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CONTRIBUTIONS OF GEORGE D. WATT TO UTAH HISTORY

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Utah history is endowed with a spectrum of unusual and interesting people. It would be indeed difficult to choose one person in this spectrum and say that he was the true great in the building of the history of the State of Deseret. However, George Darling Watt perhaps can be called one of the stalwart of this period. He contributed much to the history of the State of Deseret and it is these contributions that we will study.

George D. Watt rose from a street urchin childhood in England, into perhaps one of the most respected intellects in the Mormon Church. His early childhood in England was both happy and sad. He was separated from his family for some unknown reason and was left to forage for himself. After foraging the streets for a living he was sent to a poor house by one of his kind benefactors, where he received his schooling and learned to read and write. At the poor house he was to prove himself a very bright and clever boy.

After spending a year or so in the poor house, young Watt was chosen to become an apprentice shoe maker and was taken out of the poor house. Little is known about his life for these years as an apprentice except through some of the "Little George Stories" he wrote.

George D. Watt had the distinction of being the first person to be converted to the Mormon Church in England. Orson F. Whitney in his book, Life of Heber C. Kimball, tells us just how George D. Watt earned this distinction. "Two of the male candidates when they had changed their clothes at a distance of several rods from the place where I was standing in the water were so anxious to obey the gospel that they ran with all their might to the water, each wishing to be baptized first. The younger, George D. Watt, being quicker of foot than the elder out ran him and came to the water first."<sup>1</sup> This somewhat humorous passage shows us the great devotion and love that George Watt had for the church that he would devote much of his life to.

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<sup>1</sup>Orson F. Whitney, Life of Heber C. Kimball, page 149.

From the time of his baptism on July 31, 1837, until his departure for America, George labored for the church. Among these labors was the presiding over the Edinburgh Conference.

In 1843, George and his wife along with many other Saints departed from Liverpool, England. Their destination was Nauvoo, Illinois. George stayed in Nauvoo and served the church in the capacity of stenographer until he was called to fulfill a mission in England in 1846. He labored in this capacity until he was released in 1851.

On the return voyage he was placed in charge of the English converts that were bound for Zion. "Ellen Maria sailed from Liverpool, England with 378 Saints aboard under the direction of George D. Watt."<sup>2</sup> The ship arrived in New Orleans April 6, 1851. He was also in charge of the upriver journey to Nauvoo. "The steamer Robert Campbell arrived at Kanesville Landing Iowa, with a large company of Saints from England, Scotland etc., under the watchcare and direction of George D. Watt, our able phonographic writer and lecturer."<sup>3</sup> This passage from the Frontier Guardian indicates that George was also a well known stenographer.

During the Saint's stay in Nauvoo, George Watt's services in the capacity of stenographer were very valuable to the church. "His stenographic services were always available to the Prophet in whatever way the church wished to use him. He also instructed Phonography at the School of Prophets."<sup>4</sup>

His prowess as a phonographer continued in service of his church. He used it often during both his missions in England and in Nauvoo and later in Salt Lake City.

When it became apparent to the leaders that the Saints would eventually have to leave Nauvoo a party was selected to ~~employ~~<sup>explore</sup> new territory in the west. "A meeting of Apostles was held at Nauvoo for the purpose of selecting a company to explore Oregon and California and select a new site for a new city for the Saints."<sup>5</sup> George Watt was requested to go with seven others. However, with the death of Joseph Smith the plans

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<sup>2</sup>Andrew Jenson, Church Chronology (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1914), p.42.

<sup>3</sup>Frontier Guardian, (May 30, 1851).

<sup>4</sup>Ida W. Stringham and Dora D. Flack, England's First Mormon Convert, p.15.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew Jenson, Church Chronology (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1914) p.24.

were forgotten, and Watt migrated to Salt Lake after a mission to England.

Upon his return from his mission he was made unofficial reporter for the Deseret News. "For two years (from 1851-1853) George diligently reported and recorded sermons, court proceedings, celebrations and other events, almost without fee or reward. It seems that he was not formally employed at the time by the Deseret News although his recordings were constantly published in that newspaper."<sup>6</sup> This was only one of his stenographic duties in Zion. "During most of the years from the time of George's arrival in Utah until May 19, 1868 George served as secretary to President Brigham Young. It was George who brought the first typewriter to Utah."<sup>7</sup>

Even though George D. Watt served his church in many capacities, perhaps one of his greatest was the part he played in the revision and formation of the Mormon Alphabet. "A committee on revision, consisting of Apostle Orson Pratt, George D. Watt and Robert L. Campbell esqs., all of whom were enthusiastic for the reform and had been engaged in preparing the matter for the two reader, was appointed by the Board of Regents to attend to the distributions of these works and proceed with further publications."<sup>8</sup> Due to many circumstances the alphabet did not gain much popularity and within a few years it died out. Other sources also point to the fact that George was the chief formulator of the alphabet. "It appears to be well established that George D. Watt, an English convert to Mormonism, was the man chiefly responsible for the Deseret Alphabet."<sup>9</sup> *How related to his teaching etc of penmanship?*

Another of George Watt's numerous accomplishments was the series of "Little George Stories" that appeared in the Juvenile Instructor which years later was called The Children's Friend magazine. For a period of three years it is fairly positive that the "Little George Stories" were the true stories of his childhood. These were not just stories, but they carried a message or lesson to all of the young readers.

George D. Watt's life was not all roses. After a few unknown incidents with members of the church, George Watt received the following note. "Kaysville, May 3rd, 1874. The undersigned hereby certify that George D. Watt was

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<sup>6</sup>Ida W. Stringham and Dora D. Flack, England's First Mormon Convert, p.32.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p.44.

<sup>8</sup>Orson F. Whitney, History of Utah Vol. II (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon, 1893), p. 297.

<sup>9</sup>J. Cecil Alter (ed.), Utah Historical Quarterly Vol. XII, (1944), p.99-100.

excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints on the above for apostacy. S.C. Layton, Bishop. James Walker, Clerk."<sup>10</sup> It is not known the exact cause for his excommunication, but Watt indicates in a letter to one of his wives Mattie that it was because of his friendship with persons of other religions and his attitude toward the other religions.<sup>11</sup>

After his excommunication, George Watt's life wasn't full as it had been, and he died on October 24, 1881, in Kaysville. On October 25, 1881 the Salt Lake Herald carried an obituary notice and a short Biography of George D. Watt. " . . . George D. Watt was a man widely known in this territory and in Great Britain. He was remarkable in many respects and at one time quite prominent here..."<sup>12</sup>

So ended the life of a man who from poverty and obscurity rose up and became one of the great scholars and teachers of the territory.

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<sup>10</sup>Deseret News, (Salt Lake City), May 3, 1874

<sup>11</sup>Ida Watt Stringham and Dora D. Flack, England's First Mormon Convert, pp. 101-102.

<sup>12</sup>Salt Lake Herald, October 25, 1881.

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