

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870.*

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

Reviewed by Lowell C. "Ben" Bennion

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, a distinguished history professor emerita from Harvard University, has recently released a long-awaited and widely acclaimed work on women and plural marriage in early Mormonism, titled *A House Full of Females*. She has previously published four books related to Colonial and Revolutionary America, one of which, *A Midwife's Tale*, won both a Bancroft and a Pulitzer Prize the year after its publication in 1990. She describes *A House Full of Females*, which she began a decade ago, as “my first attempt to approach early Mormonism as a work of scholarship” (389). Given her relatively late entry into Mormon Studies, readers of *BYU Studies Quarterly* may not be familiar with Ulrich’s work, unless they have already read the three very favorable reviews of her new book published in *BYU’s* 2018 issue of *Mormon Studies Review* and her response to them.¹ Mine is another favorable review, which aims to highlight aspects of the book that *BYU Studies* readers will find most interesting and adds to the growing praise Ulrich is receiving for this masterful work.

Ulrich begins and ends her latest book with “An Indignation Meeting” held in the Old Tabernacle of Salt Lake City on January 13, 1870. Despite wintry weather, at least five thousand ladies gathered there to protest the Cullom Bill, which had been passed in the U.S. House of Representatives a week earlier and would outlaw Mormon plural marriages if the U.S. Senate also passed it. Less than two months later, Ulrich writes, “the *Deseret News* reported that Utah women had held [similar] mass meetings in fifty-eight towns, from Logan in the north to tiny

1. Ann M. Little, W. Paul Reeve, and Sarah Carter, “Review Panel: *A House Full of Females*,” with response by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Mormon Studies Review* 5 (2018): 16.

Pinto in the south, and that as many as twenty-five thousand women had attended” (382). What bearing such protests may have had on the bill’s failure to pass the Senate is unclear; but in February Utah’s all-male legislature and acting governor responded, as it were, by granting suffrage to the territory’s women. In 1870, these ladies exercised the right to vote for the first time anywhere in the United States, even ahead of the women in Wyoming who had received suffrage the year before. These “indignation meetings” revealed that at least many women of Mormonism were not the submissive victims that national media had painted them, but outspoken and proud supporters of both women’s rights and plural marriage. Ulrich seeks to understand this seeming contradiction—how so many Mormon women could “simultaneously support a national campaign for political and economic rights while defending marital practices that to most people seemed relentlessly patriarchal” (xiii). The end result, she admits, is “a complicated and many-faceted work” that “may not be an easy book to read.”²

In her introduction, Ulrich includes an unusual but revealing time line. It identifies her twenty primary sources, which range from diaries and letters to minutes (xxii). All of them date from the years 1825–70, reflecting her determination to make *A House Full of Females* “a source-centered work.”³ She refers to these sources as “the writings of ordinary people who between 1835 and 1870 translated the dissenting religions of Lancashire, upstate New York, and the Ohio Valley into Mormonism and carried its principles to the American West” (386–87). Fittingly, thirteen of the sources featured were written by women, all but one of whom (Caroline Crosby) became part of a plural family. But, ironically, the most important source, judging by how often Ulrich cites it, is the diary of LDS Apostle Wilford Woodruff. Indeed, that is where she found the catchy title of her book. His entry dated February 11, 1857, reads, “I attended the female relief society at the 14th ward,” where he and his bishop went to set apart his wife, Phebe, and her counselors as that ward’s Relief Society presidency. Woodruff then observed, “The house was full of females quilting sewing etc.” (336, vii).

From that Fourteenth Ward Relief Society, Ulrich took a once-torn 1857 album quilt (2, color insert 1) and designed a map that identifies the sixty-seven quilters, including Phebe Woodruff, three daughters, a sister, a niece, and three of Wilford’s plural wives (344–45). Ulrich

2. Little, Reeve, and Carter, “Review Panel: *A House Full of Females*,” 15.

3. Little, Reeve, and Carter, “Review Panel: *A House Full of Females*,” 15.

finds special meaning in other such material objects, like the *Weighing the Baby* painting on the book's cover, which depicts a plural family (xix; 4, color insert 2). She not only includes but also effectively uses some seventy such illustrations throughout the volume. Ulrich circles back to the quilt later, and she also rightly describes her book as "a kind of quilt, an attempt to find an underlying unity in a collection of fragments" (xx).

After the introduction, the first six chapters of the book follow Wilford Woodruff and his first wife, Phebe, through their 1834–46 migrations from New England to muddy Iowa. After most of the Apostles and a fair number of other members had already entered the "Celestial Law" of plural marriage, Woodruff finally added several young females to his family. Chapter 11 highlights his household as of 1853. By then he had "married seven women" and "fathered ten children," but "only three of those wives and four of those children were now with him" due to divorces and deaths (266). In most of the first ten chapters of the book, Ulrich also introduces and illuminates the tangled lives of her other main sources, notably Eliza R. Snow, Bathsheba Smith, Hosea Stout, Patty Sessions, and—perhaps most entangled—Sarah N. Kimball (see Time Line, xxii). Only in chapter 13 does Ulrich focus on a lesser known pioneer and one not tied to Salt Lake—namely, Caroline Crosby, who had a long "life of wandering"—over two decades she lived in thirty different dwellings (312).

My only suggestions for improvement to the book are minor. If Ulrich decides to publish a second edition, I hope she will identify all twenty-nine leaders of the 1870 Indignation Meeting and summarize each one's experience with the principle of plural marriage. I would also challenge her assertion that "by 1860 more than 40 percent of the territory's inhabitants—men, women, and children—lived in plural households" (xix). Her source for that figure based it on just two of Salt Lake City's twenty wards and the Millcreek Ward in Salt Lake County. Although the incidence of plural marriage probably peaked about then, the actual percentage for all of Utah may not have been that high. As a historical geographer, I wish Ulrich had calculated the incidence of polygamy as of 1870 for the two wards with which she closes her book.

The last two chapters bring readers to Salt Lake's Fourteenth and Fifteenth Ward Relief Societies and the symbolism of their finished quilts. Here Ulrich emphasizes the countless and often overlooked ways in which "Latter-day Saint women built the Church that claimed their loyalty. . . . 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. Some did so because they believed plural marriage was a glorious doctrine, others out of a hope for future exaltation or because conforming seemed a lesser evil than abandoning their homes and faith” (387).

Despite the book’s many facets and complexities, including more than sixty pages of notes, anyone seriously interested in “Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism” should peruse it to determine how well Ulrich answers her overriding question. Those who read *A House Full of Females* will probably agree with me that Ulrich has produced another book most deserving of a prize.

Lowell C. “Ben” Bennion is a geography professor emeritus of Humboldt State University, Arcata, California, where he taught for thirty years. Well before moving back to his hometown of East Millcreek in Salt Lake County in 2000, he became involved in Mormon studies. Most indicative of his interest in Ulrich’s book is his “Plural Marriage” map-essay in Brandon S. Plewe, ed., *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History*, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2014), 122–25. He also has authored an article on “Mapping the Extent of Plural Marriage in St. George, 1861–1880,” *BYU Studies* 51, no. 4 (2012): 27–68.