, who were already there proselytizing among the traders, government agents, and the Gwich'in, the Indigenous inhabitants of the area. Undaunted, they led with their strength to separate themselves from the others, get the attention they felt they deserved. Being abstemious by virtue of the Word of Wisdom, they opposed drinking liquor, so, they took all the drink in the local saloon and hid it in a snowbank along the Peel River, creating what they called “the Great Thirst.” For this, they were unceremoniously run out of “town.”

Whittle's notes about Richards's experiences in the vast expanses of Quebec, where, apart from the Indigenous languages like Inuktitut, Cree, and Mohawk, for the most part French would have been spoken, especially in Chicoutimi (Star G) and Quebec City (Star F), are more detailed than for other sites. And they are much more interesting.

Richards's group had as much success with conversions here as anywhere, probably due in part to the Quebecois' incipient antipathy

toward Catholicism. His journals give the names of 117 people who were baptized into Mormondom in these two towns alone in the matter of weeks during their visits. How this happened might be thought of as a mystery, given none of the missionaries spoke French. But there is an explanation or two. After a note alluding to the “gift of tongues,” here again, Richards mentions these people being quickly “swept in by the Flames of the Holy Spirit.” And, as we will see, at least one convert spoke English.

As was his habit when leaving a place, Richards left someone in charge of the converts but promised to be in touch, to give them continuing guidance. He chose Jean Pierre Prud’homme de la Paix, a ship’s chandler. He was a wise, honest, sensible man and lived in Quebec City.

But, there was a disadvantage to the swiftness of all this.

Just as swiftly, the groups were left entirely on their own, with only the merest exposure to Mormonism as a faith. This unsupervised tenure, which lasted many, many years, led, as can be imagined, to a number of changes in practice and doctrine in this small but detached realm of Mormondom. Many of these, it appears, were well-intentioned expressions of their faith, sometimes of culture and geography. The group of converts kept going, but essentially on their own terms.

Richards writes about all this in his journals, so, apparently, from time to time in later years he did keep in touch, though never visited. On the whole, because he viewed Mormonism as a dynamic creed, having had his own fundamental faith constructed around the patchwork of ideas he had discovered in the materials in de Freitas’s library, he encouraged them, over time, to be creative, take an active part in shaping the tenets of the faith and its practices. The groups took his advice.

One example of this is that, pretty soon, these converts began to refer to themselves, in French of course, as being the *Pure Laine du Bon Dieu* (the Pure Wool of a Gracious God), their equivalent of Latter-day Saints. This implied that they were “chosen” and gave them, as Richards

had instructed, an inside chance at the Celestial Kingdom in the afterlife and a better chance of becoming gods of their own domain, as Richards told them might happen through obedience. This self-naming appears to have been influenced by the repeated references to the Lamb of God in the early pages of the Book of Mormon—Richards had left them a copy or two of the 1841 English edition.

Another is that the group began, when it was in season, to use sugar maple sap water, “the sweetest of God’s tree waters,” instead of wine of their own making or water for the sacrament. The deviations did not stop there.

They eventually published their own more compact version of the Book of Mormon in French, but retitled it *Le livre de Moroni!* The translators, having immersed themselves in the language and stories in the Book, reorganized, streamlined, and reshaped it. They were not the first to do this. They took notice of the work of other “translators,” “editors,” and “abridgers” of the Book—Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and others, perhaps even Joseph Smith. They would argue later, when defending their work in messages to Richards, that the essence of this part of the scriptures improved with their rearranging and shortening, and, with the use of French, sounded, even to the untrained ear, more reverent, more sacred, even more sophisticated, certainly more lyrical. They may have had a point.

The translation was led by Prud’homme de la Paix and his wife, Marie Alouette la Parole. She was a multilingual English speaker by virtue of living and early schooling in Halifax. This fact made the translation, however laborious, possible. She was more gifted in languages than her husband, she the more able linguist and wordsmith. She even spoke some of the language of the Mi’kmaq, an Indigenous people, from her days in Nova Scotia. Marie Alouette did the vast majority of the actual drafting but *not* as a mere scribe. She gave shape to the language and the flow of the stories in the text with the skill of an experienced author.

Marie and Jean Pierre were unusual in their knowledge of the written word. Jean Pierre, for his part, as a bright and dynamic young man, had been tutored for many years by the Jesuits in Quebec as a candidate for the priesthood—though he never followed through—so was conversant, and in several languages, Latin among them, with the scriptures. Marie, fittingly given the image on the carpet, had been schooled by the Ursuline Sisters, who by that time had been in Quebec City for two hundred years. The shape and content they gave the Book are interesting but not at all unlikely. In the end, some of the changes were fundamental. They assumed from the outset that they were acting through inspiration and in good faith. Neither they nor Richards, a man of great faith but also an impetuous, well-meaning rube, knew that a French version of the complete Book of Mormon already existed!

Jean Pierre and Marie strove for a tone in *Le livre* that exuded the spirit of the thirteenth article of faith, which Richards had emphasized to them repeatedly in his preachings. They were not always successful. They recognized *Le livre* as the story of peoples with strengths and weaknesses but thought there was no reason to overdo it with too many repeated afflictions and smitings between and among themselves, even wanted to mute a bit the punishing intercessions of God. Jean Pierre had been put off by his reading of Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." They worked hard to make things more uplifting, more succinct, put more emphasis on the material about Christ and the prosperity and peace that existed when people were righteous, obedient. In the latter, they featured the work of Mosiah, the proselytizing in Alma, and the descriptions in Ether 12.

They were thoroughly enamored of the place of Moroni in all of this. They noted the seminal role he played in the "last look at" and final laying up the plates and the handing off to Joseph Smith, became aware of the role given him in the future of heralding the Second Coming. In view of this, they decided to have the title of their version of *Le livre* carry his name. They worked on their shorter edition as though

it were the work of Moroni had he the time to rework all of what his father had left him. So, their *Livre* begins with overarching words from Moroni himself, who had also seen God's face, introducing the *Le livre*, giving credit to the immense work his father, Mormon, had carried out in amalgamating, bringing the abridgement of the various plates together. All this comes before the text of Nephi's famous introduction, "I Nephi, having been born of goodly parents . . ." They thought this arrangement neater, as it was Moroni who had appeared to Joseph Smith, according to Smith's own introductory testimony, which they kept, slightly altered, for its sheer power, insight, and history.

They liked the travel story of the Jaredites, buried late in the original Book of Mormon, summarized there by Moroni, more than what had been offered for a beginning in Nephi, if for no other reason than the immense faith of the brother of Jared that moved God to reveal his spirit being to him. This being so, they revised and moved some of that text to the beginning of the *Le livre*, marrying some of Lehi's departure story, as narrated by Nephi, with Jared's.

In their view this made for a stronger, dramatic beginning. In just a few pages, there were four, maybe five individuals who had seen and, in some cases, spoken directly with God. That was impressive. Beyond that, they kept to a stripped-down narrative of Nephi encompassing Lehi's allegorical dream sequence (the iron rod), the plates of Laban, and other things, including the curse and rise of the Lamanites and the scattering of the Jews and others, which would be emphasized later with Jacob's writing with the parable of the branches of the wild olive tree.

One surprise for those who would now read *Le livre* is that the migration was magic, often sub-marine, taking a hint from Jared—in seven vessels "tight as dishes" driven by the winds, sometimes "buried deep in the waves of the sea" during a voyage that lasted nearly a year. The elements of the two departure stories having been combined, the travelers were *both* Liahona-led (that "ball of curious workmanship," an orienting compass, sort of a message board) *and* enlightened by those

shining stones, touched by the finger of the God (two of which were apparently set aside to later become seer stones). They had both light and an orienting compass for their voyage! And, of course, they were, according to *Le livre*, in direct contact with God.

As a point of interest, it should be noted, though, that their translation was taking shape just a few years after the publication of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) in its original French. So, and here it is necessary to speculate some, the translators, in their choice of vessels, might have also been influenced by the very creative technology set out in the pages of that captivating novel, if they had had access to it.

They were more interested in prophecy than secular conflicts, though they may not have always captured this. In any of the remaining books they limited the cycle of faithfulness, then falling away, then contentions, then "wars and rumors of wars" to one example or less. In the same vein, they did not feel the compulsion to include each history as a linear connecting point in the story, so some of the shorter books were dropped. And they shortened or eliminated some of the lengthy, meandering preachings, those repetitive "voices crying in the wilderness."

They did not make it all totally easy though. They left enough in to honor the idea that "there needs be opposition in all things." They included a scattering of scripture that described the subversion and influence of Satan in the fight for righteousness. They maintained the engaging story of the Gadianton robbers but brought its parts together, as an example of what happens when malice and evil-doing run rampant. What with their persistence and subversive secret combinations, there were lessons to be learned even into the present. Likewise, they included the interesting character of Korihor, who, as a contrarian, spoke of the futility of looking for Christ but had equivocated, admitting he had been fooled by the devil, and was, after laying a challenge, struck dumb.

They kept other stories, scattered throughout, that were trenchant and to the point. They were entranced, for example, by the references to the adopted sons of Helaman, left those verses in as an example of belief, unity, blessedness, and the triumph of indignation, even miracle—imagine two thousand soldiers in battle without a single death! They left examples of the effect of righteousness, or its absence, like the bits in Alma where the Nephites were forced to live as a subjugated people. They kept the story of Abinadi, for his courage and statements about Christ. And, of course, they admired the devotion and the translation of the Three Nephites, post-Christ apostles, left their story untouched.

According to oral history relayed to Richards, Jean Pierre and Marie apparently, while working through the translation, came to see a parallel between the appearance of the cursed Lamanites mentioned in the original Book of Mormon and the Indigenous people among whom they lived. Armed with this insight, they did a curious thing: they altered the curse set out in the early part of the Book and continued to the end, one of the *sustaining* images in the Book.

The translators were personally perplexed by the curse of the darker skin given to the Lamanites. While acknowledging that this kind of stigma had been used before by God—remember Cain?—they didn't understand the starkness and longevity of its use over time, even if it could be thought of, as some have urged, as only a metaphor. After much thought, they eliminated references to that practice from the armory of God's tools for dealing with those who deviated from his rules or went against his peoples. They accepted that God could, and perhaps should, punish, even "curse" with strong language, *contretemps* and sundry Old Testament punishments or plagues, those who do not adhere to divine instructions, but doubted whether a darker skin shade should signal, deterministically, the perpetual unrighteousness of a people.

In all of this they might have been influenced by Richards. He had married a "Lamanite" woman, and had said, not mincing a word, that

he found the use of this curse, and the misconceptions it led to, “deeply offensive,” even thought of it at times as an example of wrong-footed whimsy. Given his own experience, he thought the promise, for those who believed and obeyed, of becoming “light and delightsome” illusory if not cruel. He had even noted in a letter, probably in a fit of peeve, that the God of the Book of Mormon seemed a “racial purist!”

But Marie and Jean Pierre wanted to include something, for the sake of the story, that would properly stigmatize the wayward Lamanites. They first toyed with the idea of using “tarring and feathering” of individual sinners, something from Joseph Smith’s own story, to serve as the dark punishment spoken of but rejected the idea. They decided, in the end, to write of a curse that “marked” the Lamanites in two ways, one of physical appearance and behavior, the other of speech. All Lamanites were given attached ear lobes and deviated septa—they would wheeze when they breathed through their noses. And, they received a slightly abnormal but recognizable pattern of speech. The Lamanites would confound and interchange the pronunciation of the English equivalents of l’s and r’s, and th’s and d’s, and r’s and w’s. They had fun with this when they transcribed the speeches of Samuel the Lamanite, who exhibited this lisp. (They made it look like God was trying out here the tool used for the confounding at Babel.) Jean Pierre, on an intellectual level, recognized that this speech curse created another group that might be stigmatized but could not come up with one that would not. They were learning that it was not easy to politically correct the actions of God.

Because of his background, Prud’homme de la Paix noticed the parallels in content in some of the later chapters of 1 Nephi and the book of Isaiah itself. They debated whether to repeat it in *Le livre*. Two things prompted them to do so. They took at face value that the brass plates brought out of Jerusalem might have included some of Isaiah, and Prud’homme himself had witnessed some of the power of this prophecy of Christ in a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*, though in

English, in Boston in 1865 while he was there ordering ships parts and material for his business.

The allusions to Isaiah, words from the Old Testament, prompted Marie to suggest adding some of Psalms for its virtuosity, even its passion, but this was not done. She held, though, to her opinion that if fragments of the Psalms weren't included neither should be the allusions to Isaiah. Marie, because of her religious background, also wanted to say something more about Mary, mother of Christ—alluded to in 1 Nephi and mentioned by name in Mosiah—but was dissuaded from doing so. Jean Pierre had had lengthy, sometimes heated, conversations, initially and then in correspondence, with Richards about the role and intercessions of Mary, whether it was Mormon or un-Mormon in idea. Richards thought *not*, and his views had prevailed.

In the end, anything having to do with Christ, including his birth, life, death, and resurrection, whether prophecy or commentary, was left, though at times they brought together various statements scattered throughout the text. They moved to 3 Nephi, even emphasized Moroni's narrative of what happened as a result of Christ's visit to the Americas, especially the detail for conferring the Holy Ghost, priesthood ordinations, and the sacrament prayers. Christ was the main point for them, really, the most important part of the *Le livre*. They would have, they implied, been satisfied with just that as the focus and content of the whole of *Le livre*, but for some reason there was much more, much more than necessary.

Naturally, with the deletions, shiftings, and reformations, their compilation of *Le livre de Moroni* was much more compact than the real Book. It was also more to the point. But, in the end, it was also a bit flawed in language and execution.



As noted earlier, Richards included here and there in his journal text poems he had written. Whittle, at one point, took the liberty, and

the time, to refashion some of Richards's works. With "Winter Ice," he retitled it, put it into the modern idiom and free verse style, filled it out a little, but kept to the subject matter and Richards's own words (*those in italics*). Perhaps these reformations are no better than what Richards originally had to offer. He was not a bad poet. But, Whittle couldn't resist tinkering. The year of the original drafting and the date of the rewrite appear after the sample poem:

And Then There Is No Difference

*When the air becomes still and cold calm,  
and the north earth leans away from the sun,  
the wind ceases collapsing into the water  
and moisture drops into the gray-green bay.*

That is when *the ice begins to form*:

overblown white kernels of Redenbacher's  
popcorn floating in hot oil,

white-capped neighbour children playing  
fox and geese around and around in a vacant yard.

*For a time, white chunks circle each other, warily—  
refuse each other, keep their social distance  
as if doomed if they touch.*

*One of these nights, though, the chunks will  
no longer offer Nature reasons to stay apart,  
the cold will persuade their blue-green edges together  
in the quiet of Hudson's Bay.*

*That is when the ice begins to fasten itself to the shore,  
bridges sea and stone, does what the listless sea smoke  
always fails to do, holds fast to the land,  
as fast as the taut rope nip of an old sailor's knot.*

*And then, on gray days, there is no difference  
between the land, the sea and the sky.*

—*Mouth of the Povungnituk, QC, August 1878 (1977)*

Star O at present-day Puvirnituk (Quebec), an Inuit settlement on Hudson's Bay, would have been on one of the forelegs of the upside-down Bear. But this is also one of the sites where Richards, having followed his "star map" as God's will, found there to be no village or permanent settlement. He already knew the chances were slim, as his group had attached themselves to agents of the Hudson's Bay Company, who were reconnoitering the area from Fort Moose, far across the Bay, down on the coast further West, weighing the chances of establishing a post there (which was done only in 1921). What Richards did find, at the mouth of the Povungnituk River, were a few clusters of inhabitant Inuit families encamped for the milder weather of late summer. In this kinder, warmer setting, he imagined in the poem the obverse, what it would be like when the winter ice, snow, and gray skies came and the differentiated world he was now viewing became one.

While on the subject of poetry, there is this that will help to put an end to the story and bring us back to the origins of the carpet, which guided Richards's mission and, along with his journals, this story.

Among some of the other papers that accompany the journals that were reviewed, Whittle found another poem on a separate piece of paper, one authored by J. Wilford Booth: "How Many Winters, With Wild Wind White Fleeced?" It came out of Booth's time as a missionary among the Armenians in the late-nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey, Syria, Egypt, the Balkans, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and more). It is written in neat, metered sets of rhymed couplets. Nice alliteration and imagery in the title but decidedly nineteenth century in style and content, more than a little overwrought with longing. But it makes its point. Here are three stanzas:

Oh! How many years, my heart fain would learn,  
'Twixt that kiss of farewell and the kiss of return?

How many winters, with wild wind white fleeced,  
'Twixt the call "Will you go?" and the letter "Released"?

How many summers, with heart fondly yearning,  
'Twixt the parting heartache and the joy of returning?

With the roundabout reference to Booth's poem, we finally come back to the subject of the carpets Richards possessed again, including the one he was wrapped in when he took his elusive tumble in Canada in 1893. Booth was the man who had carpets woven for Richards. Richards and Booth may have never met each other, but they were certainly in exchange. Beyond carpets, they seem to have traded poetry and maybe more.

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"altar,"  
52" x 39", oil on canvas,  
by Ron Richmond