

Living the Principle

Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle by Jessie L. Embry. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), xvii, 238 pp., \$19.95.

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UNFORTUNATELY BUT UNDENIABLY, the practice of polygamy is closely associated in the popular mind with the Mormons, fascinating both scholars and casual readers, generating a plethora of anecdotal studies, and resulting in many oversimplifications and stereotypes. For this reason, the University of Utah is to be commended for choosing Jessie Embry's important study to begin its new series, *Publications in Mormon Studies*. Embry's monograph describes the lifestyles of Mormon families living the principle of celestial (plural) marriage, using recollections of plural family members interviewed in the 1930s, 1970s, and 1980s. The bulk of these interviews with descendants from plural marriages contracted before 1904 were conducted by the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University. As the project developed, Embry included interviews with children from monogamous families of the same period for purposes of comparison.

According to Embry, the "practice of polygamy is essential to fully understand Mormonism historically," and "complete insight into the practice requires that we study the 'motives, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences' of those who were part of these families" (p. xvi). Embry carefully

examines previous writings about polygamy and tests their validity using both the memories of her interviewees and simple quantification of their responses. This approach, in fact, is one of the most important contributions of the book. By carefully reviewing all the major literature, Embry identifies most of the important historiographic questions and evidence about polygamy. Her chapter headings are a skeletal construct of the topic, ranging from the demographic and geographic characteristics to the motivations underlying polygamy.

Embry is at her best when she identifies unanswered questions and areas needing further research. For example, her research sample revealed that between 40 and 50 percent of polygamous husbands and wives were born in Mormon settlements in Utah and southern Idaho and that less than one-third were born outside the United States, a finding at variance with two important earlier studies conducted by Nels Anderson and Gene Pace. She was quick to note that further research was needed to examine the question of "the relationship between immigrants and polygamy" (p. 32) and concluded that although the "stereotype of immigrant women being funneled into polygamy is not supported statistically, anecdotal evidence shows some men married immigrants . . . [to solve] dual problems of economic support and assimilation" (p. 68).

In some cases, the interviews confirmed what was already known, for example that most polygamous husbands (60 percent) married only one plural wife; that 25 percent of the time plural wives were actual sisters; that men tended to choose women

as plural wives who were as old as their first wife when she married, even though the husband was now ten to thirty years older.

Since the interviews dealt with a later period of polygamy, the impact of anti-polygamy laws is apparent. The practice of polygamy among the Latter-day Saints was affected by the interplay of the faithful who practiced it and the non-Mormon opposition. Embry notes that had the interviews been conducted a generation earlier, they would have captured the memories of those who lived "the principle" before the intense opposition began. She speculates that "from an anthropological viewpoint" it was unfortunate that plural marriage did not continue without harassment so that differing responses of later generations in polygamy could be charted (p. 49).

Embry's central thesis is that "Mormon polygamous families were not much different than Mormon monogamous families and other non-Mormon families of the same era" (p. xiv). However, this thesis is not completely convincing, in part because of the admitted limitations of the methodology. Most interviews were the product of "adult memories of childhood." Embry herself acknowledges that children would not be privy to information about parents' sexual and economic activities and, moreover, would tend to remember the most positive elements of their childhood experiences. These adult informants also carried with them contemporary ideals of marriage and a vested interest, which might have colored or distorted their family memories. It is also disconcerting to find that over one-half of the informants initially refused to be interviewed (p. xv). With these potential difficulties, I wonder why Embry did not attempt the types of analyses required of historians utilizing slave narratives (see Woodward 1974). Additional subtlety may have been added to the investigation if the interviews gathered in the 1930s (by James Hulett and Kimball Young) had been compared with the more

recent (1980s) recollections. Did the different groups show evidence of discernible differences in models of ideal family life or moral strictures?

Embry too hastily dismisses the question of how polygamous Mormons reconciled romantic love with the necessity for shared marital love. She accurately concludes that the decision to enter polygamy, and the willingness to make adjustments to the challenges of such a life, were primarily determined by religious conviction. She adds, however, that "plural marriages resulted from courtships that were not that much different from other romantic involvements in the nineteenth century. The modern perception of men and women marrying for love was rarely mentioned in marriage manuals" (p. 66). This contention, that romantic love as a prerequisite for marriage is a modern concept, is not born out by recent study. While early Americans distrusted romantic love, by the middle of the nineteenth century the popular culture was "preoccupied with romantic love," and falling in love had become almost compulsory (Rothman 1984, 103-5). Despite Embry's efforts here, the case is not closed. The issue of dissonance created by plural marriage in the nineteenth century "age of romance" is still an open question, one that historians will continue to explore using anecdotal evidence.

The least compelling case in this book is Embry's conclusion that there were no differences in the economic roles of polygamous and monogamous wives. The chart Embry provides comparing both groups reveals a very small sample of monogamous women. A change of only three outside salaried monogamous women (widows) would have resulted in a great percentage difference (p. 96). Besides, are widows and outside salaried polygamous wives interchangeable? Furthermore, Embry's figures reveal a significant increase in the use of "home skills" by polygamous wives to raise money. Added to Embry's later observation that "polygamous homes were usually separate, each wife . . . responsible