

## Twilight and Dawn: Turn-of-the-Century Mormonism

Lu Ann Faylor Snyder and Phillip A. Snyder, eds. *Post-Manifesto Polygamy: The 1899–1904 Correspondence of Helen, Owen, and Avery Woodruff*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009. 196 pp. Notes, illustrations, index. Hardback: \$34.95; ISBN: 0–874–217–393

*Reviewed by Stephen C. Taysom*

HBO's popular *Big Love* series and David Ebershoff's bestselling novel *The 19th Wife* (New York: Random House, 2008), stand as evidence that polygamy remains a perennial topic of interest for Mormons and non-Mormons alike. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that scholarly presses with heavily Mormon-themed catalogues continue to publish serious work on the subject. Utah State University Press's excellent LIFE WRITINGS OF FRONTIER WOMEN series has once again offered a sterling piece of documentary history with the publication of *Post-Manifesto Polygamy: The 1899–1904 Correspondence of Helen, Owen, and Avery Woodruff*, edited by Lu Ann Faylor Snyder and Phillip A. Snyder. Historians of Mormonism such as D. Michael Quinn and B. Carmon Hardy have been documenting high-level Church involvement in post-Manifesto polygamy for decades, but this volume is a unique glimpse into the intimate workings of one such relationship.

Owen Woodruff, the youngest son of LDS Church President Wilford Woodruff and Woodruff's third wife, Emma Smith Woodruff, became an apostle in 1897, at age twenty-four. In January of 1901, nearly eleven years after Owen's father had issued the Manifesto withdrawing official support for new plural marriages, twenty-eight-year-old Owen married eighteen-year-old Eliza Avery Clark as a plural wife. Owen and his first wife, Helen May Winters, died in Mexico of smallpox in 1904 after refusing to be vaccinated. *Post-Manifesto Polygamy* contains the correspondence between Owen and Avery as well as that between Owen and Helen. Supplementing these eighty-five letters are several short autobiographical excerpts

written by Avery and other brief journal entries written by people closely connected to the Woodruffs.

Although the volume is slim, its material opens a window into a strikingly wide variety of issues important to the study of turn-of-the-century Mormonism. The issue of plural marriage, while representing the main subject with which the materials are concerned, is far from the only topic of interest. Scholars working in the study of religion broadly construed, as well as those interested in the dynamics of gender and family relationships, and social hierarchies in the American West will find this book enlightening. Sharpening the contemporary appeal of the collection is the persistent subtext regarding the proper role of the government in public health issues—specifically the question of vaccination.

Before exploring the letters themselves, a word or two about the introduction and annotation is in order. The introduction to the collection is generally strong and admirably performs the tasks of describing and contextualizing the primary materials while resisting the temptation to burden the reader with heavy-handed interpretations that would be more appropriate for a monograph. The editors' judicious use of excerpts from Owen's journals to fill gaps in the correspondence lends particular strength to the introduction. At fifty pages, however, the introduction could probably have been shortened without blunting its impact.

Similarly, the annotation is generally well executed, with ample descriptions of persons and events that appear in the letters and journals. Only once or twice was I left wishing for more explanation than the notes provided. USU Press, no doubt due to the high cost of providing footnotes on the same page as the main text, has chosen to place the notes at the end of the book. For documentary collections such as this in which the reader will likely need to refer frequently to the annotations, the arrangement is inconvenient.

The documentary section of the book opens with an account of the "courtship" of Owen and Avery. According to Avery's reminiscence late in life, she was struck by Owen's charisma when he visited a Church conference in Wyoming where she was living with her family. As the apostle assigned to oversee settlement in the Big Horn Basin, Owen's presence in 1899 was not unusual. However, before this particular trip, Owen, according to his journal, received

permission from Joseph F. Smith, then second counselor in the First Presidency, to find a plural wife. Following a tradition dating back to the time of Joseph Smith, Owen first broached the issue with Avery's father who expressed shock at this "new polygamy." According to Avery's later reminiscence, her father questioned Owen about the legitimacy of such unions in the eyes of the Church. Owen responded by pointing out that "several of the brethren in high positions had been advised to take plural wives" (50). Satisfied that Owen's request was not a rogue maneuver, Avery's father presented the proposal to his young daughter. Avery reported feeling "frightened and puzzled" but decided to "keep on praying" to determine "what is right" (51). Avery's decision to accept Owen's offer of marriage followed in short order.

From the time of Owen's and Avery's engagement until the end of Owen's life in 1904, a concern with secrecy wove itself throughout their correspondence. Owen counseled Avery before the marriage to "be careful" and "true as steel" (52). On another occasion, Avery reported to Owen that she would "keep all secrets," "guard my words and actions," and that she had "burned all letters and will continue to do so, although it seems like destroying valuable literature" (61). Owen and Avery referred to one another by code names in their letters and employed a code system for the names of places that Owen visited. Third parties mentioned in the letters also came in for the code-name treatment. Joseph F. Smith, for example, is referred to in several letters as "President Roosevelt." Although the need for discretion on the subject of plural marriage had long been the case when dealing with the prying eyes of government officials, post-Manifesto unions required that secrets be kept from other Mormons. A letter to Owen from his first wife, Helen, indicates the difficulty of keeping plural marriages secret, especially when the subject remained a popular topic of conversation among Latter-day Saints. Helen wrote that, while she was resolved to "not speak about" plural marriage in the months leading up to Owen's marriage to Avery, "invariably someone starts it up." She also reported somewhat nervously that Owen's mother "surmises something" but "doesn't ask any questions" (56). In 1901, Avery proudly reported to Owen that she was able to avoid detection as a plural wife in a particular situation because "few questions were asked me and all stories

connected very well”(73). The flavor of post-Manifesto polygamy that one takes away from exchanges such as this is reminiscent of the circumstances surrounding the introduction of plural marriage in Nauvoo in the 1840s.

The correspondence also highlights the tensions inherent in polygamous relationships, and the materials are replete with references, at least from Avery and Helen, to the sanctifying nature of self-sacrifice, the need to subdue individual desires, and pride in the service of what they clearly believed to be a heavenly ideal. As one might expect, the two women relate to their shared husband in very different ways. Helen frequently teases Owen and occasionally chastises him for his failure to write with greater frequency. Avery, by contrast, is writing to a man ten years her senior—a man she barely knows—and her letters are predictably deferential and self-deprecating. In this respect, Owen’s family life is very similar to polygamous relationships throughout the nineteenth century. The need for secrecy, however, placed additional strains on the family. Avery, in particular, faced a difficult task. She never lived with Owen for any significant period of time, saw him only on rare occasions, and in his absence had to keep up the illusion of her status as a single woman.

As useful as the book is in providing a fine-grained look at the experiential dimension of plural marriages in the ambiguous years after the Manifesto, it is important to note, even if only briefly, the many areas in which the book ranges beyond the issue of plural marriage. The Mormonism that dominated the lives of Owen, Helen, and Avery was a peculiar mix of what we would now recognize as “early” Mormonism and “modern” Mormonism. For example, Avery wrote that she “enjoyed going through the Temple and will go again if I can.” Mormons today will immediately identify with such a sentiment, but the idea of repeatedly visiting the temple for spiritual contemplation was a relatively new concept in the early 1900s. At other times, the correspondence bears witness to the final glimpses of some early practices. Helen joyfully recorded the fact that she had received from Zina D. H. Young and Bathsheba Smith a “lovely blessing [in which] they made me some beautiful promises” (55). Women performing blessings through the laying on of hands, like the communal chalice from which Avery drank her sacramental water and the polyg-

amous unions that defined the lives of the Woodruff family, would soon disappear completely from Mormon practice and nearly completely from Mormon consciousness.

Few documentary collections have captured the essence of the lived religious experience of turn-of-the-century Mormonism as deftly and adroitly as *Post-Manifesto Polygamy*. The richness and texture of this ambiguous and understudied period in Mormon history shine through on every page of this collection. Phillip A. Snyder and the late Lu Ann Faylor Snyder have done a commendable job of shepherding this important assembly of documents onto library shelves and into the hands of many interested readers.

### **Mormon Pulp with a Reading Group Guide**

David Ebershoff. *The 19th Wife: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 2008. 523 pp. Paperback: \$15.00; ISBN: 978-0-81297-415-7

*Reviewed by Mark Decker*

Polygamy and blood atonement, whatever their real-world drawbacks, can make for profitable novels. If Zane Grey were still alive, he might be plotting another sequel to *Riders of the Purple Sage* in hopes of riding the titillation wave created by *Big Love*, Warren Jeffs, and the Yearning for Zion fiasco. Yet shifts in readership that have accompanied the media innovations of the last century have led the descendants of Grey's initial audience to spend much more time looking at flickering screens than at badly printed pages, greatly reducing the market for the kind of pulpy tales Grey wrote. It is not hard to imagine, however, that real money could be made today by writing fiction about polygamists that would interest book discussion groups. In general, people who join book discussion groups like a good story as much as anybody else, but they don't enjoy overly broad characterization, credulity-straining plot twists, or minstrel-show-derogatory portrayals of maligned or poorly understood ethnic and racial groups. Straight pulp won't do.

David Ebershoff attempts to capture the attention of this lucrative reading demographic in *The 19th Wife* by combining