

Melvin C. Johnson. *Polygamy on the Pedernales: Lyman Wight's Mormon Villages in Antebellum Texas, 1845 to 1858.*

Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2006

Reviewed by Ken Driggs

**P**olygamy on the Pedernales is about the Mormon settlements in Texas during the 1840s and 1850s, whose primary allegiance was to Lyman Wight. Christened the “Wild Ram of the Mountains” by the *New York Sun*, Wight was ordained an Apostle by Joseph Smith in 1841. Because he was “charismatic, intensely personal, and often domineering in his dealings with others,” writes author Melvin C. Johnson, “the Wild Ram became influential with Joseph Smith” (3). Wight’s group broke with Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve, and they pursued Wight’s vision of a Latter-day Saint safe haven in Texas, which Wight believed was commanded by Smith.

Born in 1796, Wight served in the War of 1812, married Harriet Benton Wight, and settled in frontier Ohio by 1826. Lyman and Harriet joined Sydney Rigdon’s Campbellite community in 1829, where Lyman became passionately converted to New Testament Christian primitivism and common-stock economic communalism. He was part of a large body of Rigdon’s followers who converted to the LDS faith when missionaries arrived.

Joseph Smith, apparently recognizing Wight’s passion and promise, ordained him the first high priest of the Church in 1831. Later that year, Wight was called to help the Saints in frontier Missouri. In 1834, he participated in Zion’s Camp and was called by Joseph Smith, reports the author, into “an irregular, paramilitary force,” claimed by some to be the Danites (15).<sup>1</sup> In 1838, Wight was seized along with Smith and five others by the Missouri militia, after which General Samuel D. Lucas ordered that they be executed. “Given the opportunity by General Moses Wilson to escape the firing squad if he would testify against Smith, Wight is supposed to have said, ‘Shoot and be damned’” (19). He remained in Liberty Jail with the Prophet for several months until the group was allowed to escape in 1839 and joined the refugee Saints in Illinois. “Wight later wrote that while in jail, he assisted Joseph Smith Jr. to ordain one of his sons as

his successor” (19). In 1841, Smith ordained Wight an Apostle, and shortly before Smith’s own murder in June 1844, he called Wight into the Council of Fifty. As an Apostle, Wight was initiated into the then private practice of plural marriage and into the highest levels of the new temple rituals and teachings, which he maintained for the rest of his life (32).

Nauvoo’s rapid growth required building materials, and the Saints found lumber up the Mississippi River in the wilds of Wisconsin. In 1841, along with Bishop George Miller, Wight was dispatched to organize and manage the lumbering operations, an assignment he took on with his usual zeal and success. This operation would become the Black River Pine Company, “a thriving community with four sawmills along the Black River and a dozen logging camps” (34). The work and living conditions were hard, and the experiences produced intense loyalties between Wight and the other laborers: “The majority of [Texas] Wightite colonists came from the Pine Company, which spent two distinct periods in Wisconsin—from late fall 1841 to June 1844, and from the fall of 1844 to the spring of 1845. The latter period completed the transformation of Wight’s followers into a distinctive faction opposed to Brigham Young and Utah Mormonism” (23).

As Smith and his followers encountered new friction with non-Mormons in Illinois, the Prophet began to look for more remote and friendly havens. In addition to the Rocky Mountain West, he considered the newly independent Republic of Texas. Smith sent Lucien Woodworth to negotiate with Republic of Texas President Sam Houston about such a settlement and found him receptive. Woodworth reported to Smith in May 1844, and Smith personally called Wight and Miller on a mission to prepare Texas for a possible Mormon migration after they finished the season’s lumbering in Wisconsin. Wight was winding down that business when the Prophet was murdered. “The commitment to carry out his mission to Texas would drive Wight for the rest of his life” (31). At the same time, “Brigham Young never understood the depth of Wight’s commitment to the Texas mission, nor did he comprehend Wight’s literal interpretation of Smith’s instructions, that is, to prepare a gathering place for the church membership in Texas” (36).

At the October 1844 general conference of the Church, “Young called Wight a coward for leaving Nauvoo,” but Wight was again confirmed as an Apostle after the Twelve deliberated the matter (52). In March 1845, Wight and his followers, about 150 persons, “fired their log cabins” in Wisconsin and began the journey to Texas by river (54). Six months later, they began colonizing near Austin, Texas.

Although not all research studies on Mormon population movements agree, Johnson writes that by 1848 only “a slight majority of the Mormons

had settled either in Utah Territory or were under the direction of the Twelve in Winter Quarters, Iowa. Almost one-half of the membership, along with apostles John Page, William Smith, and Lyman Wight, had rejected the leadership of the Twelve” (35).<sup>2</sup> By December 1848, after continued defiance in joining with the Church in Utah, Wight was excommunicated and dropped from all Church offices. His excommunication, along with other recalcitrant Apostles, “removed all remaining major opposition to Young’s succession” (122).

Wight and his followers finally colonized Sycamore Springs near Austin (1846–47), Zodiac near Fredericksburg (1847–51), Hamilton Mills (1851–53), and finally Mountain Valley (1854–58), all in the Texas hill country, which amounts to a geologic division between eastern and western Texas. The Wightites’ cooperative industries in the area dominated regional commerce. Though their population was significant in pioneer Texas, their numbers never exceeded 175. Yet their organizational and industrial skills made them important pioneers, even if other settlers kept them at arm’s length.

In Johnson’s view, this Mormon splinter group was held together by Wight’s forceful personality. “The autocratic frontier leader, increasingly addicted to his alcohol and opium as time passed, still inspired others to follow him for more than fifteen years, in situations often grim and troubled, across America’s borderlands in pursuit of their common faith” (3).

The Fredericksburg area was settled by German immigrants who were unsettled by Wight and his followers but came to tolerate them for practical reasons. “Although the Germans considered the Mormons to be ‘lawless of religious practices,’ they accepted the newcomers because they realized the need to learn the American ways of milling, agriculture, and livestock” (88). Zodiac was also the site of a modest temple constructed at Wight’s direction and was dedicated on February 17, 1849.

By 1858, the need for a Texas sanctuary was less compelling, and Wight’s hold on his flock was weakening. At age sixty-two, Wight wanted to join with like-thinking Mormons in Missouri and Iowa. His antagonism toward the Utah leadership continued; he had written an especially bitter letter to Brigham Young a year earlier. On March 30, 1858, Wight and a small party began the journey to Jackson County, Missouri, but the next day a fatal seizure felled him at Dexter, near San Antonio, apparently “caused in part because of years of alcohol abuse and the medicinal opium he used to treat earlier illnesses” (190). He was buried the following day in Zodiac. Those followers who remained found their way mostly into the Reorganized Latter Day Saint tradition, although they continued practicing plural marriage for a time. Others fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. Johnson sums up their dissolution: “After 1865, more

than 200 former Wightites were living in Texas, California, Missouri, and Iowa. Almost all had joined other branches of Mormonism. The majority, including the wives of Lyman Wight and most of the other polygamists and former polygamists, joined the RLDS church in the Upper Midwest. About twenty in number reunited with the LDS church in Utah” (197).

Notwithstanding some dispute about raw numbers, a particular strength of the book is the discussion of *how* the Mormon community splintered after the June 1844 murder of Joseph Smith. It is documented that Smith gave clear direction on prophetic succession or institutional primacy in council meetings, but the general membership and some leadership, not privy to those councils, was disoriented. Many, including Wight, believed in patrilineal succession, under which the child Joseph Smith III would assume leadership when able. Initially, many Mormons debated what religious institutions would direct the Church until the son was able. Who would be regent? Would it be the Quorum of the Twelve, whose history to that point had included little administration of the Church? Would it be the now nonexistent Council of Fifty, which included Wight, and which he felt should lead? Would it be Sidney Rigdon as the lone survivor of the First Presidency? Others also added to the confusion: there was the sole surviving black sheep brother, William Smith, and other charismatic pretenders like James Strang.

In summary, I found this book to be especially interesting and worth reading, and I strongly recommend it. It is short and readable and an excellent history of the succession crisis that followed the Prophet’s murder in 1844 and of the important Mormon role in settling frontier Texas. It may not be for casual students of Mormon history in that some basic knowledge is required, but serious students of the Latter-day Saint experience will find it fascinating.

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1. For a full account of the Danites and the propagated legends surrounding them, see David J. Whittaker, “Danites,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:356–57.

2. Richard Bennett covers this at length in his book *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852: “And Should We Die—”* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987). For example, he shows that over 76 percent of the membership in Nauvoo in 1846 made it west.