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Christine Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom: Mormons and Polygamy in American Political Culture, 1852-1890*

Reviewed by Colleen McDannell

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complicating that story by demonstrating the varied motives that drove Hamblin and his LDS superiors and by pointing out that most of these missionary efforts failed by nearly any measure. Once the Indians realized the Mormons would not help them in their wars with other Indians and that the Mormons wanted and would take their water, relationships ended. The results, Compton says, were inevitable. In the end, he concludes that “all an Indian missionary could do would be to help both Indians and white settlers adjust to the process in a human and non-violent way.” Again, I wanted Compton to step out from the safe position of using his sources to report—that is, providing his readers with more analysis of why things happened the way they did. In this way, readers can better understand how this very interesting character that Compton carefully details for us might have mattered in the past and into the present, a useful goal for all historians.

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Christine Talbot. *A Foreign Kingdom: Mormons and Polygamy in American Political Culture, 1852–1890*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Colleen McDannell

WILL WE EVER GET ENOUGH OF POLYGAMY? Just as the textual Book of Mormon is now eternally tied to the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, so the television show *Big Love*, fundamentalist Mormons, and the controversies over gay marriage lead us back to nineteenth-century polygamy. Keeping attention on alternative family patterns means Latter-day Saint history will always be a part of the cultural discussion. Christine Talbot’s *A Foreign Kingdom* is a masterful addition to that conversation.

Mormon polygamy has been approached in a variety of ways—from the historical surveys of B. Carmon Hardy and Richard S. Van Wagoner to the legal studies of Sarah Barringer Gordon to the careful explorations of everyday life by Jesse L. Embry and Kathryn M. Daynes. Talbot builds on this literature by asking her readers to step back from the lived worlds of polygamists and into the constructed worlds of those nineteenth-century Americans who thought about polygamy. The goal of *A Foreign Kingdom* is not to tell us about polygamists but rather to use polygamists to tell us about citizenship. In this way Talbot's study fits well with J. Spencer Fluhman's "*A Peculiar People*," which uses anti-Mormonism to understand the construction of categories of religion in the nineteenth century.¹ Both studies use the history of a small group of Americans—Mormons—to better understand wider concepts held by many Americans.

Talbot clearly lays out her argument in the introduction: Polygamy destabilized the public/private divide in ways that restricted Mormon access to American citizenship. Only with the proper relationship established between the public and private could people qualify for "membership in the American body politic" (p. 3). From the anti-Mormon perspective, Mormons could not be citizens because their homes were so entangled in theocratic politics that they had no space to develop an individual, independent conscience. Talbot illustrates how Mormonism and representations of Mormonism "denaturalized" family and citizenship (p. 161). This blurring of the "natural" divide between public and private, male and female, and church and individual by Mormons provoked others to reaffirm and reassert the distinction between social realms. The bulk of the book is taken up in carefully laying out the evidence that supports this argument.

After a quick summary of LDS history and thought, Talbot starts by describing the Mormon rejection of an inward-looking, romance-driven nuclear family and its preference for an extended kinship system modeled after the Old Testament. For Mormons, polygamy provided the multiple kin connections and the personal sacrifice that enabled religious progression to occur. Female suffrage, which Utah women

1. J. Spencer Fluhman, "*A Peculiar People*": *Anti-Mormons and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

gained in 1870, also worked to diminish the difference between what men did and what women did. Talbot points out that the reality of an anti-romantic family life was not easily practiced and that in their private writings many polygamist wives articulated the strain that this nonconventional family life caused them. It is here, when the ideal takes a backseat to the real, that one wonders if the erasure of the private in Mormon households actually did take place in ways different from that of non-Mormons. It is easy to accept Talbot's argument when we assume that Mormonism (and Victorianism) worked the way that it was supposed to work.

A Foreign Kingdom is strongest when it is analyzing representations, especially anti-Mormon fiction. Through fiction, anti-Mormons imagined a Mormon family devoid of romantic love, sentimentality, and attachment to domesticity. The family was the foundation of the nation, and the polygamist family was a disordered, chaotic, disharmonious mess. How could citizens be raised in such a household? From the perspective of mainstream Americans, it was clear that a public, national culture could not be created without private attachments. Talbot uses architecture and now-familiar anti-Mormon cartoons to drive home her point that Protestants believed that civic virtue required domestic unity, which could not be achieved by Latter-day Saints because outside influences (religion, politics) had polluted the home circle.

Although Talbot briefly mentions a parallel in anti-Catholicism (pp. 86–87), this connection could have been made stronger. It not only was the celibate priest and nun who threatened the notion of a natural family structure, it was the immigrant family whose multiple children acted like adults: working, cussing, and staying out of school. In the later nineteenth century, Progressive Era reforms were directed at many subcultures—from Native Americans to Italians—that espoused alternative family structures.

In her chapter “Consent, Contract, and Citizenship,” Talbot reflects on another “defect” that Mormons shared with Catholics, that of misplaced authority. Here, in a highly original argument, she illustrates how the marital contract prepared individuals for the social contract, which in turn made them citizens. Polygamy and theocracy blended into one

another because both deprived individuals of their right to independent consent—women because they were not free to regulate their marriages and men because their church stopped them from freely giving political consent. For anti-Mormons, it was impossible to imagine that anyone would ever freely consent to either the Latter-day Saint religion or to its social practices. In general, this is an observation that could be applied to the full history of American religions—how could any thinking person be a Catholic, a Jehovah’s Witness, a Hare Krishna? Obviously, weak individuals are either hypnotized (Mormons) or brainwashed (Hare Krishnas). Talbot’s demonstration of how this works with Mormons helps us see how the anti-cult movement also used this strategy when its advocates argued that totalitarian “cults” rendered (often through violence) adults into children who could no longer be thought of as consenting citizens. Mormonism established female servitude, making women variously prostitutes or slaves. While other scholars have also made this observation, Talbot’s unique contribution is to stress its connection to disenfranchised citizenship.

The construction, however, was not simply about Mormons. What also was going on was a sleight-of-hand to present Protestant women as freely consenting adults, when they were not. The slave/prostitute Mormon woman meant that the Protestant woman—by definition—had rights and freedoms through her revered domestic position. It was her position in an ordered home, not simply her existence as an adult, by which she gained citizenship. And therefore the exercise of that citizenship would better be expressed through the head of the home, the male. This logic made even more sense after Latter-day Saint women began voting. As the Mormon patriarch was thought to be a despotic ruler, so the non-Mormon husband was a loving, companionate husband. If the “oneness” (p. 125) of Mormonism—the collapsing of the private and public, church and state, individual and leader—was fundamentally the problem, then separation must be the goal. While Talbot sticks to describing the Mormon side of the binary, it is easy to see how anti-Mormonism props up a shaky Victorian Protestantism threatened by increased immigration, calls for women’s rights, and the enfranchisement of male African Americans.

Talbot's chapter "Race, Class, and Contagion" tackles the problem of how and why Mormons, almost all from Western European stock, came to be thought of as an evolutionary-regressive subrace. Not surprisingly, Mormons are represented as Muslims not simply because they are polygamists but because they lack liberty of conscience, exist in an imperial despotic state, and were racially "black." Talbot does not dwell on the racial construction but rather uses it as evidence for understanding how Yankee Mormons became essentially a foreign theocracy (p. 141) and thus a "contagion" to the healthy American body politic (p. 142). Here the problem is not miscegenation but rather the monstrous pollution that will inevitably "eat away at the very moorings of the Republic" (p. 145).

With such a complete attack on Mormonism—where "real" Mormonism and "imagined" Mormonism were indistinguishable—it almost seems that the anti-Mormon legislation of the late nineteenth century was superfluous. However, once it was established through cultural means that Mormons were not citizens, it would be simple to rid them of political, economic, and religious rights through legislation. In each chapter, Talbot presents Latter-day Saint rebuttals, but in the penultimate chapter she more fully describes Mormon resistance. Latter-day Saints recognized that legislation was an attack not simply on individuals but on their "church as a body" (p. 153). They called upon the Constitution to defend their religious rights and to limit the role of federal officials. They designed strategies to fight in the court. They even turned the rhetoric used against them, of their being "un-American" and "anti-Republican," towards their tormentors. And, of course, the Saints willingly went to prison, perjured themselves, and struggled "on the underground" to defend their right to live as they wanted. Nothing, however, worked. In the end, Latter-day Saint leaders exchanged their nontraditional marital practices for access to citizenship and statehood (p. 159). The theological, economic, and social accommodation that would be made in the twentieth century is the story for another book.

In her conclusion, Talbot safely sticks to repeating her argument and summarizing her chapters. Only in the last few paragraphs does she indulge in a few thoughts about the contemporary world. "Ironically," she writes, "the LDS church has become one of the staunchest

defenders of normative, monogamous marriage between a man and a woman” (p. 164). But is it ironic? Talbot has provided a compelling case of how citizenship is given only to those who worship in a certain way, have families in a certain way, and structure their economies in certain ways. But to what extent does contemporary America actually allow for deviation from certain social norms, such as those pertaining to family structure? Americans’ growing support of gay marriage does not necessarily spring from contemporary acceptance of fundamental social difference, but is at least partly due to same-sex marriage advocates’ effort spent pointing out that their families are just like “our” families. Like other marginalized communities, Mormons understand in an intimate and real way the pain of being outside the norm. Given the history that Christine Talbot so forcefully portrays, it is perhaps no irony that Latter-day Saint leaders convey a vision for family life that aligns squarely with what a large share of Americans imagine as normal.

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Craig Harline. *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Randall Balmer

THE FORMULA SOUNDS BEGUILINGLY SIMPLE, yet it is so difficult to execute. Take an unusually detailed and heartrending seventeenth-century diary about a religious convert and juxtapose it with a twenty-first-century conversion narrative that also entails the discovery of sexual identity. Add to that the sure hand of a narrator who understands both historical context and the dynamics of conversion, and you have a truly extraordinary book.