

Brian C. Hales.
*Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism:
The Generations after the Manifesto.*

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006

Reviewed by J. Michael Hunter

In *Modern Polygamy and Mormon Fundamentalism*, Brian C. Hales takes on the arduous task of making the convoluted story of modern polygamy comprehensible to the average reader. Hales approaches the subject not as a historian or sociologist but as an active Latter-day Saint who has questions about the authority claims of modern polygamists.

Hales's central theme is what he calls the "One Man" principle (11). This theme is essentially that LDS scriptures teach that one man holds the keys of the sealing power, and this man is the only one who can authorize plural marriages (D&C 132:7, 18–19). Hales is frank in acknowledging his belief that the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only man on earth who can grant the sealing power, including the sealing of plural marriages.

Thus, according to Hales, notwithstanding the bold and elaborate claims to priesthood authority made by many modern polygamists, no genuine sealing authority exists among them. For this reason, Hales's book will hold particular appeal to Latter-day Saints, although others will certainly find it a useful handbook for understanding modern-day polygamy as well.

Hales begins by providing background information on the practice of plural marriage among the Latter-day Saints as far back as 1840 in Nauvoo. According to Hales, selected Church members practiced plural marriage as a divine command between 1840 and 1852. All Latter-day Saints were not yet ready to have this be a command binding on them, so the Lord selected strong members to secretly begin the practice.

After Joseph Smith's death in 1844, Brigham Young authorized and encouraged Latter-day Saints to practice plural marriage. In 1852, Church leaders openly acknowledged plural marriage as a Church practice. According to Hales, the Latter-day Saints were thus under command to practice plural marriage after 1852.

This command lasted until 1890 when Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto, which took the Latter-day Saints out from under the command to practice plural marriage but did not altogether forbid the practice. The Manifesto led to a great deal of confusion among Latter-day Saints since, just as in Nauvoo, Church leaders secretly authorized a select few to practice plural marriage. Whom the “One Man” had authorized or had not authorized became a matter of dispute.

At the April 1904 general conference, President Joseph F. Smith issued an “Official Statement” later referred to as the “Second Manifesto.” It was very similar to the 1890 Manifesto except that it promised excommunication for LDS members who would not comply. Hales explains that between 1890 and 1904 plural marriages were essentially “secret and authorized” while marriages after 1904 were “secret and unauthorized” (102). Where the 1890 Manifesto had not forbidden plural marriages, the 1904 second manifesto had. Hales wrote that “the secrecy that camouflaged legitimate plural marriages prior to 1904 created an atmosphere (for a few years) during which unauthorized post-1904 unions might occur without the local leaders truly understanding the ‘one’ man’s directives” (102).

Hales relies heavily on the research of others in his discussion of nineteenth-century plural marriage as he lays the foundation for his real contribution—the history of plural marriage between 1904 and 1934. Hales reaches his stride as he throws light on what has heretofore been a shadowy period where authorized plural marriage morphs into renegade polygamy.

In 1910, Joseph F. Smith firmly declared that all persons involved in new plural marriages would be “cut off from the Church” (103). That same year, the Quorum of the Twelve began holding disciplinary councils and excommunicating polygamists. Polygamists began hiding from both government and Church authorities.

However, by the 1920s, the government showed less interest in prosecuting polygamists and many had already been excommunicated from the Church, so polygamists began to openly congregate in loosely structured groups. They also began to publish their beliefs. Hales does an excellent job of elucidating how the stories of one man and the publishing efforts of another brought these loosely structured groups together into a formalized priesthood structure in the early 1930s.

In the 1920s, Lorin C. Woolley, an eccentric and highly imaginative individual, began telling stories about President John Taylor conferring special sealing authority on Woolley and four other men in 1886—authority allowing these men to perpetuate plural marriage independent of

Church authorities. Woolley claimed that Taylor also administered an oath to the men to never forsake the practice of plural marriage.

Hales points out many flaws with the story—some based on historical fact and others on Church doctrine. Historically, Woolley claims to have been a bodyguard for John Taylor, but no records exist to support this claim, and Woolley’s small stature was not exactly suited for the task. Woolley waited decades after the fact to begin telling the story, even though publications by him in support of polygamy as early as 1912 provided ample opportunity and need for his use of the story. Woolley lists thirteen individuals who he says were in attendance at this special meeting. Yet, there is no evidence that any of these thirteen individuals ever mentioned the meeting or allowed it to direct their future actions. None of the four other men supposedly ordained by Taylor left a record of those events. Doctrinally, Hales points out that secret ordinations violate Church procedures as put forth in Doctrine and Covenants 42:11, which states that no one should preach the gospel or build up the Church unless that person has authority and “it is known to the church that he has authority.” Hales also argues that it violates the doctrine that “in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (153; D&C 6:28).

The other central figure in the formalizing of the modern polygamy movement was Joseph Musser, who convinced Woolley to commit his story to writing in 1929. In 1933, Musser published a book that claimed a priesthood organization with greater authority and keys than any found in the Church. Over the next few years, other publications came out that elaborated this basic idea, including the concept of a “Council of Seven Friends” (195) that acted as the governing body of this superior organization. This somewhat complex organization and how it claimed to have descended from the 1886 John Taylor ordinations is explained by Hales using helpful charts.

From these early beginnings in the 1930s, organized polygamy expanded to include various groups that have often made headlines over the past seventy years. Hales provides charts to illustrate how many modern polygamists trace their authority claims back to Woolley’s story. Even polygamists who do not claim direct authority through Woolley often have some connection to Woolley or Musser.

Hales gives interesting information on the 1944 federal raid on Short Creek, Arizona, which is often overshadowed by the later and larger Short Creek raid in 1953. He discusses prominent polygamist families such as the Allreds, Barlows, Jeffs, and Jessops. He has a chapter on the Kingstons and one also on the LeBarons.

Hales brings the polygamy story right up to the present with happenings in Colorado City (the former Short Creek) and that community's unique teaching of the "Law of Placing," which requires young girls to submit themselves to priesthood leadership and their fathers to choose a husband for them. This controversial practice has resulted in numerous arrests of men in this community and the highly publicized raid on the community's satellite community in Texas. Hales's book came out before the raid, but he does discuss the establishment of the branch community in Texas.

For events after 1954, Hales's narrative becomes less detailed and more dependent on the works of others. He offers only a shallow summary of the Naylor group, Tom Green, Ogden Kraut, Royston Potter, John Singer, Addam Swapp, James D. Harmston, the Laffertys, and others. Hales notes that if his research "is deemed inadequate by critics and historians, possibly it could at least serve as a springboard for additional research and further publications on this topic" (xiv). Indeed, it would be impossible to give detailed coverage to all of the various polygamist groups in a single volume.

Hales is to be commended for providing such a fine one-volume overview of modern polygamy, which succeeds in making this complex story comprehensible to the average reader. For the core of his story, covering the years 1904 through the early 1950s, Hales has compiled an impressive list of sources, including the Joseph White Musser journal, the B. Harvey Allred journal, sermons of numerous polygamist leaders, photocopies of letters that are apparently not readily available, and interviews of insiders that he himself conducted. For those areas that he was able to only touch on, such as the Kingstons, he has provided an admirable foundation on which other researchers can build.

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