

Review of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017, 484 pp., ISBN 9780307594907

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Historians do not typically associate women's rights with polygamy – if anything, they view polygamy as inherently bad for women and their rights. Yet, in continuing her approach of unearthing the intimate lives of so-called misbehaved women, Pulitzer Prize and Bancroft Prize winning historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich disrupts these ideas by focusing on the earliest days of Mormonism's experimentation with polygamy. For example, Ulrich reminds readers that the Utah territory approved women's right to vote in 1870 (a half-century before the federal constitutional amendment). In an incredibly ambitious project, Ulrich gathers an impressive array of diaries, journals, letters, minute-books, scrapbooks, quilts, and other materials left by first-generation Latter-day Saints to tell the story of women and men who broke with the marital conventions of 19th-century America. Ulrich attempts to answer the questions of why people (particularly women) were attracted to this peculiar marital system, how the earliest Mormon polygamists attempted to make this strange arrangement work, and how plural marriage contributed to the enfranchisement of numerous women. *A House Full of Females* explores these tensions, detailing the support of Mormon women for both suffrage and polygamy.

Given that *A House Full of Females* is designed for a mass-market, non-Mormon lay readership, the bulk of its content shall not be new for people well-versed in the history of Mormonism. But for scholars of Mormonism and religion in 19th-century America, Ulrich's emphasis on women actors within early Mormonism does present a new and needed perspective. While Mormon studies remains a small but rapidly expanding field, the majority of texts related to Mormon polygamy has centered on Joseph Smith's plural wives and the difficulties his 1843 revelation concerning plural marriage had on the male leaders of the church. Emma Smith's (Joseph's first wife) complex and conflicted relationship with polygamy has received a fair amount of attention, as have the legal battles faced by the Latter-day Saints after the settlement of the Utah region, but seldom have women been the center of these stories.

In contrast, *A House of Females* focuses on the Mormon women involved in polygamy, particularly those who transitioned from monogamy to polygamy,

offering a much-needed additional view in studying the origins of Mormon polygamy. Additionally, Ulrich avoids retrospective autobiographies or the reflective testimonies, focusing on the first-hand accounts and testimonies of these women, thus emphasizing the uncertainty these people faced in adopting a countercultural, experimental, and heterodox marital practice. In studying polygamy from this intimate perspective, Ulrich chronicles these women's hopes and fears, their faith and their doubts, as well as their successes and struggles.

Similar to Kathryn M. Daynes's *More Wives Than One* (2001) and Paula Kelly Harline's *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club* (2014), Ulrich details the internal lives of the women involved in the earliest days of plural marriage. She describes everything from their day-to-day chores, their communal living arrangements, and their household politics to their own justifications and support of polygamy. Some of these plural marriages produced long lasting friendships between wives, others bitter rivalries. For some, polygamy was a liberating force, providing a cooperative network which empowered women to share domestic responsibilities. Others considered it a way to flee abusive husbands, and others even viewed it as a pathway to economic security. For some women, however, it was a deeply depressing and traumatic experience. Ulrich holds these differing experiences in tension, particularly through the writings of Wilford Woodruff (one of Smith's early followers and later the fourth president of the LDS Church) and Phebe Cariter (Woodruff's first wife).

The early chapters of the book focus on what drew so many women and men from across New England, particularly married couples like the Woodruffs, to Mormonism in the first place, long before the doctrine of plural marriage was revealed. The second chapter details the stress international missionary work to England placed on marriages and family units and explains the different ways wives supported one another despite having absent husbands. The formation of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo in 1842, an organization designed to support women in works of charity and education, is the subject of the third chapter, noting its important contribution to female driven social work. Chapter 4 turns to the introduction of polygamy within Nauvoo, and its differing reactions and effects on the women who were invited to partake in its practice.

Chapters 5 to eight centers on the challenges faced in relocating the LDS to the Salt Lake Valley in the Utah territory after the unexpected assassination of Joseph Smith. These chapters concentrate not only on the hardship faced by the Mormon pioneers due to difficult weather and limited supplies, but also martial challenges that polygamy produced given their uncertainty in how to make such an arrangement practically work. The later chapters focus on the settlement of provisional state of 'Deseret,' the construction of Salt Lake City and other Mormon provinces, the intense military standoffs between the LDS and the US government, missionary trips across the globe, but most importantly the public and formal sanction of plural marriage to the LDS Church and the world in 1852. This would normalize the practice of polygamy amongst the Mormons, enabling more experimenting with how polygamy could function within LDS communities but engender fierce opposition from the US government. The book concludes with the reorganizing of the Female Relief Society under the direction of Brigham Young, with women being encouraged to maintain their charitable works but instructed to stop anointing the sick, thus maintaining a clear distinction between their efforts and those of the male only priesthood.

Key to Ulrich's book is the gathering of women. Because of early Mormonism's belief in the literal gathering of Zion in preparation of the Second Coming, Mormon women reflected this gathering practice in their unique ways. Women gathered together, often without the supervision or approval of their husbands and male church leaders, to study and pray together. Due to the absence of women on missionary trips, women often had to be independent of male figures but interdependent on their fellow Mormon women and sister-wives. The Female Relief Society enabled women to combine their efforts in domestic labor (particularly sewing), but also served as a vehicle to empower educational and philanthropic activities. Even on the trail to the Salt Lake Valley, Mormon pioneer women gathered together to support and sustain one another. One of the most provocative (although minor) features of Ulrich's reconstruction of women in early Mormonism is their use of supposedly men-only priesthood blessings and charismatic spiritual gifts throughout this time period.

A House Full of Females is a fascinating and engaging read. Ulrich offers a rich and complex account of a deeply perplexing experience within American religious history, one in which readers will undoubtedly appreciate her nuance. Given Ulrich's personal family relationship with polygamy (her grandparents and great-grandparents were polygamists), one can appreciate the paradox polygamy poses to her as a historian, feminist, and faithful Latter-day Saint. If readers are looking for *A House Full of Females* to solve this paradox, they will be disappointed, but those hoping to further understand what this experience was like will be deeply satisfied. By emphasizing the experimental qualities of early Mormon polygamy, Ulrich tells human stories about the women and men involved within this practice. Ulrich remains true to her goal: first and foremost, she empowers these women to speak for themselves. If the past should be treated as a foreign country, Ulrich's readable narrative and historical reconstruction will enable readers to treat Mormon polygamy with less exoticism and eroticism.