

Polygamy Examined

Mormon Polygamy: A History by Richard S. Van Wagoner (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 307 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by Linda King Newell, co-editor *DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT*, co-author of *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, Richard S. Van Wagoner correctly reminds us that even though "many Mormons are descendants of polygamists, most Church members are often no better informed on the critical aspects of their polygamist past than non-Mormons." Even though the various archives throughout Mormonism are rich with primary resources on this topic, "there has been no comprehensive study of polygamy from its earliest stirrings in the 1830's to its current practice among Mormon Fundamentalists [p. vi]." He intends his work to fill this void and, despite some problems of sources and interpretations, admirably succeeds.

Mormon Polygamy is the first book-length narrative history of this controversial aspect of Mormon belief and practice to come from within the Church membership. It thus replaces the earlier, edged works produced by crusading anti-Mormons or disaffected members. But *Mormon Polygamy* is by no means an apologia. Instead, it is a hard-hitting factual narrative, and the author leaves no doubt that the practice, even at its best, was difficult. Van Wagoner's narrative focus on administra-

tive history precludes any in-depth sociological or theological discussion of how polygamy came to be or what polygamous households were like (although chapter nine does give a fascinating overview of various views of living the principle, mostly by women). It reviews various outside sources that may have influenced Joseph Smith's ideas, looks at Mormon polygamy from its Kirtland roots to its abolition as a Church-sanctioned practice in this century, and finally follows it into today's illegal fundamentalist cults.

It documents well the conflicting personal views of many who practiced polygamy — their public support and their private hurt. Some readers will surely criticize what appears to be the author's sometimes indiscriminate use of early anti-Mormon sources. But his use of more "legitimate" diaries, journals, and letters tells a surprisingly similar story. Particularly well done are the chapters covering the clash between the Church and the federal government as Church leaders lobbied for statehood. The book outlines the struggles of John Bernhisel and later Reed Smoot working in the nation's capitol to establish Mormon respectability in the eyes of their anti-polygamy fellow legislators. At home, however, public statements and promises to the government were privately disregarded as the practice continued, sanctioned by Church leaders many years after the 1890 Manifesto.

The chapters documenting the Church's ultimate turning away from polygamy, the initiation of excommunication to punish

participants, and the rise of groups who relinquished Church membership to continue the practice are also absorbing.

While *Mormon Polygamy's* ability to cover more than 150 years of history in only 300 pages is a strength, such compression also has weaknesses. One is the author's use of an admittedly impressive range of sources without providing criteria for determining what is reliable and what may be malicious gossip. For example, a Mrs. Alexander's undated statement (p. 5) repeats second-hand information from Polly Beswick linking Joseph with Vienna Jacques in the mid-1830's but failing to mention that Polly was known as a gossip. Another example is the Martin Harris statement on the same page connecting Joseph Smith with a "servant girl." The author's citation is a secondary source with no page, no publisher, no date, and, I might add, no way for the reader to evaluate it. Even though the author tells us in the preface that he "tried to weigh carefully the bias of each source," he often does not pass his insights on to the reader.

Occasionally Van Wagoner oversteps the bounds of his evidence to make a point. From Anthon H. Lund's journal entry for 10 January 1900, for example, he takes a statement attributed to Apostle John Henry Smith — "President Young once proposed that we marry but one wife" (p. 249, 7) and concludes, on that evidence, that during 1876 Brigham Young "apparently first began advising Church leaders to marry only one wife" (p. 113).

I sometimes found the book's organization distracting and confusing. The chapters dealing with John C. Bennett are particularly hard to follow, partly because they detour from the chronological format by backtracking. Van Wagoner did try to avoid this problem, for he states in the preface: "To prevent digression from the basic chronological sequence I saved the academic discussion of controversial sources for the endnotes section" (p. i). In many places in those chapters, as well as others, the flow and clarity of the narrative would

have been enhanced, and confusion or misrepresentation avoided, had the author integrated into the text much of the material relegated to the endnotes.

A few readers, no doubt, will be bothered by some of the conclusions, both stated and implied, in *Mormon Polygamy*. For example, the first two chapters argue that although Joseph Smith's introduction to polygamy came as early as 1831 when he and Oliver Cowdery were working on what is now called the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, plural marriage actually began in Nauvoo when Joseph Bates Noble performed a ceremony for his sister-in-law Louisa Beaman and Joseph Smith on 5 April 1841. The book implies that earlier documented relationships Joseph had with women such as Fanny Alger in Kirtland were extra-marital rather than polygamous. While the Beaman marriage may be the first plural marriage for which there is a witness and a reliable record, it does not necessarily follow that other pre-Nauvoo associations were not also plural marriages, whether Joseph performed the ceremony himself or whether they were done by a third party lost to the historical record.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the history of Mormon polygamy is the deception that accompanied it from its beginnings to its present fundamentalist form. There is no easy or convincing way to explain this away, and Van Wagoner doesn't try. Instead he carefully documents the deception from Nauvoo to the present, leading us to question: Where is the hand of God in a practice that spawned so much deception, dishonesty, and pain? The author does not attempt to answer that either.

Those who don't want to confront the issues raised by such a history of plural marriage may insist that such examinations of historical fact are irrelevant — or even dangerous — to religious faith. But polygamy is part of our history, an honored and legitimate part, despite its distortions and excesses. Flannery O'Conner, Catholic novelist, speaks most directly to those