

Gilbert Hunt's 1816 "The Late War"

An Example of How The Book of Mormon Reflects Popular Early 19th Century War Themes and Rhetoric, and a Potential Direct Influence for the Writing Style and Some Thematic Content of the Book of Mormon

I see this book as having some significant implications for Book of Mormon studies. However, I also too often find that when this book is mentioned people will immediately assume that I'm proposing things that I'm not actually proposing. An extreme version of what I actually propose is of course easily dismissed, and legitimate issues go undiscussed. So let me try to clear some things up from the start:

First, the writing style of this book is so distinctly similar to the Book of Mormon that I think it is reasonable to suggest that Joseph had encountered and been inspired by it, and that he thus "translated" the Book of Mormon into strikingly similar language. Even if this book wasn't the direct inspiration for this particular writing style (there are other similar ones such as the Book of Napoleon—though not so close to Joseph's time and environment), I feel that exploring this book's writing style will still change the way many people read the Book of Mormon. Even if one does believe that a legitimate ancient record was written by ancient prophets, this book will at least help readers to recognize that the Book of Mormon does not reflect the original "voice" of those prophets—and in some cases may be a quite loose re-interpretation of whatever they originally said. However, let me be very clear that I do not believe that exact lines of text were intentionally copied or plagiarized from this book to the Book of Mormon. I find such claims to be irresponsible and detrimental to getting to the legitimate issues that exist.

Second, I feel that this book is valuable to Book of Mormon studies for those applying "motif criticism" to the Book of Mormon (a tool often used in textual studies). In particular, this book is a valuable example of how the Book of Mormon reflects a lot of popular early 19th century war themes and rhetoric—themes that are so particularly representative of early 19th century concerns that it is reasonable for people like myself (or perhaps even believers like Blake Ostler who proposed the "expansion theory of translation") to feel that such themes were not really expressed by ancient Americans—or at a minimum to feel that whatever they originally did say was probably significantly re-imagined in a way that reflects early 19th century concerns. However, let me be clear that I am not

suggesting that this book (in terms of motifs and ideas) informed the whole of the Book of Mormon. It doesn't. I am suggesting it is quite plausible that it inspired some particular parts—in this case the war themes and rhetoric in particular.

Third, I feel that there are strong enough similarities between some stories in this book and some stories in the Book of Mormon that it is reasonable for people to suspect that Joseph had read and been inspired by this popular book, and that while formulating the Book of Mormon he thus ended up creating some strikingly similar stories in the Book of Mormon (perhaps even legitimately feeling they were coming from inspiration). Although I suppose it is possible that Joseph and Oliver could have actually flipped through this book while seeking inspiration for the Book of Mormon and then borrowed general ideas and phrasings, my feeling is that an “indirect” (and probably even totally unconscious or unintentional) inspiration is much more likely. To give a similar example, I sometimes try to write songs, and I sometimes have to be careful because on occasion I'll find that the melody that my mind naturally goes to turns out to be similar to one I've heard in some other song. I feel there is good reason to suspect that *The Late War* inspired some particular Book of Mormon stories—but again, I want to be clear that I'm not suggesting that it somehow informed or inspired the whole of the Book of Mormon, and that I don't feel it is likely that they were consciously referencing this book during translation. Now, on to the content:

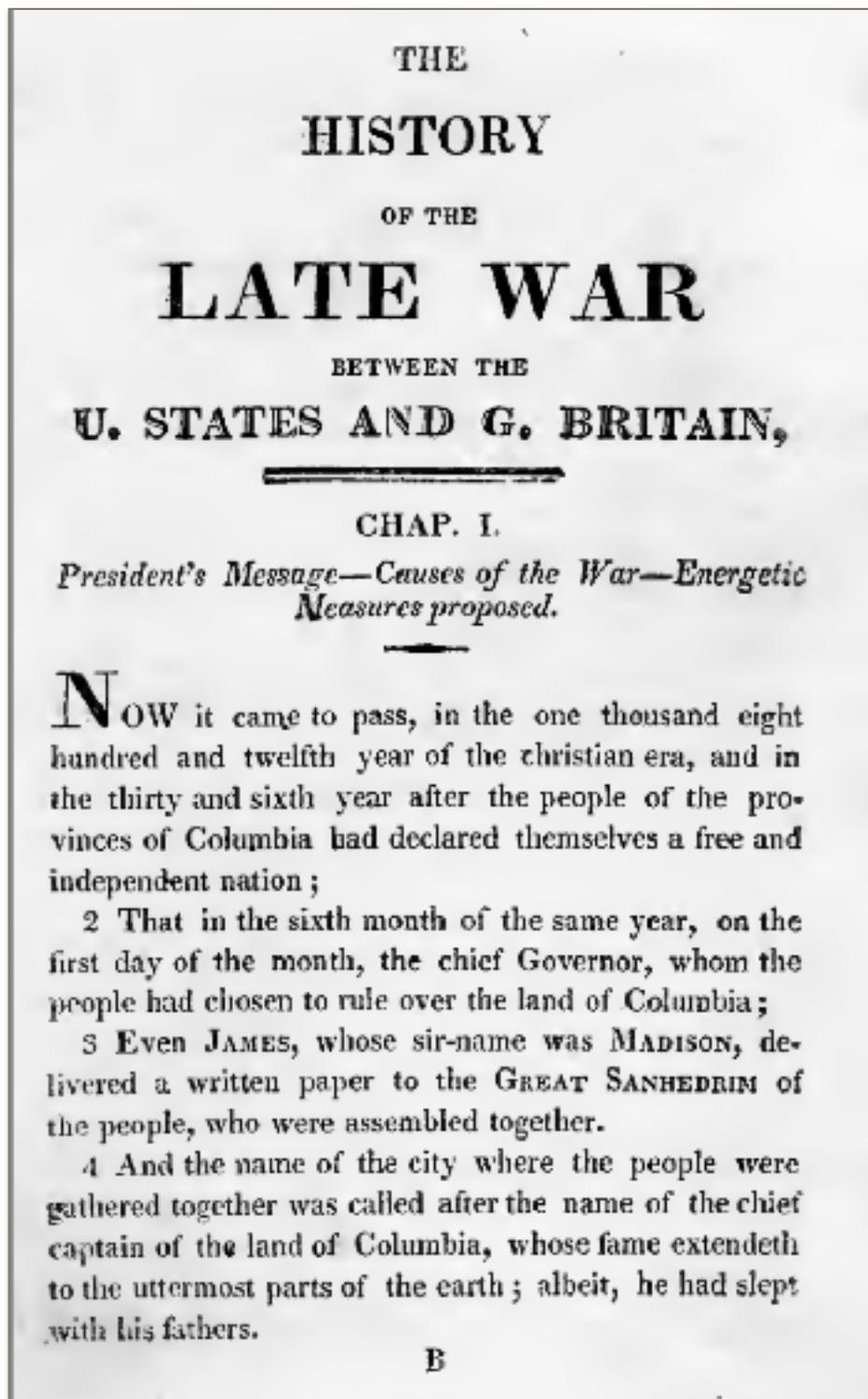
BACKGROUND INFO:

“The Late War” was a commonly used textbook for school children in Joseph Smith's area. It was published in New York in 1816. It was popular enough that its 3rd edition was being published by 1819. It is essentially a history of the War of 1812, but it was intentionally written in the scriptural language of the “King James Bible” with the intent of inspiring a love of scripture in young people. It might be interesting to some that Samuel Mitchill had given the foreword for *The Late War*, and happens to be one of the scholars that Martin Harris took the manuscript to (along with Charles Anthon).

THE LANGUAGE AND WRITING STYLES ARE STRIKINGLY SIMILAR:

The first thing that any Mormon exploring this book is going to notice is how startlingly similar it sounds to the Book of Mormon. The similarity is so striking that I can't help wondering if Joseph had read and enjoyed the book, and thus ended up using a similar writing style in the Book of Mormon. Perhaps we should *expect* two early 19th century authors who are trying to write in scriptural style to sound similar to each other—yet quite distinct from biblical style? That is possible. But the similarity here is so striking (and yet distinct from biblical style)

that it's hard for me to imagine that one didn't influence the other. Even if such was the case, it isn't terribly problematic if Joseph chose to use the same "voice" he enjoyed in "The Late War" while "translating" the Book of Mormon. However, as I already noted in my introduction, it does have implications for how one reads, views, and interprets the Book of Mormon. In addition, it could serve as evidence that Joseph had in fact read this book—which could make it more plausible that some very similar themes in the Book of Mormon were inspired by this book. The full text can be found [HERE](#) if you care to flip through it, but at a minimum, check out the first page below:



SIMILAR THEMES IN BOTH BOOKS:

Again, the similar writing style alone is not terribly significant, but when I found that the book also contained many themes that seem like they could have inspired similar narratives in the war chapters of the Book of Mormon, my interest was peaked a bit more. It is worth taking into consideration.

- “*2000 hardy men, who were called volunteers... fought freely for their country... men of dauntless courage.*” As “leaden balls whizzed about their ears” they heroically “rushed upon the savages, and slew them with great slaughter, and overcame them.” A theme that is arguably similar to that of the 2000 stripling warriors?
- Leaders of the armies are often referred to as “*chief captains,*” as is the case throughout the Book of Mormon. Also interesting that it refers to “*captains of fifties,*” and to assembling “*captains of fifties, and his captains of hundreds*” (like [D&C 136:3](#) which speaks of being “*organized with captains of hundreds, captains of fifties, captains of tens.*” I include this point simply because it doesn’t seem likely to me that ancient Native Americans would just happen to have organized their armies in the same way (and by the same numbers) that modern Americans did.
- Fighting for “*the sacred cause of liberty*” is a repeated and central theme. “*Fear not, we defend our lives and our liberties, and in that thing the Lord will not forsake us.*” The “*cause of liberty*” is of course a major theme in the Book of Mormon with 30 references to fighting for “liberty” in Alma alone.
- “*Freemen*” are referenced, as being opposed to the “*servants of the king.*” Of course, fighting against those who want a “king” is a key theme that arises in the Book of Mormon (see [Alma 51:1-20](#) or summary [HERE](#)).
- Missionaries were sent among them, “*and they hearkened unto the preachers...and their natures were softened.*” “*There eyes were opened.*” When their enemies fell into their hands, they “*raised neither the tomahawk nor the scalping knife.*” A theme similar to that of the [Anti-Nephi-Lehies](#) who no longer wanted to shed blood after being converted, or the time when Moroni tried to spare Zarahemnah and his people when they had them surrounded ([Alma 43:54](#); [Alma 44:5-6](#)).
- In multiple instances the text speaks of times when they had to gather troops and win them to their cause. In one instance they “*sent forth a proclamation*” which was “*published abroad,*” and “*a great multitude*

flocked to the banners of Columbia” and “*joined the standard of Columbia.*” (banners & standards referred to flags or “an ensign of war, a staff with a flag or colors” (see 1828 dictionary [HERE](#)). In another instance the people were “*informed of the evil, and accordingly they flocked in multitudes to the banners of Jackson.*” Perhaps these themes could have been inspiration for Moroni’s “standard of liberty,” which is noted in at least three Book of Mormon chapters, and “thousands did flock unto his standard.”

- A man is laughed at when trying to build a steamship: “*Lo! The man is beside himself and they laughed at him, nevertheless he exceeded their expectations...These steam boats were cunningly contrived, and had abundance of curious workmanship.*”
- An instance of a “*false prophet*” who “*led astray those of little understanding*” and “*preached for filthy lucre*” whose “*words were smooth.*” Reminds me a bit of some of the Book of Mormon “anti-Christ” and “priestcrafts.”

Throw out whatever details you want, but at a minimum I do find it significant that both books contain these very dramatic accounts of war, and of fighting for the “cause of liberty” and freedom, and of fighting to ensure that they would not be ruled by a “King.” I’ve noted elsewhere some of what I believe were Joseph’s motives in writing the Book of Mormon. Like Ethan Smith and so many others, he wanted to help the Indians to recognize their supposed heritage as “Israelites,” and be converted or “gathered” to Christianity. He wanted to end sectarianism, settle some disputed issues, and unify Christians in one restored faith. But perhaps these war chapters were included because, like so many others of the time period, he was also quite concerned with awaking people to the realization that they must defend their freedoms and liberties, and must continually fight against the rule of Kings? Perhaps he was inspired by “*The Late War?*”

UNDERMINING CLAIMS ABOUT “HEBRAISMS” IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Even if we go ahead and assume that Joseph had never read *The Late War*, it is still a very important book for Book of Mormon studies. Simply by imitating a biblical style of writing, Gilbert Hunt’s modern book managed to have all the same “Hebraisms” or “Semitisms” that apologists and church leaders so often tout as evidence of the Book of Mormon’s ancient origins. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland even noted these things in his talk “*Safety for the Soul,*” stating how “*foolish*” it is for someone to reject a text that is “*teeming with literary and Semitic complexity.*” It is often claimed that there are left over remnants of Near

Eastern writing style that came through the translation. Instances of cognate accusative, negative questions, construct state, compound prepositions, adverbials, and so on. They claim that these things could not have just shown up by chance—and yet, guess what? They all show up in *The Late War*. I also remember hearing a claim that the term “whirlwinds” is a direct translation of the Mayan language—suggesting authenticity. Guess what? Also in *The Late War*. For more on these issues, see my post [HERE](#).

CHRIS AND DUANE JOHNSON’S COMPARISON STUDY

Chris and Duane Johnson first drew attention to the similarities between these books with a comparison study that they performed. I appreciate their work, and feel that exploring it can be a helpful exercise to get a feel for some of the similar themes, but I would definitely offer some caution. It would be easy to overstate the evidence if you just quickly read through the Johnson’s study. You’ll note that some of the examples draw from numerous verses, sometimes spanning a significant amount of text in order to re-create lines from “The Late War.” I do find some similar themes and the similar style of writing significant, but the side by side comparisons of the text could be misleading and give the appearance of direct or conscious plagiarism—which I don’t believe occurred.

One other thing their study found was that the Book of Napoleon also has a writing style that is extremely similar to the Book of Mormon. I wonder if Gilbert Hunt was inspired by that book? But apart from that I see no connection between the Book of Napoleon and the Book of Mormon.

With that caution noted, the Johnson’s study can be found [HERE](#)