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The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women

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Paula Kelly Harline. *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women*.
New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Andrea G. Radke-Moss

In 2014, Paula Harline released *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club* to wide acclaim. Considering the number of past publications on the history of Mormon polygamy, what has made Harline's publication and approach stand out, especially coming from someone who is not a professional historian?

From the outset, the title of *Polygamous Wives Writing Club* is worthy of comment. Harline claims that the idea for the book came from watching her ward Relief Society sisters meet monthly to share their writings, and then she "imagined that nineteenth-century women could have done the same" (4). Perhaps unintentionally, the title appears to be a riff on a popular genre of fictionalized women's associations, book clubs, and literary societies. James Patterson's *Women's Murder Club* series (2001 to 2016) might have started the trend, but it was the best-selling *Jane Austen Book Club* (2005) that really popularized the "book club" framework. Other top sellers followed: *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (2009), *Miss Dreamsville and the Collier County Literary Society* (2012), *The Book Club* (2013), *The Jane Austen Quilt Club* (2014), and *Book Club* (2016). Taken together, this genre has allowed authors to explore stories against the backdrop of female associations. The plots might be different, but the themes are universal: communities of women meet around a common interest, create space for self-discovery and empowerment, and find group strength in pushing against the personal, social, and professional challenges of their lives.

Harline has adroitly applied this motif to *Polygamous Wives*. By turning the lived experiences of nineteenth-century Mormon wives into a place of sharing between women, she has created an imagined feminine community of mutual sorrow, loneliness, struggle, and triumph. It works as a useful organizational tool, as she has geographically situated

her female subjects into common places and chronologies, and tried to link their experiences across invisible lines of separation.

Whereas other works in this genre are thoroughly fictionalized, Harline draws upon actual histories of real women, producing a work that is catchy and provocative, though it still carries a highly speculative tone. For instance, female subjects are introduced with lines like “If [these] wives had known each other, they probably would have enjoyed spending an afternoon together” (11). Thus, as history is blended with literary, sometimes both are muted, even if the overall effort is meant for dramatic and personalizing effect. And in trying to achieve a smooth narrative style, Harline has omitted the in-text footnotes and placed all references at the end of the book, making it difficult to check any source quotes, author assertions, statistical information, or historical analysis from other scholars. Since Harline has consciously crafted her book around these approaches, readers should be aware that they might be appealing to some but, perhaps, jarring to others. Still, the book is powerful, gripping, and well-written—except for the speculative places throughout.

Harline chose twenty-nine obscure polygamist wives’ diaries and autobiographies from the nineteenth-century Mormon diaspora. This publication is a rich trove of polygamous source material, and there is much for researchers to unpack here. In contrast to the usual emphasis on elite wives who functioned in the highest circles of Church leadership, these women represent the average experiences of rural, unknown, and poor women. Harline’s purpose is to use these women’s personal writings to understand their decisions to live polygamy and then to know how they lived it privately. One “made-up” quote captures the experience of most women in her study, and clarifies Harline’s basic thesis: “I believed that the principle of plural marriage was from God, but it was still hard—it nearly killed me” (5).

Harline’s three basic premises are: first, that wives struggled to adapt to polygamous life in a culture of monogamous practice. She goes so far as to say that, for some, “there still seemed something adulterous about it” (4). While that may have been the feeling in many cases, it seems that women were more worried about being neglected and lonely within it. A huge takeaway is that even with the best intentions and under the best circumstances, it was impossible for husbands to apply total equality of treatment, attention, financial support, and regard for all their wives. Second, Harline debunks the myth about unified sister-wives, and instead found that most women struggled to find any female

kinship and bonding within marriage plurality. Third, the hardships of antipolygamy legislation and life on the Underground were devastating for polygamous wives. This is probably the book's strongest contribution, as Harline unpacks the challenges of multiple displacements, long marital separations, housing difficulties, instability, security, and even abandonment.

A few contributions stood out to me for their attention and inclusion: the economic contributions of polygamous wives, the challenges of economic class, sexual intimacy, and the trials of the antipolygamy era. The book, however, sometimes has a spotty approach to historical contextualization and details. For example, a few significant individuals get only offhand mention, as though the author simply might not know who they are. A generic "polygamous wife" who gave a speech in 1870 before five thousand people in the Salt Lake Tabernacle was Eliza R. Snow herself (73). Page 86 includes a discussion of George T. Benson and his daughter Louisa, with no mention that they are the grandfather and aunt of future Church President Ezra Taft Benson. And one passing mention of a "widowed mother," Rebecca Swain Williams, who "never remarried," would have been more meaningful if readers knew that this was none other than the widow of Frederick G. Williams, famous medical doctor and First Presidency counselor to Joseph Smith (69).

Some anachronisms are distracting for their use outside of time and place, like referring to courting practices from the 1850s through the 1880s as "dating" (16, 129). And calling these women "feminists" (177) might have been more nuanced after a discussion of intentional autonomy vs. accidental autonomy. A reference to 1856 federal attempts to "curtail polygamy" shows that the author might be confusing the formation of the Republican Party with the 1862 Morrill Act (125). In a few other cases, the errors are more careless: the order of federal troops to Utah by President Buchanan is dated as 1858, not 1857 (56); Joseph Smith's death is attributed to "Missouri mobs" without mention of Illinois mobs (155); and Susa Young Gates is called a "polygamous wife and businesswoman," when in fact she was married monogamously to her second husband and was mostly a journalist, writer, and editor.

In other places, the analysis is thoughtful and professional. Harline has done her best to read and evaluate these writings carefully and sympathetically. She has included the analysis of prominent historians of polygamy, gender, and culture. She has pulled out nuances and personal elements and has tried to understand these women across their varied experiences. Her narrative is often colorful and humorous, with

lines like “Their dysfunctional threesome limped along” (65), which describes the struggling marriage of one family. She grapples with the difference between the public support of polygamy and the private sorrow in living it, offering great sentences like “Women who wrote from the margins of official discourse could use their diaries as a way to ‘talk back’ to their culture” (67).

It is impossible to write an objective history of Mormon plural marriage. Harline admits her own preconceived aversion toward polygamy, but she attempted this project to honestly try to understand the women who chose the practice. And in the end, she recognizes that these stories represent overwhelmingly her “negative findings” (200). Indeed, it is hard to get past the fact that Harline has included elements of disappointment, devastating heartache, loneliness, poverty, abandonment, displacement, and even neglect and abuse in almost every account. For those who wonder if these women should *not* be considered a representative sample of Mormon polygamists wives, then what would be? Almost to a woman, these wives also desperately wanted and loved their children and ultimately justified their experiences through the joys of motherhood (34). And so, Harline sees these suffering women as typical but also admits the complexity of pinning down a one-size-fits-all approach. These marriages were “not just one thing but an entire spectrum of north and south, horizontal and vertical, far and near, early and late, old and young, pleasure and pain, substance and poverty, compatibility and disappointment, children and illness, respect and disregard, companionship and loneliness, regret and gratitude” (199).

While *Polygamous Wives* might be interpreted as an indictment of Mormon polygamy, Harline does admire their sacrifices, and she hopes that today “the polygamous wives who lived it will take a more prominent place in the Mormon imagination—after all, they did much to lay a foundation for the modern Church” (215).

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