

Kathryn M. Daynes. *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910.*

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Sarah Barringer Gordon

Any substantive evaluation of Kathryn Daynes's *More Wives Than One* should begin by emphasizing that this is a work of the highest order—Daynes brings originality, talent, and rigor to her work. Her book is likely to be extremely important; it received the Mormon History Association's Best Book Award for 2002. The award is richly deserved: the book includes innovative work in multiple dimensions of a complex and often elusive past.

The book, a study of polygamy in Manti, Utah, from religious, social, and legal perspectives over seven decades, does not simply investigate the laws and religious doctrines that were designed to govern the lives of residents of Manti. More important—and, in the end, the heart of the book—is Daynes's examination of how and why women entered into plural marriage, how their decisions changed with different patterns of immigration and affluence, and what portion of the population was involved in plural marriage at different periods. Daynes is interested in ordinary folk, and her work allows her to piece together how men and women navigated a world in which religious command and legal mandates came into direct and prolonged conflict. As Daynes sees it, while the doctrines and beliefs that underlay plural marriage were firmly in place by the end of the Nauvoo period and continued after 1890, political reality meant that polygamy truly flourished only between 1847 and approximately 1882 (when the federal government disfranchised polygamists and prohibited “unlawful cohabitation”). This short but intense period, as well as the focus on a single community, allows Daynes to give her readers a deeper look at how plural marriage was lived by those who practiced it than has been achieved in prior works on the subject.

To make such detailed assessments, Daynes uses census data, Church membership records, tax assessment rolls, cemetery records, immigration

indexes, and marriage licenses to reconstruct “a list of everyone who lived in Manti from 1849 [when the town was first settled] to 1910,” when the Church enforced polygamy’s prohibition (9). Gleaning valuable data about where and in what material circumstances the residents actually lived, Daynes meticulously documents and describes marriage, economics, divorce, inheritance, immigration, desertion, and many other topics of vital interest to historians of marriage and the family.

Daynes’s analysis reveals that the percentage of Manti women who were involved in polygamy is higher than many scholars previously thought. For example, of those women born before 1852 whose first marriage took place in Utah, 56.7 percent were in a plural marriage at some point in their lives (98). For those born between 1852 and 1870 and those who immigrated between 1870 and 1887, the number is 12.2 percent (96).

As Daynes irrefutably demonstrates, plural marriage affected all aspects of marriage in Manti, monogamous as well as polygamous. Indeed, Daynes’s subtle analysis of the “marriage market” (91), immigration, and the fact that many women entering plural marriage were fatherless (119) is a classic example of careful social history work. Part three of the book, “Numbers: An Analysis of the Marriage Patterns of Manti Women,” is among the finest pieces of social history scholarship ever written. It demonstrates conclusively that women entered into and left plural marriage in response to religious doctrine (169), which told them that their exaltation in the celestial worlds depended upon their adherence to the Principle.

Daynes also demonstrates that there were material differences between marriage in a polygamous society and a monogamous one. Women throughout the period married young, younger than outside Utah. Immigrant women usually married soon after they arrived (97), often as plural wives, especially in the early period (118). Equally important, “plural wives came disproportionately from groups of economically disadvantaged women in the frontier economy” (91). Women who entered plural marriage improved their circumstances in this world while earning greater rewards in the celestial worlds for themselves, their children, and their sister-wives. For women, plural marriage was often a response to difficult economic times as well as to religious fervor.

As might be expected, the women’s circumstances improved because polygamous men were wealthier and held a higher rank in the Church than their monogamous counterparts. “Wealth and plural marriage in Manti were related,” Daynes concludes, as they were in the rest of Utah (130). Yet polygamy also reduced economic disparity because “plural marriage helped give poorer women access to [the greater] resources [of polyga-

mous men]” (133). Among Daynes’s most interesting speculations about the relationship of plural marriage to the broader economy is her claim that “the United Orders were instituted to counter growing divergence in wealth at a time when plural marriage was decreasing” (133).

Polygamy declined over most of the period Daynes studied. Of the three generations who lived in Manti between 1849 and 1910, women in the first generation were considerably more likely to marry initially as plural wives. The decline in numbers, which shows conclusively that women increasingly and tenaciously opted for monogamous unions, should be paired with the recognition that for the Church leadership throughout the polygamous period, pressure to enter plural marriage was strong and even increased in the 1880s. Church pronouncements about whether a monogamist could be exalted were inconsistent, but it was clear that “plural marriage was not only the preferred type but also the most honored and most sacred” (72). In the end, Daynes concludes, believing in the divine nature of polygamy and practicing it were differentiated in many Church teachings—the ability to practice was by definition limited to those men who could find and support women willing to marry them as plural wives. Over time the number of women willing to enter plural marriage declined.

Equally important, the number of divorces granted in Manti went overwhelmingly to polygamous unions, especially when the marriage had been created during the heady years of the Mormon reformation in 1856 and 1857 (165) and again during the government raids of the 1880s. Just under half of the women involved in such divorces later remarried polygamously. As Daynes shows, the Church urged reconciliation but also acknowledged that some marriages could not realistically be salvaged; in these circumstances, the Church permitted divorce in order to promote remarriage and continued reproduction (169). Implicit in this point is the conclusion that divorce was not a rejection of belief in plural marriage but should instead be recognized as an indication that plural marriages endured greater stress than monogamous ones (165–67). Many such stresses, in the early period, had to do primarily with material and economic hardship; in the later period, with federal prosecutions and legal change.

Among Daynes’s central points is that, before the 1880s, marriage in Utah was essentially a religious rather than a legal undertaking. Church divorce as well as polygamous marriage, for example, were both “non-legalistic and non-traditional” (188). The transition to a new legal regime imposed from without destroyed a system that was in decline, she maintains, but not necessarily in crisis. Daynes, while not a lawyer, has a solid grounding in legal thought and categories, and she understands well the

vital role of law and custom in any society. Equally important, Daynes understands clearly that extralegal actions (such as a divorce from the pulpit or a “nominal” plural marriage) were also vital aspects of the Mormon marriage system in territorial Utah.

The shift from a religious to a legal regime, she says, was complete with the enactment of the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887: henceforth, the courts dictated what marriage meant and when it was over. In Utah, as in the rest of the nation, the state now controlled marriage and divorce, replacing the more flexible Church doctrines with legislation and judicial pronouncements. The “transformation,” as Daynes refers to it in her title, was both heavy-handed and subtle. It became clear to all involved that for the Church to survive, it must give ground on polygamy. This breakdown of the religious system, she argues, plunged Latter-day Saints into a period of religious and legal turmoil as Church leaders’ ability to regulate plural marriage evaporated, even though belief in its divinely sanctioned nature continued. Although she does not directly point this out, the last year of her study, 1910, coincides with a letter sent to stake presidents instructing them to enforce the 1904 decree that those who entered into or performed new plural marriages would be liable to excommunication. Finally, it truly was no longer possible to marry “more wives than one” and remain in harmony with the Church.

While the history of Mormon plural marriage has received significant attention over the past three decades and more, the topic remains exceedingly difficult to deal with; it combines a dramatic and controversial divergence from traditional Christian marital practices with a sense that the response from those outside the faith was excessive and oppressive. Balanced treatment under such circumstances remains difficult, yet Daynes’s poise is unwavering.

Daynes finds richness that other scholars have missed, and her historian’s sensitivity to change over time allows her to show polygamy’s efflorescence and decline in nineteenth-century Manti with pinpoint accuracy. She is careful to situate her work within the broader historiography of nineteenth-century Mormonism and to make her differences with prior scholars clear. For example, she argues cogently that the Mormon marital practices during the polygamy period did indeed constitute a system, with clear-cut rules about sexual propriety, courtship, and the creation and dissolution of marriage. This conclusion differs from the arguments of Eugene Campbell and Bruce Campbell in their work on divorce among Mormon polygamists.¹

Daynes has also benefited from a generation of insightful and probing work into the history of the Church and its conflicts with the outside

world, as she readily acknowledges. Her book builds on the finest work in the field, including (but not limited to) that of Carmon Hardy, Lawrence Foster, Edwin Firmage, Richard Mangrum, and her dissertation adviser Jan Shippy. Daynes deserves to take her place among them as a leading scholar of Mormon history. This book is likely to propel her instantly into such company. Last but not least, and especially gratifying to the reader, this was not a book researched or written in a rush to print. It glows in ways only a piece of scholarship that has had years of painstaking work lavished on it can.

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1. Eugene E. Campbell and Bruce L. Campbell, "Divorce among Mormon Polygamists: Extent and Explanations," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (winter 1978): 4–23.