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*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 alternative biography, 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, Utah. Later, being the smart guy that he was, he would turn up at Oxford, where guided by his mentor Aiden Hayes, he created as part of his academic work the engaging character of LePetit Richards, an early convert to Mormonism, purportedly backed up by Richards' journals and other materials, all fiction. Whittle published the Richards story as part of a special Addendum to The Dictionary of Alternative Biography (1973, reprinted by Louisa Hare, 1978). Now, I have refurbished that story, used the struts of Whittle's genial work to refashion the early parts of this piece, then extended it. Along the way, I have enlarged on what Whittle did, though probably not as cleverly as his original, 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 authored by Richards when he was known as Colyer—then expanded the whole story of Richards' exploits to cover his mission years in late-nineteenth-century Canada. Three parts of this contribution are creative but not fiction: a woodcut print, the likeness of LePetit; calculations made by Orson Pratt on the number of spirit children engendered 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 up 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, apparently, fell on Mormon historical sites, even into Mexico.

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 brought it down through “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 and haunches 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.

But of all this, it is for a carpet featuring this same constellation, and the rather interesting backstory it represents, that Richards’ life is noteworthy, bears dressing up and retelling beyond what Whittle was able to do. 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, who also offered to buy the wagon Richards had used to cross the Plains.

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, though, especially in the area of Bountiful, a

name taken from the Book of Mormon, in British Columbia.

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' Canadian mission years. Richards' 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, more or less, 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.*

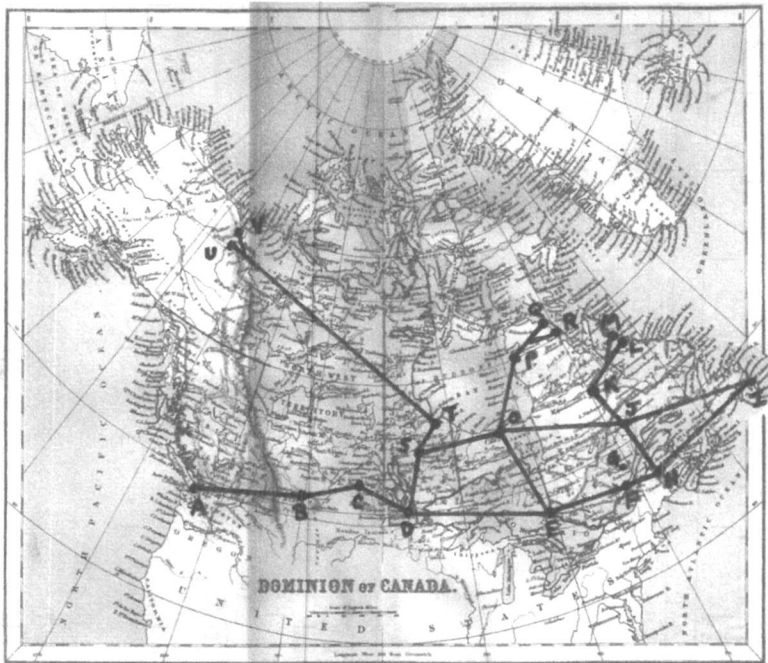
If by Richards’ own hand, these might be a vague but teasing clue that he was yet alive and headed back to England, the reference to “poplars” perhaps alluding to the Oxfordshire of his baptism. But there is some ambiguity here. We might never know for sure; there is a gap in his journals—though it is 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’ 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 later became part of his own 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.)



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

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 (1835). According to family folklore, it was Richards’ 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, were seared into his memory, would influence him later to search for the Richards' 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 the Richards 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 and oft-times wayward Britons.

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As a teenager in the late 1840s, Neville Colyer, as Richards was first known, had secured through an uncle, a prosperous London bookbinder, a position as a scout (a "step-and-fetch-it" and tidier for the college's

students) at 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 as much as three-eighths 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." This he regarded as an advantage.

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!” But, 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 contained 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