

PROLOGUE

Two hundred years after James Jesse Strang ruled as the Mormon king of Michigan's Beaver Island, he continues to fascinate historians, who debate whether the times shaped the man or the other way around. Much has grown up around Strang since his death, and a biographer must take pains to explain what is real, what is merely speculative, and what is just plain mythical. Over the years, Strang has acquired a certain reputation, which he may not wholly deserve. The reader of this book should examine the evidence and come to an independent conclusion.

Strang was much more than a king, a prophet, a polygamist, or a con artist. He cannot be dismissed as a mere religious curiosity as that would diminish his real impact on the early history of the Mormon Church. It would also be wrong to focus only on the sometimes lurid events of Strang's life. For the twelve years after the assassination of Mormon Church founder Joseph Smith Jr. in 1844, Strang established a life of settled purpose. He knew who he was—called by God. And he knew what he wanted—lasting fame.

The path Strang's life took was a product of American society's search for utopia in the nineteenth century. This movement resulted in the creation of a host of new communities aimed at shared wealth, common property, and unique social values. Strang attracted a dedicated following, using not just religion but also local politics and more wily means. Able to mesmerize his followers with flights of inspired oratory, Strang used the power of speech and the written word to communicate his insights as revealed truth. By the time he came into conflict with federal authorities and drew the attention of President Millard Fillmore, Strang had secured election to the Michigan House of Representatives. There was nothing illegal about his electioneering, although his enemies tried to prevent him from taking his seat in the capital.

Strang's kingship is how he's best remembered. His crimson robe, dime store crown, and cheap scepter were the regalia of a man determined to be a king in the real sense, despite democratic America's low regard for royalty. He ruled his island kingdom with an iron hand, meting out harsh punishments, and this helped set in motion the very forces that led to his de-

struction. This was a time when Mormons everywhere were persecuted as a fanatic sect with otherworldly origins. It had been Joseph Smith's violent death at the hands of a mob in Illinois that propelled Strang to the forefront of the bereft and faction-prone church. Strang's branch of the church earned its share of hatred and contempt. Gentiles on the mainland believed it was their sworn duty to bring King Jimmy down.

Strang was both generously gifted and seriously flawed. The combination helped make him a celebrity in the mid-nineteenth century—"good copy" in old newspaper parlance, and he knew it. He probably would have said there's no such thing as bad publicity—just spell his name right. When Strang's life went off the rails, mostly as a result of his own high-handed ways, his contemporaries marveled that such a man had stood among them and such a talent had been squandered. More than a century and a half later, he continues to captivate us because of the heights he scaled and the extravagant means he utilized to stand above the crowd. Rather than delusional, he was purposeful.

One could say that Strang's dreams of power and fame were realized, but in fact he achieved only glimpses of glory, nothing more. His instruments to fame have been blunted by time. The Letter of Appointment—the alleged document in which Joseph Smith declared Strang his successor—is widely regarded as a forgery. The *Book of the Law of the Lord*, Strang's scriptures, is but a pygmy compared to the influence of Smith's *The Book of Mormon*. The model community Strang built on Beaver Island was destroyed, and his votaries have diminished to a handful. His diary at least remains as a tangible link that scholars and historians can dissect and analyze.

Still, we are compelled to give Strang his due—damn him or praise him. Much of what we believe we know about the man is nonsense, misinformation, and twisted facts. I want to present the historical Strang stripped of myth, demonization, and popular fancy. There are many reasons to admire what he achieved through raw talent, a superb sense of timing, keen boldness of stroke, and sheer force of personality. Whether he was a pious fraud or an authentic prophet—a servant of God or a clever charlatan—the final judgment is left to the reader. One thing is certain: in Michigan's rich history, James Strang will always be among its most colorful characters.

CHAPTER ONE

James Strang's America

THE WORLD INTO WHICH JAMES JESSE STRANG was born and grew to maturity was one of social, religious, and political turmoil. In the marketplace of ideas in early- to mid-nineteenth-century America, nothing was too strange, too bizarre, or too revolutionary but that it had leaders and eager followers. Many of these leaders were pious frauds, and those they enticed to follow them were gullible graspers at straws, especially in the social experimentation that characterized this period of American history.

Even such bedrock beliefs as monogamy were not exempt from sweeping new ideas. Plural marriage, or “spiritual wifery,” as it was referred to in the new Mormon religion, shocked sensibilities with its radical reexamination of the marriage contract, but it was by no means novel at that time. As historian John G. Turner notes, “[C]ontroversial departures from monogamy included George Rapp’s advocacy of celibacy in his Harmonist communities, John Humphrey Noyes’s insistence that believers striving for heaven’s perfection might abandon marital exclusivity on earth, and the acceptance by some American disciples of the French reformer Charles Fourier’s concept of a ‘sexual millennium.’”¹

The still young American republic was discovering itself as the land of freedom, opportunity, and wide expression of points of view. Although the country still looked to Europe, that keen observer of America Alexis de Tocqueville would note this was a people who would do things their own way. He marveled, for example, at the pride Americans took “in their uncompromising separation of church and state” and “noted that most ministers made it a point of honor to abstain from politics.”² In his travels here, Tocqueville found a lot to like in the brash republic. His *Democracy in America* has held up remarkably well over the years.

The political landscape was undergoing dramatic change. In the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century, America was moving away from established eastern, colonial traditions and embracing a westward-looking mind-set. The Appalachians were a barrier, to be sure, but to the new pioneers these mountains were just a speed bump on the way to the rich lands of the Northwest Territory and the setting sun. Whereas the old pioneers—the Pilgrims and Puritans and early Virginians—were content to wrest a living in settled communities along the Atlantic seaboard, the new pioneers glimpsed opportunity, ample elbow room, and a chance for material riches in the western wilderness.

Manifest Destiny was still on the distant horizon, but the seeds had been sown for a country marching to its appointment with history. Preparation came with President Thomas Jefferson's purchase of the Louisiana Territory, which doubled the nation's size. The epic exploratory journey of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark was a window into the country's future. Another war with Great Britain in 1812, inconclusive in itself, nevertheless opened a period of expansionist tendencies toward Canada, which continued through the 1830s. Upper Canada, now Ontario, was assumed to be eager to embrace its American liberators when the little-known Patriot War (1837–40) was launched. And when President James Monroe articulated the doctrine that bears his name, America assumed a position as a regional power, whether or not it was capable of supporting its boast.

Jacksonian democracy would sweep the country with its elevation of the Common Man. Now all adult white males were allowed to vote, not just members of the propertied class. A man of the West, Jackson represented the frontier, the emerging middle class, and the swagger of the self-made man who found new worlds to conquer around every corner. As president, the Hero of New Orleans challenged the big banks, introduced the spoils system to politics, and upheld the supremacy of the federal system by quashing nullification efforts led by his own vice president, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. The election of 1828 saw the young nation rejecting the familiar meritocracy of the East and embracing a representative democracy of the people. Historian Gary B. Nash put it this way.

During the Revolutionary era, politics had preoccupied the American people. Between 1790 and 1828, Americans turned their thoughts to issues of social change and reform, for if their political experiment was to succeed, society would have to be republicanized as well. Behind their reform efforts lay a clus-

ter of beliefs regarding the unique character of the American people. From the first days of colonial settlement, European immigrants had thought of America as a place free of Old World ills and open to new ways of life. The Revolutionary generation called their new society *novus ordo seclorum*, a new order of the ages. They believed that reason rather than habit or tradition would guide America's development. Americans insisted that their country was a "young" and "rising" republic, a "new nation" taking its place among the "old" and "decadent" empires of Europe. Equality was the second element of America's new social faith. This tended to mean equality of opportunity in that social differences should not be based on privilege or inherited position.³

A third element in America's new social faith, especially important to the story that will unfold in these pages, was the doctrine of individualism—an assertion, writes Nash and others, "that society's basic purpose was to promote the interests of its individual members."⁴ Jacksonian democracy carried the principle of individualism to national prominence and enshrined it. Old Hickory styled himself the people's candidate and promised a more democratic political system with the interests of the people at its center.

In economics, a revolution in transportation, beginning with the 1825 completion of the Erie Canal and continuing with the growth of the railroads, would eat away at the old agrarian society and transform the country into a market economy. There is no downplaying the significance of the Erie Canal. "By bringing the interior to the seas and the seas into the interior," writes historian Peter L. Bernstein, "the Erie Canal would shape a great nation, knit the sinews of the Industrial Revolution . . . and revolutionize the production and supply of food for the entire world."⁵ And perhaps just as important, "Americans perceived the canal as an expression of faith in the potentials of a free society, a message of hope for a great young nation on the move."⁶ The Erie Canal helped to facilitate in east-west fashion what the later opening of the Mississippi River would do north-south—provide an artery of transportation that could move men and goods with relative ease to Lake Erie ports, Detroit, and then to points west, such as Wisconsin.

James Jesse Strang was at the impressionable age of twelve when the Erie Canal opened to traffic. Its western terminus in Buffalo, New York, was near the place where he was born, and this technological marvel would have helped to shape his perceptions of the outside world. It may have been the source of considerable state pride in the Strang household that such an engineering triumph was wholly contained in the Empire State.