



1-1-1992

***Mormon Polygamy: A History* Richard S. Van Wagoner**

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Recommended Citation

Alexander, Thomas G. (1992) "*Mormon Polygamy: A History* Richard S. Van Wagoner," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol32/iss1/22>

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RICHARD S. VAN WAGONER. *Mormon Polygamy: A History*. 2d ed. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989. xii; 255 pp. Bibliography, index. Paperback, \$12.95.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander, professor of history and director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University.

Although the occasion of many of the sermons I have given in Church gatherings has faded into oblivion, the evening I reported my mission in the Ogden Twenty-ninth Ward is indelibly impressed on my mind. Immediately after I had finished my report, the bishop arose to announce that a ward member whom I had known for years and who had been serving in the French Mission while I was in Germany, had been excommunicated for entering polygamy. Memories flooded through my mind as I read Van Wagoner's mention of her name.

That personal memory aside, probably no topic in Mormon studies has held the fascination of the public—both Mormon and non-Mormon—as has the practice of plural marriage. Revulsion at the practice induced many in the United States during the nineteenth century, and not a few today, to identify the Latter-day Saints with gross immorality and deviant fanaticism. Public outrage promoted an anti-Mormon crusade that led eventually to the suppression of the practice and to the accommodation of the Latter-day Saints with their fellow citizens.

A number of studies of Latter-day Saint polygamy preceded the publication of Van Wagoner's first edition in 1986. Among the most noted are Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough? The Story of Mormon Polygamy*, which in spite of its racy title was based on solid sociological research; Stanley S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy"; Phillip R. Kunz, "One Wife or Several? A Comparative Study of Late Nineteenth-Century Marriage in Utah"; Eugene E. Campbell and Bruce L. Campbell, "Divorce among Mormon Polygamists: Extent and Explanations"; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century*; Danel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith"; Lowell Bennion, "The Incidence of Mormon Polygamy in 1880: Dixie versus Davis Stake"; Ben Bradlee, Jr., and Dale Van Atta, *Prophet of Blood: The Untold Story of Ervil LeBaron and the Lambs of God*; Vicky Burgess-Olson, "Family Structure and Dynamics in Early Utah Mormon Families—1847–1885"; Kenneth L. Cannon III, "Beyond the Manifesto: Polygamous

Cohabitation among LDS General Authorities after 1890"; Jessie Embry, "Effects of Polygamy on Mormon Women"; James Edward Hulett, Jr., "The Sociological and Social Psychological Aspects of the Mormon Polygamous Family"; Victor W. Jorgensen and B. Carmon Hardy, "The Taylor-Cowley Affair and the Watershed of Mormon History"; Orma Linford, "The Mormons and the Law: The Polygamy Cases"; Edward Leo Lyman, "The Mormon Quest for Utah Statehood"; and D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904."¹

In general, Van Wagoner's interpretations are quite moderate. He agrees with Joseph Smith's own interpretation of the origins of plural marriage. Van Wagoner, like other authors before him, properly cites other groups and individuals who proposed, and in some cases instituted, forms of marriage other than monogamy. Finally, however, and following others, he concludes that the Latter-day Saint practice derived from Joseph's attempt to effect the restoration of all things. Van Wagoner views polygamy as popular with some Mormons and abhorrent to others. He also recognizes that the practice continued in some circles well after 1890.

Even though Van Wagoner's interpretations are rather well substantiated in other secondary literature and by readily available primary sources, a number of authors have continued to insist on outmoded and indefensible rationalizations. Some have argued that more women joined the Church than men and that polygamy was necessary to provide faithful husbands for the excess females. In fact, historians have known for years that a shortage of marriageable females occurred in some areas and that some Church leaders actually married wives of other living Saints. Other authors have begged the question, at the same time denying its pervasiveness, by arguing that plural marriage was limited to two or three percent of Latter-day Saint marriages. However, current statistical information provided by Lowell C. Bennion and others has shown that the incidence was much higher. On the average, perhaps 20 to 25 percent of adults were married polygamously. Some say that the Church considered the practice legal, justified by the First Amendment free exercise clause, which was true; but then they proceed to argue that Latter-day Saints gave up plural marriage as soon as the Supreme Court declared the practice illegal, an absolutely absurd statement contradicted by abundant factual information.

Nevertheless, there are some problems which Van Wagoner has not solved and which remain to be investigated. The beginning

of the practice of plural marriage remains a mystery. The first recorded polygamous marriage took place between Joseph Smith and Louisa Beaman in April 1841, but how long before that the Prophet had entered the practice is open to speculation.

Various people have tried to push the date of the beginning back to the 1830s with a marriage alleged to have taken place between the Prophet and Fanny Alger. Van Wagoner rightly concludes that “confusion over the exact nature and extent of Joseph Smith’s involvement with Fanny Alger has remained to this day” (10). Well he should, since at least one piece of evidence that he presents on the question is spurious. He cites an alleged interview in the St. George Temple between an unnamed Saint and Heber C. Kimball, who is said to have introduced Fanny’s brother John as the brother of Joseph Smith’s first plural wife. This would have been an extraordinary feat since the St. George Temple was not dedicated until 1877 and Heber C. Kimball died in 1868.

Nevertheless, Van Wagoner’s book is essentially a rather straightforward discussion of the institution, practice, and demise of polygamy among orthodox Latter-day Saints and its continuation under Fundamentalists. Van Wagoner documents the discord that plural marriage caused in Nauvoo, its subsequent practice and public acknowledgment in 1852, its effect on family life, the anti-polygamy crusade, and the Woodruff Manifesto. He also considers post-Manifesto polygamy, the Smoot hearings, and subsequent suppression of new polygamous marriages among orthodox Mormons. Finally he discusses the continued practice of plural marriage among generally inoffensive Fundamentalists such as the Colorado City–Hillsdale community, the Allred group, and Roysten Potter; the violent activities of the LeBaron family and their associates and of the Singer-Swapp clan; and the deviant sexual practices of John W. Bryant.

When the second edition of any book is issued, one often wonders what justification the author and publishers had for a new edition as opposed to a second printing of the old. In order to try to answer that question, this reviewer made a cursory comparison of the two editions. The results are mixed. Many of the changes are essentially cosmetic, such as adding titles to chapters, reformatting verbatim transcripts of interviews, and rephrasing or recasting information taken from the first edition. Some of the changes, however, have resulted from Van Wagoner’s use of more recent research on the topics under consideration (see, for instance, pp. 82, 90, 96, 98, 119, 204, and 212 ff.).

Although Van Wagoner's book is a generally accurate summary of previously published studies together with an examination of some of the available primary data, we still need a full-scale, in-depth study of plural marriage. Sufficient confusion remains about such things as its date of origin, the details of its practice during Joseph Smith's lifetime, the practice of polyandry, the extent of the practice of plural marriage among orthodox Latter-day Saints between 1852 and 1904, the extent of its practice after 1904, and the patterns of practice among Fundamentalist groups today that a number of studies can and undoubtedly will be published in the future.

NOTE

¹ Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough? The Story of Mormon Polygamy* (New York: Henry Holt, 1954); Stanley S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," *Western Humanities Review* 10 (Summer 1956): 229–39 (subsequently reprinted in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* 35 [Fall 1967]: 309–21); Phillip R. Kunz, "One Wife or Several? A Comparative Study of Late Nineteenth-Century Marriage in Utah," in *The Mormon People: Their Character and Traditions*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander, Charles Redd Monographs in Western History, no. 10 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1980), 53–73; Eugene E. Campbell and Bruce L. Campbell, "Divorce among Mormon Polygamists: Extent and Explanations," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (Winter 1978): 4–23; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Danel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith" (Master's thesis, Purdue University, 1975); Lowell Bennion, "The Incidence of Mormon Polygamy in 1880: Dixie versus Davis Stake," *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 27–42; Ben Bradlee, Jr., and Dale Van Atta, *Prophet of Blood: The Untold Story of Ervil LeBaron and the Lambs of God* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1981); Vicky Burgess-Olson, "Family Structure and Dynamics in Early Utah Mormon Families—1847–1885" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1975); Kenneth L. Cannon III, "Beyond the Manifesto: Polygamous Cohabitation among LDS General Authorities after 1890," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (Winter 1978): 24–36; Jessie Embry, "Effects of Polygamy on Mormon Women," *Frontiers—A Journal of Women Studies* 7 (1984): 56–61 (Embry's 1987 book is cited in Van Wagoner's second edition); James Edward Hulett, Jr., "The Sociological and Social Psychological Aspects of the Mormon Polygamous Family" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1939); Victor W. Jorgensen and B. Carmon Hardy, "The Taylor-Cowley Affair and the Watershed of Mormon History," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 48 (Winter 1980): 4–36; Orma Linford, "The Mormons and the Law: The Polygamy Cases," *Utah Law Review* 9 (Winter 1964): 308–70, and 10 (Summer 1965): 543–91; Edward Leo Lyman, "The Mormon Quest for Utah Statehood" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Riverside, 1981) (subsequently published by University of Illinois Press); and D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904," *Dialogue* 18 (Spring 1985): 9–105.