

Sin or Bore?

MORMON POLYGAMY: A HISTORY

RICHARD VAN WAGONER
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By Kerry William Bate

*But what's favour amongst four?
Polygamy may well be held in dread
Not only as a sin, but as a bore
Byron, "Don Juan," canto VI, xii.*

It was a part of Byron's ostentatious affectation to be indifferent to sin and find everything a bore. However, neither his contemporaries nor successors were so charitable toward sin nor apathetic about the exotic. Polygamy is a subject which will never lose its interest, so long as human beings refrain from reproducing asexually and two-parent families remain the norm.

Interest in polygamy made 19th century Utah the empire of the muckraker and the capitol of the pious public confession. Fanny Stenhouse's fascinating but sometimes superficial memoirs spoke for a genre: *Tell It All*. The Victorians, not able to read letters in *Penthouse* promoting exotic sex practices, could at least peruse titillating condemnations of those practices in the pulp magazines of the day.

Unfortunately when the literature surrounding a subject is either sanctimoniously hostile or submissively supportive it becomes difficult to wade through the polemics and come up with a reasonable concept of reality. Witness the present emotional debate over South Africa and Nicaragua.

Despite the reams of paper devoted to Mormon polygamy, the hordes of self-righteous lecturers, authors and defenders—all contaminated by hypocritical and unctuous political posturing—despite all this, until Van Wagoner's book almost nothing had been written about the subject that was comprehensive, objective, and scholarly. Only Kimball Young's hopelessly outdated book, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* came near the mark.

Graced with a cover picture of Joseph F. Smith's enormous family, Van Wagoner's book reminds us that polygamy makes human reproduction seem as simple and pointless as the multiplication of polliwogs, and we know that Van Wagoner could easily have sunk into yet another of the semi-sensuous and superficial hack jobs we have seen in the romance magazines of today or the twaddle of an earlier era. Alex Joseph was invented to pander to that audience.

Instead, Van Wagoner treats the subject dispassionately, and his chapters on pre-Utah polygamy are especially superb. We learn of Joseph Smith's situational morality ("That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another"), and the fact that Smith often married—or attempted to marry—women already wed, is treated matter-of-factly. The polyandrous menage of Zina Huntington-Jacobs-Smith-Young is explained: "Zina was revealed [in 1846] by proxy to the murdered Joseph Smith and in the same session was 'sealed for time' to Brigham Young. Faithful Henry B. Jacobs [her husband] stood as an official witness to both ceremonies."

"Oh how happy I could be if I only could see you and the little children, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh," Jacobs as late as 1852, "Oh Zina, can I will I ever get you again, answer the question please."

But generally it was the woman who felt like the victim. Orson Pratt, a one-time polygamy opponent, discovered that while women had the right to refuse to give consent to a husband's multiple marriages, those who did so would lose "the privilege of enjoying the society of a husband in eternity. You forfeit your right to an endless increase of immortal lives. And even the children with

which you may be favored in this life will not be entrusted to your charge for eternity; but you will be left in that world without a husband, without a family, without a kingdom."

Polygamy under Joseph Smith was furtive, duplicitous and clearly sensual. Brigham Young, adhering closely to his New England origins, was determined to fulfill Byron's promise that it be a bore. He seemed to personally enjoy the companionship of men, and his attitudes toward women were unapologetically chauvinistic. He counselled John D. Lee to "Get good young Women when you Get them that can be controld," and abhorred the idea of having to engage in courtship. Young "said that the Gentile custom of Sparkification was done away so that the passions may not be aroused and undue advantage taken of the chastity of the Daughters of Zion by these pernicious habits &c.," reported Lee's wife Rachel.

"All their council & wisdom (although there are many good women) don't weigh as much with me as the weight of a Fly Tird," he had informed his brethren even before polygamy was officially admitted and publicly promulgated.

The most fascinating part of the book is Chapter Nine, where the attitudes of women are explored. The conflicts between public support and private anguish are handled with sensitivity and honesty. While Emmeline B. Wells and Martha H. Cannon signed editorials in the *Women's Exponent* arguing that plural marriage "gives women the highest opportunities for self-development, exercise of judgment, and arouses latent faculties," their private lives were far from satisfactory.

"O, if my husband could only love me even a little," lamented Wells, and Cannon wrote to her husband crying, "Oh for a home! A husband of my own . . . A father for my children whom they know . . ." One can't help but wonder if a good many other marriages, unencumbered by polygamy, don't suffer from the same disillusionment. Perhaps our society is realistic in recognizing that, and it explains today's high divorce rate and "serial polygamy."

Other aspects not explored by

Van Wagoner are more problematical but intriguing. What happens to a generation of embittered women? What attitudes do they convey to their children—especially female offspring? I have a thoughtful friend who traces her own mother's bitterness and anger through a multi-generational reaction to polygamy, with the original angry woman having been married at an early age to a very old and doddering man, consequently exploited and ever after disgusted. Her self-loathing was passed on to her daughters and for generations thereafter women in the family viewed themselves as exploited and inferior, hated each other and

despised the men they were forced to accept as their superiors. Later chapters detail the eventual Mormon surrender of polygamy, contrasting the public and private positions of such leaders as Joseph F. Smith and clearly demonstrating how difficult and problematic the surrender was. Perhaps without the Reed Smoot investigation, polygamy today would be taken no more seriously by the Mormon church than spelunking. Modern polygamy is a jumbled, disorganized movement, ranging from the insanity of Ervil LeBaron to the frank sensuality of Alex Joseph. The information on today's polygamy seems superficial, uninteresting and

pointless: we wonder if the "fundamentalists" exist only to insure that Mormons can not as readily repudiate their sexual past as they have buried their socialism. Van Wagoner's book is a capable and comprehensive work that will find a welcome—if lonely—place on the bookshelves of scholars. But it won't compete with romance magazines, *Penthouse* fantasies, or reprints of 19th century exposes. Readers interested in sin will find Van Wagoner's book a bore.

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