Treasure Hunts in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Depositum custodi!

(Montague Rhodes James: *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, 1894)

Religion

The religious dimension of the treasure hunt declined as the nineteenth century progressed. The belief in ghosts lost ground or transformed into spiritualism and an interest in the more or less vulgarized forms of what would become known as ‘parapsychology’. Without the ghosts who needed to be redeemed, the religious overtones of treasure hunting disappeared. Even news about treasure in an ecclesiastical context was void of spiritual meaning.

A newspaper report published in *The Times* in December 1903 highlights the political rather than the religious significance of treasure tales. According to some Italian newspapers, 2 high-ranking clerics had presented themselves at the Vatican to give the newly elected Pope Pius X the sum of 40 million lire entrusted to them by his late predecessor Leo XIII. According to the same sources, after Leo’s death, 2 bags full of gold worth more than 9 million lire had been found in his private rooms hidden behind bookcases. As the correspondent of *The Times* pointed out correctly, only some liberal Italian newspapers of marked anti-clerical disposition had run the story about the hidden riches of the papacy. There was no corroborative evidence. *The Times* suggested that the anti-Catholic press spread rumours about money that Leo XIII had supposedly hidden away in order to prevent Catholics from giving money to the Church as many used to do at Christmas. It was indeed suspicious that the newspapers had launched their campaign in December. *The Times* reporter explained that all available evidence
suggested that the finances of the Vatican were far from being robust and the Pope was in no position simply to hide a couple of million lire behind a bookcase. The story about fantastic riches secretly hidden was obviously meant to damage the reputation of the Church and its leading personnel, and to keep the public from giving financial aid. The treasure of Pope Leo XIII in the newspaper stories was a treasure hidden from the public. The message the Italian newspapers wanted to spread was in essence that the Church did not deserve any support as it was already rolling in money and did not use its alleged riches wisely. Some essentials of the old treasure story featured. However, the newspapers did not say anything about any magical practices. In this context, the treasure was essentially political news. A mere hint at the magical potential of treasure lore would have destroyed that message.

All that remained of the old idea that treasure seeking might not only fill your wallet but also be ‘good’ for you on a personal level was the notion that treasure hunting could have some educational value. The comedy Lot 79 by the American playwright Rida Johnson Young conveyed this message in its arguably most primitive form. Treasure hunters from New York City went to Cape Cod to find treasure. All they finally discovered was a box with a piece of paper in it, congratulating them on the good exercise they got digging it up. The reward of the urban treasure seeker was an outdoor work out in the comparatively healthy environment of a seaside resort. The play ran with moderate success in London’s West End in 1918.

There was, however, one notable exception from the general trend to a more secular, non-magical and non-religious understanding of treasure. Significantly, it was not a European but an American phenomenon. It used and adapted the old motifs in order to create a new religious narrative, and indeed a new Christian church: Mormonism. In 1838, Joseph Smith, the founder of the new denomination, described how he had found the Book of Mormon in some detail. An angel named Moroni came to Smith three times in the same night. He always had the same message: he told Smith where he could find ‘a book…written upon gold plates giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent (North America) and the source from whence they sprang’. Together with the book, Smith would find two stones in silver bows. The stones were the Urim and Thummim. ‘The use of these stones was what constituted Seers in ancient…times.’ They would enable Smith to translate the golden book. It is significant that according to Smith’s own account, the angel had to explicitly forbid him to use the golden book ‘for the purpose of getting rich’. Smith found the book hidden under a