

they don't fit, a couple of men who can't even get their wrongness right, and one quick-witted young woman who cuts the Gordian knot. At one point Boyd says to Loretta, "I don't get you. How do you become you, living the way you've lived?" 'I'm creative,' she says. 'I'm smart'" (222). If there's a theme in this book more emphatic than the theme of striking out to meet your future head on, it's the theme of being smart. The dumb ones might make it partway down the road, but the smart ones get away, however they can.

Daredevils is a smack-your-lips-with-pleasure kind of read. Every sentence is intact, every image finely balanced with its corresponding action, every scene the only one that could follow the one that came before. It's a must-have. I can't think of anybody (except maybe a die-hard plotless-enigma Beckett fan) who wouldn't be highly entertained and pleasantly excited by this novel. It makes you smarter, more able to meet your future. It keeps you turning pages, not wanting to miss a beat, smiling all the way through. Don't miss it.



A Book Full of Insights

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870*. New York: Knopf, 2017. 512 pp. Hardcover: \$35.00. ISBN: 9780307594907.

Reviewed by Benjamin Park

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is one of the most decorated historians of early America. Her book *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990) earned her both the Bancroft and Pulitzer prizes, as well as a MacArthur Fellowship.

Her corpus of work epitomized a social history movement of the late-twentieth century that not only integrated women's voices into traditional narratives, but also revised those very narratives by demonstrating the ideas, actions, and allegiances of the forgotten half of America's story. At the same time, Ulrich was part of another crucial cultural movement: the resurgence of Mormon feminism during the 1970s, as illustrated by the resurrected *Exponent* and the appearance of *Dialogue's* "pink issue." It is fitting that these two worlds converged with her most recent monograph, *A House Full of Females*, which is a monumental contribution to Mormon, gender, and American historiography.

The subtitle for the book, however, is somewhat misleading: *Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism*. Though the introduction and final chapter that frame the text indeed focus on Mormon women arguing for "women's rights," that particular theme is much subtler and, at times, subservient throughout the story. Ulrich is, of course, arguing that the notion of "rights" is much more malleable than traditional, male-centric definitions, but that tension is never explicitly investigated. And while the jolting paradox of the title—how could women who participated in polygamy simultaneously believe in women's rights?—is readily apparent, "rights" seems a bit too restrictive for what Ulrich is doing. Further, plural marriage is not always the sole focus of the volume: the early chapters that precede Joseph Smith's introduction of the practice, as well as the later chapters that focus on male missionaries abroad and missionary wives at home, are as interested in monogamous relationships as they are polygamous ones. This is to say, the subtitle of *A House Full of Females* sells the volume's importance short: more than a history of polygamy and women's rights, this is a revisionist social history of Mormonism between Kirtland and 1870, as seen through the eyes of the women who lived it. Ulrich is asking a provocative question: what would the history of Mormonism during the tenure of its first two prophets, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, look like if its leading men were re-cast as *supporting* actors?

The answer to that question is one that the Mormon history community has needed for quite some time. Though many of the events and circumstances are well known to historians of Mormonism, they will appear new given that they are here told almost solely through the vantage point of women. Even figures like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young are seen through the lens of Zina D. H. Young and Patty Sessions. This should disrupt traditional narratives and frameworks. By re-casting seminal moments, some elements of the story (the emotional and physical struggle, the restlessness, the camaraderie) are highlighted, while others (the radicalism, the boldness, the certainty) are subverted. Post-martyrdom Nauvoo appears strikingly different through the eyes of Zina D. H. Young, as does Winter Quarters through the perspective of Patty Sessions and the Utah War through the experience of Phoebe Woodruff. Throughout, the Mormon story takes on a new hue.

Ulrich's tale follows a growing cast of characters as the decades progress and the events climax. The first few chapters focus on Wilford and Phoebe Woodruff and the trials they faced during his many missionary and ecclesiastical duties. Woodruff then remains a constant presence throughout the book even as more women (like Eliza R. Snow, Zina D. H. Young, and Augusta Cobb) take a more prominent role. But men like William Clayton and Hosea Stout retain frequent appearances. It might seem odd for a book focused on women's ideas and experiences to spend so much time on male leaders. And in some ways, it is. But figures like Woodruff, Clayton, and Stout allow Ulrich to focus on two key themes: first, the importance of written records, given these men's notorious reputation as diary keepers; and second, the personal relationships through which plural marriage was lived. Ulrich is not just interested in polygamy as an institution, but rather the entire culture through which it was introduced and lived. The diaries of men and women are consistently blended together to provide a much more comprehensive view of Mormon society.

Most of *A House Full of Females's* chapters focus on one theme, event, or context, along with a concomitant set of players. The chapters on polygamy in Nauvoo are arguably the best accounts of that secretive and tumultuous period, as Ulrich painstakingly reconstructs the fraught nature of polygamy's origins. Men and women struggled to understand the practice's meaning and implementation, as relationships were tested, torn, and reaffirmed. Clayton, like a handful of other Mormon men, yearned to initiate a godly union that simultaneously balanced his sexual desires, need for approval, and penchant for drama. In *Winter Quarters*, Ulrich focuses on the triumvirate of Stout, Sessions, and Mary Richards, whose contrasting perspectives give a sense of the complex yet temporary refuge. During a few years where the center of Mormonism consistently shifted east and west, how did women find a sense of solidarity and community? Once in Utah, Augusta Cobb, a wife of Brigham Young, takes a prominent role as her independent streak is contrasted with other polygamous wives, including those within the Young family. Later chapters explore the creation (and dissolution) of local Relief Societies, missionary trips across the Pacific, as well as the conflict with the United States government. The story climaxes as Mormon women join fellow American suffragists in fighting for women's rights. At every point, there is an awareness of and emphasis on the diversity of opinions and experiences. There was no single model for a Mormon polygamous life.

But in trying to capture so many different viewpoints, the narrative at times becomes disjointed. Ulrich moves from one record-keeper to the next—the chapter on the westward trek features a dozen diarists—while introducing new backgrounds and anxieties all along the way. The reader is prone to get lost. One of the hallmarks of Ulrich's acclaimed book *A Midwife's Tale* was its focus on the tedious yet revealing elements of a singular diarist's life; charting similar analysis from literal houses full of females is a tougher task. Perhaps the book's strongest and most poignant section is chapter 11, which focuses on the lived dynamics of the Woodruff family in the early 1850s. While Ulrich brings in develop-

ments of other leading Mormon families, her ability to focus on one household demonstrates how these broader tensions played out in a particular context.

Besides the book's general narrative, there are two persuasive arguments in *A House Full of Females* that deserve recognition, one explicit and one implicit. The explicit argument concerns the nature of authority as practiced within the Mormon community. While Ulrich acknowledges the strict and at times alarming patriarchal tone of leaders like Brigham Young, she insists that these men emphasized their authority so often because they felt it was threatened. That is, their rhetoric was more representative of their anxiety than it was of their reality. "From the outside," Ulrich explains, everything "appeared to be under Brigham Young's control." But from the inside, "his genius lay in an ability to embrace what he could not command" (290). Throughout Mormonism's first half-century, Mormon women organized, protested, and gathered by their own accord, often leaving men to adapt in response. This more cooperative framework for Mormon participation offers important revisions for the field. As Ulrich summarizes in the book's final pages,

Latter-day Saint women built the Church that claimed their loyalty. They sustained its missionary system, testified to its truths, and enhanced its joyful, performative, and playful elements. . . . Without earnest female converts, Mormonism's meetings would have been less colorful and its revelations less intimate and personal. . . . They gave birth to the children who sustained the kingdom.

Certainly, there could have been no such thing as plural marriage if hundreds of women had not accepted "the principle" and passed it on to new generations. . . . Living their religion, they learned wisdom by the things that they suffered, and when the opportunity came . . . they defended the right to speak for themselves. (387)

One only hopes future works in the field can be similarly colorful.

The second, more subtle argument concerns sources. What historical remnants are left behind, how do these varying artifacts reflect their makers, and how do historians choose which to focus on? Besides

examining diaries and letters, Ulrich emphasizes that historians have overlooked equally revealing sources: the doodles in Wilford Woodruff's diaries, the token Eliza R. Snow gave the Young family, the album kept by Sarah Kimball, the quilts woven by local Relief Societies, and even the Relief Society halls built by female leaders—all these relics were tokens of friendships, relationships, and allegiances that exemplify the communities in which they were created. Dissecting this material is crucial to reconstructing the lives of those outside official written records. The publishers at Knopf are to be commended for allowing so many detailed images and illustrations throughout the text, which brings the stories, anxieties, and lessons to life.

A House Full of Females is a master historical work by a master historian. This is a narrative of the LDS tradition deserved by an age that is focused on inclusion and diversity. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich demonstrates what Mormon history can look like when we integrate women's voices, concerns, and experiences into our larger narratives. And in doing so, she issues a clarion call for how Mormon history should be written in the future.