

# Darkness into Light: Laurence Oliphant's Experience of Communal Discipline in the United States & Palestine

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SOMEASPECTSOF communitarian history are biographical and psychological. Because students of communitarian history tend toward the larger historical, sociological, and economic approaches to the subject, they often overlook the dark side of that history and the fate of individuals caught in it.

One of the more revealing life experiences in the study of modern communitarianism is that of Laurence Oliphant, whose encounter with The Brotherhood of the New Life was very nearly disastrous. Thomas Lake Harris, leader of The Brotherhood, exercised virtually total control over the community—employing techniques that included humiliation, disorientation, and fear. Laurence Oliphant remained a member of The Brotherhood for over ten years and it is the purpose of this paper to explain how he became, and remained for so long, subject to the power of an individual like Harris.

The closed and private nature of communal societies, such as the one led by Harris, often leads to the abuse of power when it is vested in the hands of an unscrupulous or unbalanced leader. Unrestrained by the rules of a larger, open society—such a leader may sanction acts that are illegal, immoral, or insane. The likeliest victims are those who are the most vulnerable: the naive, the sick, the inadequate, or the solitary who have sought the shelter of the community to lean upon the strength of others. Such persons can be humiliated and frightened in the guise of discipline, or relieved of their money under the pretext of communal need. Such a victim was Laurence Oliphant who suffered all of this during his encounter with The Brotherhood of the New Life. Fortunately, Oliphant was also able to experience the positive aspects of communal living during the last years of his life in Palestine.

A more unlikely candidate for the plain living and seclusion of communal life would be difficult to find. Laurence Oliphant, writer,

Anne Taylor, a free lance writer and biographer in London, has written the biography of Laurence Oliphant.

traveller and diplomat, was as flamboyant as a peacock during his early manhood. Born in 1829, his youth and early manhood coincided with the rise to its zenith of British imperial power. Oliphant was, for many years, a privileged witness to some of the most brilliant events of those times.

Laurence Oliphant was the only child of Antony Oliphant, a Scottish gentleman who, as a younger son, had been excluded from enjoyment of the family estate and had taken refuge in the practice of law. Antony Oliphant, when Laurence was ten years old, acquired a knighthood and the post of Chief Justice for the Colony of Ceylon. Part of Sir Antony's responsibilities in this position included entertaining the streams of distinguished visitors whose ships touched at Colombo enroute to and from India and the Far East. Sir Antony's wife, Maria, provided her husband with no help in this having retreated to a sofa shortly after Laurence's birth.

It was Laurence, then, who at a precocious age was able to offer support to his father in these duties. Laurence's natural charm and his ease of manner, along with his delightful wit and developing empathy with all sorts of people, made him society's darling in Colombo. But Laurence's gifts were also a source of great anxiety to his parents who were fervent evangelicals and convinced that this world was not made for happiness. They would have preferred a little touch of misery in their son, and they tried to instill this in him by constantly harping on the doctrine of original sin.

In time, Lady Oliphant's delicate health necessitated a move from the steamy heat of the capital. The family relocated in a high mountain valley where the nights were so cool that fires had to be lit and Laurence, out walking in the morning, would find ice fringing the puddles. Young Oliphant loved the place for its cool beauty and even more for the presence of the Baker family. John, Valentine, and Stanley Baker (who was later to become one of the explorers of the Nile River) arrived from England in 1848 with assorted wives, children, farm servants, and other retainers to establish a settlement. They provided Laurence's first experience of extended family living as a community and he was enchanted by it. In the years that followed his departure from the valley, he retained a nostalgic longing for the people and the way of life that he had found so appealing. Those years, after he left Ceylon, while tremendously exciting were often solitary—yet he had become too haunted a person to endure solitude.

The sense of guilt that his evangelical parents had worked so determinedly to instill in him had become a constant and dreadful burden. When alone he fell to brooding on the meaning of religion and

the nature of his conduct toward other human beings. His apprehensions were particularly acute concerning his relations with the opposite sex. All his life he attracted women and was attracted by them. Living under the rigid social code of those times, he was perpetually alarmed that his innocent attentions might inadvertently compromise some hapless girl. In this he was further tormented by a mother who pried into his thoughts and picked at his relationships—acutely anxious that her precious son might marry someone unsuitable. Indeed, it seemed that Lady Oliphant tried to prevent her son from marrying at all. This impasse prevailed for many years and stopped Laurence Oliphant from acquiring a wife until he was forty-six.

But all that still lay in the future when, in 1850, a chance visitor to Ceylon launched Laurence on a distinguished literary career. The Prime Minister of Nepal, Jung Bahadur Rana, stopped at Colombo on his way home from England. Taking a fancy to young Oliphant, he invited him to what was then a remote and mysterious country. Oliphant's account of his journey to Katmandu was vivid, amusing, well-judged, and well-informed. Its publication conferred on him an early celebrity. Dispatched to London the following year, at age twenty-two, to read for the Bar—he was petted by London Society and noticed by some very important people. Among the friends of his own age was Evelyn Ashley. Ashley was the nephew of the Earl of Shaftesbury, a noted philanthropist, and he was also the step-grandson of Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary. Oliphant became something of a protege of the Lords Shaftesbury and Palmerston.

It was probably not a coincidence, then, that when he became bored with the law during the summer vacation of 1852 and was looking for a country about which to write a second book he should choose Russia. Wandering with no apparent purpose throughout the vast country, he somehow found himself at Sevastopol at the precise moment the Tsar had arrived to review the navy. Somewhat absent-mindedly, Oliphant noted the state of the ships and the interesting fact that there were no defenses to the landward side of the port. Shortly thereafter, the Crimean War broke out, and Oliphant found himself much in demand at the Headquarters of the British Expeditionary Force.

This episode set the pattern of his life for many years to come. Wherever trouble threatened British interests, there Laurence Oliphant would be as an interested traveller and a noted journalist writing for *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *London Times*. He went to France, Italy, Poland, and Hungary to observe the rising tide of nationalism that was shaking European thrones. His articles appeared in the newspapers and journals of that mid-Victorian period and were eagerly

read in the London clubs. His confidential reports, admirably lucid in content, arrived on desks at the Foreign Office.

His reports always took a detached view of the disturbed political situations he observed in the various countries. But privately, Oliphant sympathized with the peoples whose efforts to free themselves from powers like Russia and the Austrian Empire he had studied at very close quarters. By the early 1860's, he had come to regard nationalism as a kind of religion. The Polish insurrection, which broke out in 1863, enlisted all his passionate sympathy. When the revolt was bloodily suppressed by the Russians, Oliphant accused Lord Palmerston, then Prime Minister, of, at best, cynicism in his response to Poland's appeal for British help, and, at worst, betrayal.

Oliphant's estrangement from Lord Palmerston was further demonstrated the following year when he wrote a bitter denunciation of Palmerston's whole foreign policy for *Blackwood's Magazine*.

Upon the urging of many that he give up his Ruritanian capers for the serious business of life, Oliphant stood for Parliament in 1865. Popular, articulate, well-connected, concerned and brilliantly well-informed in foreign affairs, he was expected not merely to shine in the House of Commons, but to soon be offered a ministerial appointment. Yet it was at precisely this moment of his life that he fell under the influence of Thomas Lake Harris and The Brotherhood of the New Life.

Thomas Lake Harris was a curious individual, and I believe him to have been an evil one. He was unscrupulous, greedy, vain, manipulative, and capable of sustained cruelty. Six years older than Oliphant, Harris was born in 1823 of English parents who migrated to upper New York State during his childhood. As a young man he became an itinerant preacher, having discovered an ability, which he much enjoyed, to sway people with his sermons. After having become acquainted with the early spiritualist leader, Andrew Jackson Davis, Harris began to practice spiritualism on his own. A brief foray into communal living at Mountain Cove, Virginia, failed to deliver the anticipated Day of Judgment, or even a means of subsistence, and Harris wandered to New York, where he founded a church with a suitably wealthy congregation. There he preached a doctrine that was a mixture of Christian spiritualism and socialism.

In 1859, Harris made his first venture to England where, in the wake of D. D. Home, spiritualism (the "Science of the Soul" as Robert Dale Owen was to call it) was sweeping the halls and, more to the point, the drawing rooms. Among his congregation came to be Lady Oliphant, grieved by the sudden death of her husband when Laurence had been abroad. Like many other sad and lonely people, Lady Oliphant

turned to spiritualism for comfort. In Harris she believed she saw a hand outstretched to help.

And so it was she who first brought her son Laurence and Harris together. She hoped that Harris would be able to help her son who had been suffering from recurrent and violent headaches as well as periodic bouts of acute depression which, as he said, reduced his mind to the condition of blank, white paper. "I wonder," he wrote, "whether other peoples thoughts are like clouds as mine are; sometimes when it is stormy grouping themselves, black or lowering, until they burst in a passionate explosion."<sup>1</sup> So acute were the fits of depression, when they came upon him, that he lived in fear of going insane.

At this time Oliphant wrote a biting lampoon of London society that attracted much attention. In it the hero is rescued by a mysterious stranger from America who takes him off to live a new and exalted life. This came to pass in Oliphant's own life. In 1867, to the dismay of his friends and the titillation of society, Oliphant abandoned his constituency, his parliamentary duties, and his literary pursuits for the American community Harris had founded.

The Brotherhood of the New Life was originally founded as a consequence of the Civil War and it came to be permanently located at Brocton, near Buffalo, on the shores of Lake Erie. Living there, and subject to Harris' discipline, were about sixty people. The majority were women, and the total also included several invalids and some refugees from the devastation of the Civil War. Harris' expressed purpose was to achieve the regeneration of mankind through the concerted efforts of his disciples in an exercise known as "breathing together." But in order to reproduce divine respiration—the source of all power—members had to first be purged of all the evils acquired in the world. This so called purging was achieved through a process we would now call "brain-washing," a process at which Harris was adept. Humiliation, disorientation, and fear were the weapons he employed.

Hostile thoughts constituted a most serious crime, and Harris claimed the ability to sense them. Unfortunate individuals would find themselves suddenly arraigned, without warning, for something they had *thought*. The combined efforts of the whole community were required to purge this crime; the victim was kept awake, sometimes for days on end, and deprived of food, abused, and beaten—all for the collective good. These practices were not known outside The Brotherhood. In the beginning, the community had attracted the benevolent

1. Laurence Oliphant, *Picadilly* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885), p. 59.

attention of newspapers like the *New York Tribune*, whose editor, Horace Greeley, fed his readers a steady diet of articles about Fourierism and Owenism. Greeley visited The Brotherhood, but something in Harris' attitude disturbed him. "He wants to be Pope, and I don't like Popes," Greeley concluded.<sup>2</sup>

The Brotherhood existed on funds donated either by its members or by hopeful applicants. The members grew their own food, sold milk in the villages, and planted vines from which they later made wine. But income from these enterprises was not sufficient to keep Harris in the manner in which he was pleased to live: in a large, beautifully furnished house where he was waited upon by specially favored members of the community. He did no manual work, being obliged to hold himself in constant readiness to oppose all evil thoughts. Often he slept all day, having been at such work all through the night his disciples were told.

When Laurence Oliphant arrived to join The Brotherhood, he was kept segregated from the rest and obliged to live in a barn. Harris instructed him to rise at 5:00 A.M. and spend the day carting manure. This was symbolic of his previous life, as was the fact that the rest of the community was made to anoint themselves with a foul smelling substance known as a specific against venereal disease. Herein lies one of the clues to the ascendancy Harris acquired over Laurence Oliphant and also his mother. The illness Oliphant suffered, with its blinding headaches and the recurrent fear of going mad, was syphilis. A disease he may have contracted during his wandering life or possibly, as I believe, he had inherited. Harris promised a cure.

The fears that Harris exploited in The Brotherhood are well illustrated in a letter Oliphant wrote to close friends in England after he had been a member of the community for more than a year. The friends, alarmed at his long absence and neglect of his parliamentary duties, had urged him to return and make his home with them. But Oliphant replied: "Faithful [Father Faithful was a name Harris liked to be called] saw that in my present condition to return to Parliament would not only be most injurious to me spiritually but, as the Divine Protection would be withdrawn, might be attended with fatal natural results. Nor could I find the slightest internal indication that I had any use there, while I felt the strongest conviction that I was in my right place here. Faithful saw when the time had come . . . I felt justified in pleading my health as a reason, as I am morally convinced that I could not have lived through the session."<sup>3</sup> Oliphant then proceeded to apply

2. Harris/Oliphant papers. Box 13, file 4.

3. Harris/Oliphant papers. Box B, file 11. Laurence Oliphant to William Cowper, 17 February 1868.

for the Chiltern Hundreds, the means by which a member of Parliament quits the House.

Laurence Oliphant remained a member of The Brotherhood until 1879, that is, for more than ten years. There is not space here to elaborate on the mistake Harris made in allowing Oliphant to marry and his subsequent attempts to remedy the situation by trying to humiliate Oliphant's wife, Alice. Suffice it to say that with Alice's strong and loving support, and after the death of his mother within the community, Oliphant was able to break with Harris. He had become disillusioned, not with the spiritual aims of The Brotherhood nor with the concept of communal living, but rather with the personal integrity of the founder.

In 1874 The Brotherhood divided and Harris and his closest supporters departed for California, where they established a community called Fountain Grove. Those who sided with Oliphant remained at Brocton. And later about four of these members joined Laurence and Alice Oliphant in Palestine in 1882.

Oliphant had a firm belief that the Second Coming of Christ would be hastened if the Jews were restored to Jerusalem. This belief owed nothing to Thomas Lake Harris, but rather stemmed from the teachings of his parents who, like many evangelicals, looked forward to the millennium. Related to this millennial doctrine were Laurence's efforts to settle refugee Jews in Palestine after 1880.

Oliphant's efforts at restoring the Jews make a fascinating story, but what concerns us here is the final chapter in his career as a communitarian. In 1882, Laurence and Alice joined the Temple community at Haifa, a colony of millenarians from Wiirtemberg. The Temple community, although it was founded nearly one hundred years after George Rapp's first separation from the Lutheran Church, had certain similarities with the Harmony Society.

The founder of the Temple community at Haifa was a Professor Hoffmann, a graduate of Tübingen University, which was a center of Pietism in Rapp's time and earlier. Hoffmann was a minister of the Lutheran Church who became critical of its tendency to harbor rationalistic thought. Like Rapp, Hoffmann desired a more direct experience of God than he thought the rituals of the Church allowed. Hoffmann was a fervent student of the Bible and looked for the fulfillment of the prophecies recorded in the Book of Revelation, which had also so moved Rapp. In 1867, Hoffmann and a group of followers went to Palestine to lay, as they said, the first stones of the spiritual temple that was to be prepared for the return of Christ.

The first duty of the Temple Society was to make the land fit for the presence of the Messiah. Palestine was then in ruins, the holy

places neglected and the land laid waste. The Arab inhabitants were miserably poor and further oppressed by Turkish demands for taxes. Hoffmann and his followers, like the Harmonists, numbered among themselves all sorts of diligent and able workers, craftsmen as well as farmers. Unlike the Harmonists, however, they did not believe in holding all things in common. The Temple community transformed the neighborhood of Haifa by making it safe from brigands, building roads and houses, improving the port, and bringing in settlers. They introduced wheeled vehicles to the Arabs. They manufactured out of olive oil a soap that was sent to New York for sale, as were articles carved out of wood. There was also a college where the brightest pupils received professional training.

Like the Harmony Society, the Templars were the subject of much interested comment, and from traveller's accounts one gains the impression that the Templars were far more at ease in Palestine than the Harmonists ever were in Indiana. The sense of strain that pervades the Harmonist papers is absent from the Templars' history. They were much respected and wherever discussions were held about the form of government that might arise in Palestine after the departure of the Turks, the Temple community was mentioned as being likely to have some part in it.

Within the society's settlement at Haifa, Laurence and Alice Oliphant had a house. There they received friends from Brocton and read and studied Arabic. Oliphant continued to write books and articles, some of which were published by his friend Charles A. Dana, the editor of the *New York Sun*. Oliphant became close friends with a leading Templar, Gottlieb Schumacher, a German-American engineer, and together they drew up plans for a railway to bring grain from the interior to the port at Haifa. But Oliphant's chief occupation was helping the Jewish refugees who had settled nearby and devising methods of bringing others in.

After years of toil and strain, Oliphant was happy, occupied, and at peace. Haifa and the Temple Society were reminiscent of the days in Ceylon in the mountain valley. Then all this was suddenly shattered by the death, from fever, of his beloved Alice in 1886.

It was his second wife, Rosamond Dale Owen, who would eventually inherit the house at Haifa, the land, and the summer dwelling at Mount Carmel. Oliphant travelled to New Harmony, Indiana, in 1888 to seek her out. He knew her to be a spiritualist and sought her as a possible assistant in the mission that had come to occupy his life. She agreed to return with him to Palestine, and they were married en route upon their arrival in England. The journey ended there, however, for Oliphant fell ill and lung cancer was diagnosed. Alone, and with



very little money, his new wife Rosamond devotedly nursed Oliphant in his final days. She was often the subject of hostile comments by those who compared her with the beautiful Alice.

Laurence Oliphant died in December of 1888, four months after his marriage to Rosamond. Today he is remembered in Israel as one of the leading Gentiles who helped during the very beginning of the Jewish state.

It was despite Harris that Oliphant achieved so much. The prophet had ruined his parliamentary career, nearly broken up his first marriage, and clouded his reputation in England. Harris' peculiar discipline and warped imaginings came close to destroying Oliphant. Harris had effectively destroyed the lives of several of his followers—driving at least one of them to suicide.

It says much for Laurence Oliphant—a good and gentle man—that he was able to survive the assaults made upon him by Harris and to go on to make a substantial contribution to the realization of Eretz Israel.

*Note on the Sources*

My sketch, although sparsely footnoted, is based upon extensive research in the primary sources. Some of the chief unpublished and published sources are listed below.

*A. Unpublished*

Blackwood Papers	National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
Broadlands Papers	Trustees of the Broadlands Estate (Held at Hampshire County Record Office, Winchester, England)
Harris/Oliphant Papers	Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York
Guy le Strange Papers	Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, England

*B. Published*

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