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*A Sermon in the Desert: Belief and Behavior in Early St. George, Utah* Larry M. Logue

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LARRY M. LOGUE. *A Sermon in the Desert: Belief and Behavior in Early St. George, Utah*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988. xiii; 165 pp. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Armand L. Mauss, professor of sociology and religious studies at Washington State University.

In recent years, scholars like “Ben” Bennion and Larry Foster have discovered that nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy (strictly speaking, polygyny) was far more pervasive and influential than we had realized. Indeed, as an institution, polygamy was Utah’s analogue to Southern slavery. Though perhaps not involving a majority of the population, nevertheless it was extensive enough to be a *formative* institution, one that influenced nearly every aspect of the culture in one way or another. Such is the major theme of Logue’s book, whether intentionally or not. Almost as if in metaphor, the theme of polygamy permeates the book just as the institution permeated social life in St. George of the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s.

In some ways the book does not deliver what it promises in the preface, where we are led to expect a comprehensive community

case study with broad theoretical significance. What we get, as it turns out, is an important but limited study of family and religion, as understood through census and diary data, but very little about the other important institutions of the town. What passes for “theory” here, furthermore, is a series of plausible *explanations*, rather than anything at the global level of the venerable “frontier thesis,” or even at the “lower order” of theory to which the author aspires. I do not mean to denigrate the author’s explanatory creativity, which is an important contribution in itself, but the reader does not really find much here that can be generalized theoretically.

We do get a tremendously inventive blending of demographic and diary data from which the author draws a number of intriguing inferences about the whys and wherefores of life in St. George. This blend of qualitative and quantitative data is frequently compared with findings from community studies of other contemporaneous towns, both in Utah and elsewhere in the United States, so that we have a basis for judging whether this or that aspect of St. George life was really unique for its time. (Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn’t.) When the author’s explanations stay close to his data, they are quite convincing, but now and then he overreaches the data.

Two examples will illustrate. In comparing infant mortality in St. George with that in other American communities, the author finds an anomaly: The infant mortality rate during the first year of life was relatively low in St. George, though eventually (by age five) it pretty well converged with that in the rest of the country. Why was it so low at first? From diary and other documentary accounts, the author finds strong evidence that breast-feeding was much more common, and of longer duration, in St. George than elsewhere. Accordingly, the smallest infants benefited both by natural immunity from mothers’ milk and by suppressed ovulation, which tended to reduce the risk of early conception of a successor sibling. That’s all pretty plausible and is an interesting example of interaction between cultural customs and demographic variables.

On the other hand, when the author finds that mortality rates for adult women were higher than those for adult men in St. George (even when compared to the rest of the country), he blames patriarchal privilege with very slim evidence indeed. As far as I can tell, the evidence consists solely of occasional references in diaries to the self-sacrificing proclivities of women. We cannot tell whether St. George women were more likely than men to glorify (or even accept) self-sacrifice, or whether they were more likely to do so than other pioneer women. Nevertheless, the author draws the inference that the women were giving up their food for the men in



the name of patriarchy and self-sacrifice, with the consequence of higher mortality from malnutrition. This undocumented claim is an entirely unnecessary violation of the principle of parsimony in scientific explanation. Certainly a *sufficient* explanation for higher rates of female mortality can be found in the higher average frequency and duration of childbearing (compared to elsewhere), which the author had already established.

The main contribution of the book will be found in chapters 3, 4, and 5, dealing respectively with marriage, fertility, and mortality. In these chapters the author leads us through a kind of dialogue between demographic data and diary accounts. From this dialogue he “teases out” the kinds of intriguing inferences noted above about daily life in early St. George. He is inventive in filling gaps in the demographic record, but he is also meticulous in explaining the risks that he has run in doing so. Two methodological appendixes detail his techniques for using diaries (appendix A) and demographic data (appendix B). The first two chapters give us an overview, drawn from secondary sources, of the early history and religious beliefs of the people of St. George. An epilogue reviews the major implications of the study and how they fit with Mormon (and other) history more generally. To the academically savvy, the book has the appearance of a revised dissertation (chapters 3, 4, 5, and the appendixes) to which have been grafted the opening two chapters and the epilogue. It must be conceded, though, that this process has been done more smoothly and skillfully than with most revised dissertations.

Besides his display of an unusual and impressive methodological virtuosity, the author’s main contribution in this work, in my opinion, lies in what it reveals about the far-reaching implications of polygamy. Logue employs an unusual way of measuring the extensiveness of polygamy. On the assumption that most husbands, wives, and children lived in relationships that were sometimes monogamous and sometimes polygamous (depending on the comings and goings of new and departing wives), he argues that the most meaningful way to calculate the extent of polygamy is in *person-years*, which he then does for men, women, and children. The result validates (but does not greatly inflate) the findings of other recent investigations into this matter: polygamy in early St. George (and probably in most other Utah towns) involved more than a third of the person-years of the men, three-fourths of the person-years of the women, and more than half of the person-years of the children (50–51).

Among the “ripples” issuing from such pervasive polygamy was a chronic shortage of marriageable women, since there was no



appreciable imbalance in the general sex ratio. This shortage, in turn, pushed down the average age at marriage for all females, whether polygamous or monogamous. Early marriage age, of course, meant a longer average duration of childbearing, which pushed the St. George fertility rate (and, by inference, that of Utah?) well above the national average for the time. Thus, while it is true that polygamous wives had no more children than did monogamous wives (and often fewer), the average fertility of *all* wives was increased by the general impact of polygamy on marriage age. The resulting abundance of children in the hand-to-mouth economy of St. George was no blessing as it might have been in other agricultural sections of the country, where children were sometimes an economic asset.

I found myself wishing that the author had explored some of the other likely concomitants of polygamy, bride shortages, and poverty. Two that come to mind are divorce and the forced out-migration of the young men who were unable to “score” in either the marriage market or the labor market. We know that divorce was not uncommon in polygamous Utah, and that it was often initiated by a wife. The author even cites one example (105), but the reader suspects that more data on divorce must have been available to the researcher. Such data, especially in the able hands of this author, might have given us still more insights into the implications of polygamy, especially for disaffected women. On the second issue, the predicament of unattached young men, one wonders where they went. Did they stay in Utah? Did they stay in the Church? Did such extensive polygamy have the ironic and unintended consequence of driving off some of even the devout male youth?

This book, at the very least, ought to add more weight to the mounting evidence that, one hopes, will eventually bring the collapse, once and for all, of so many of the myths that have accumulated through the years about Mormon polygamy, to wit:

1. polygamy was not very extensive;
2. polygamy was necessitated in part by a shortage of eligible men;
3. polygamy was mainly a charitable institution to take care of aging and widowed women;
4. polygamy was practiced only by the more wealthy;
5. polygamy worked to the economic advantage of at least the men;
6. polygamy produced more children per woman than monogamy did;
7. polygamy was the resort mainly of old men, an arrangement, in other words, for patriarchal old geezers to exchange daughters and granddaughters;
8. polygamy originated and was sustained by a variety of motives, some of them pragmatic, some of them ignoble, but religion was mainly a post-hoc rationale.

All of these myths (some of them mutually incompatible) have been propounded by either apologists or antagonists or both. It is hard to sustain any of them in the face of the evidence provided in this fine study. In particular, the fundamentally religious basis for polygamy becomes undeniable in the context of the extraordinarily unfavorable cost-benefit ratio that accompanied it for almost all participants, at least in St. George. Those people knew what “the law of sacrifice” really meant!