

Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies

Volume 10
Number 1 *Fall 2019*

Article 7

2019

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

"Book Reviews." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): 86-90.
<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol10/iss1/7>

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Book Reviews



Madsen, Carol Cornwall. *Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History*. The University of Utah Press, 2017. 548 pp. ISBN 9781607815235.

As the title might suggest, the biographical account of Mormon writer and feminist Emmeline B. Wells, as written and compiled by Carol Cornwall Madsen, is indeed intimate. Madsen, a professor and historian, has dedicated her life's research to American women's history, particularly that of women within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Madsen herself is a fifth-generation Latter-day Saint and thus holds intimate ties to the Church, its doctrine, and its history both in the sacred and scholarly realm. Madsen's praise for Emmeline B. Wells appears in the introduction of her book. Madsen commends Wells as a "faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (xiii), and further applauds her role as a "woman triumphant...[whose] long life could be seen as a triumph against the reverses that might have felled her along the way" (xiv).

Despite personal or religious convictions, however, Madsen appropriately maintains a fairly unbiased perspective throughout the course of the book. It is readily apparent throughout the narrative that Madsen's ultimate objective is to construct a thorough, accurate, and detailed account of the life of Emmeline B. Wells, and her work undoubtedly accomplishes just that. The primary sources used in

constructing this narrative come from Wells' personal diaries, but Madsen also draws on other important sources, including documents from the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint (LDS) History.

Chapter One begins with a broad sketch of Wells' life, what Madsen refers to as an "undulating path of joy and sorrow, exultation and disappointment, triumph and tragedy," that she felt wholly "etched the contours of her life" (3). Madsen includes everything from Wells' life including family history, personal attributes, childhood trauma—losing her father at age four—to addressing Wells' general contributions as a writer, editor, teacher, and mother.

In Chapter Two, Madsen contextualizes Wells' life within the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and nineteenth-century U.S. history. This trajectory continues throughout the rest of the tome, in which Madsen recounts Wells' multiple marriages, divorces, and experiences as a sister-wife and as a mother. Madsen also discusses Wells as a woman "fashioned by more than education," who also—unsurprisingly—took in religion as "an equal partner in molding the woman she was to be" (24). Madsen carries the reader through Wells' religiously driven journey from her initial conversion and baptism into the LDS church to her role as a prominent member of the LDS women's Relief Society.

In later chapters, from the passing of the Morrill Act in 1862 on, the narrative

shifts into more political matters as Madsen explores the woman suffrage movement and its subsequent role in Wells' involvement as both a feminist and an "emerging journalist" (126).

As Madsen aptly put it, through the course of her career, Wells became "truly inundated with work" (134). Over the years, Wells moved around frequently, from Utah to Washington to New York to England, coming into contact with six LDS presidents and six U.S. presidents. During this time, Wells wrote for the *Woman's Exponent*, a periodical produced by women of the LDS Church, focusing predominantly on polygamy, the suffragist movement, and the experiences of LDS women. She was also elected as the chair of the Salt Lake County Board of Lady Managers, assumed the role of general secretary of the Relief Society, became involved in multiple literary clubs, and continued to involve herself in the political sphere, both on a local and international scale. All this she did while producing her own book of poetry.

Wells lived to see the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919, which granted U.S. women the right to vote, and died at the age of ninety-three just two years later. She remained involved within the Church and her local community up until her death in April of 1921. While Wells experienced a plethora of failures and tragedies involving multiple familial deaths within her lifetime, Madsen notes that, "No other Mormon woman of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries quite achieved the notoriety, high regard, respect, and genuine love of such a wide range of admirers as did Emmeline Wells" (497).

It is worth noting that Madsen's chosen audience in reading this narrative is relatively unclear. Due to an extensive use of footnotes paired with an immense amount of detail and dense contextual information, one might assume that Madsen intended for

this work to be studied primarily by scholars. On the other hand, the prose are straightforward and the clarification provided by the footnotes makes this work accessible to a much broader audience.

Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History is by no means a quick read. Comprised of thirty-seven chapters and paired with a consistent, interwoven narrative of the geographic and historical contexts surrounding Wells' personal affairs, this book seemingly omits nothing. If you are looking to understand every personal, political, and religious element of Emmeline B. Wells' life, from infancy until death, you've come to the right place. If, however, you simply want a brief, comprehensive overview of Wells and her contributions, you may want to look elsewhere.

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Stapley, Jonathan. *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology*. Oxford University Press, 2018. 187 pp. ISBN 0190844434.

Jonathan Stapley's *The Power of Godliness* is an impeccably researched and well written book aimed at exploring the history, evolution, and purpose of Mormon liturgical practice. Though Stapley's analysis is sophisticated, it is accessible. The book lends itself to a broad audience, from the academic to the lay observer.

Though the book is relatively short in length, his research is extensive. Stapley undertakes the difficult task of succinctly examining the theological and historical shifts in LDS liturgy—showing the variation of Mormon practice and belief over a relatively short existence. As Stapley

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explains, “This book argues that a fundamental force in the development and interpretation of Mormon liturgy and cosmology has been the religion’s conception of priesthood.” (2) The book does a particularly good job at examining what role race and gender have played in that conception from the decades-long priesthood ban on African American men to the practice and disavowal of polygamy—two rather complex issues that he addresses rather concisely for the brevity of the volume.

Stapley’s discussion of Joseph Smith’s development of Mormon cosmology and priesthood is extraordinary. Though many have written on the subject, Stapley seems to bring new light to the matter. Stapley extends his purview beyond well-examined topics to offer new insight, such as in his discussion on baby blessings. While few have deemed baby blessings noteworthy of examination, Stapley shows how “this ritual is an incredibly useful tool for understanding the construction of a Mormon fatherhood that is now completely entangled with the Mormon ecclesiastical priesthood.” (3) The chapter dedicated to baby blessing is perhaps my favorite.

Many readers will be drawn to the book for its discussion on women and the priesthood. Stapley examines how women have been active participants in LDS liturgy through healing rituals that were once prevalent among women. He examines how such practice, and therefore women’s authority, declined as LDS liturgy became routinized by the hierarchy of the church.

The book appears to be primarily directed at an academic audience. However, because of its accessibility and emphasis on rather controversial themes, I imagine it finding a home among lay member of the LDS church, and others lay individuals interested in the Mormon tradition. I think that readers will find that Stapley has greatly

enriched the discussion by providing further historical context.

In his concluding paragraph, Stapley writes, “I make an effort to understand the brushstrokes of church leaders and members through time as they have contributed to the living system of Mormonism. It is my intention to complicate the facile or presentist reading, the proof-text, and the analytically lazy, whether academic or parochial.” If this is indeed the goal of the book, I would argue that Stapley has accomplished it.

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Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017. 484 pp. ISBN 9780307594907

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is a Pulitzer Prize winning historian and Harvard professor of early American and women’s history. Dr. Ulrich’s acclaimed *A Midwife’s Tale* took the mundane of Martha Ballard’s diary and spun out a compelling historical narrative providing ordinary early American women a voice. *A House Full of Females* carves itself out of the well-worn area of research that is plural marriage in Mormonism by using the voices of early Latter-day Saint women to tell the rise of their authority. Ulrich utilizes a variety of sources from diaries, letters, poetry albums and minutes from fourteen women and five men. There are physical objects such as paintings, quilts, and samplers that are also used as valuable source material included. Ulrich also enriches the monograph with Black and white pictures, as well as a few full color images. Ulrich describes her work as “a kind of quilt, an attempt to find an

underlying unity in a collection of fragments” (xx). Ulrich particularly focuses on women who, while joining the religion at different times, were all social, religious, or community leaders with clout. However, as we see throughout the monograph, much of that clout was first established by their relationship to well established men within the community and church. Ulrich’s writing style lend itself well to a general audience.

The overarching question this book attempts to answer is how Latter-day Saint women were able to support the seemingly antithetical views of female suffrage and plural marriage. Ulrich argues against previous explanations of defense of property and religion by stating “If an Eastern newspaper dropped a match that ignited a woman’s rights movement in Utah in 1870, the fuel for that blaze had been accumulating for years” (xxii). *A House Full of Females* argues that women in the church were complicated; and that their shared past of religious passion, yearning for millennial justice, experience of being hounded and driven from place to place, and their political frustrations led these women to hold such a paradoxical view on women’s suffrage and plural marriage (xiv).

A House Full of Females has fifteen chapters and for brevity’s sake can be broken down into three themes; chapters 1-5 cover early Latter-day Saints up to expulsion from Nauvoo, chapters 6-10 examine Latter-day Saint pioneer and early mission experiences, and chapters 11-15 looks at how Latter-day Saints established themselves in the American West.

The first five chapters of this tome relate to early church members and ends with their exodus out of Nauvoo. In the first chapter, Ulrich introduces the reader to the book’s primary source, Wilford Woodruff and more specifically, his diaries. As an early convert and eventual leader of the Church; Woodruff’s expansive diaries

provided Ulrich the framework and timeline for her book. The chapter also discusses the founding and migration of the early church, and the relationship between Latter-day Saint belief and diary keeping. Chapter two examines the move to and subsequent conflict they experienced in Missouri. It also explores the hardships that women faced at home, while their husbands traveled abroad to preach the gospel. Ulrich wrote, “if a woman wrote her missionary husband that she Lacked food or flannel...she risked sounding like Sariah, in the Book of Mormon, a “murmuring” wife...if, on the other hand, she remained resolute in the faith, she disappeared like the “tender wives” in another famous passage from the Book of Mormon” (32). The third chapter delves into Nauvoo era of the church with the creation and of the Relief Society, a women’s organization, and the beginnings of plural marriage. Chapter four examines the different opportunities that plural marriage offered women, which ranged from economic, societal, and religious privilege, and personal safety. The fifth chapter focuses on women’s experiences with the introduction of temple ritual and discusses the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.

The second theme of this book focuses on Latter-day Saint pioneer and early mission experiences. Chapter six examines the importance of trail diaries and how they were mostly kept by women. It also analyzes the complex relationships that plural marriage had created amongst women in the Church. The following chapter continues the journey westward to Winter Quarters, Nebraska. This chapter examines gender and the complex relationships between the sexes. Ulrich explains that “their experiences at Winter Quarters helped shape their accounts of earlier periods in their lives...helped them find meaning in the here and now” (163). Chapter eight explores the church’s move to Utah and the roles that

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women in settling western territory. Women were not only healers and proto botanists; their curiosity led them to interact with various Native American tribes. Chapter nine is looks at the experiences of women missionaries and the conflict that arose between plural wives, specifically between the legal wife and the subsequent plural wives. This chapter explores women's interactions with one another and their respective duties in the church and home. For example, "women should care for one another rather than calling in doctors" (219). This section ends with a chapter on newly sent missionaries abroad; uniquely called to defend plural marriage to the world alongside proselytizing. A discussion on how church members felt about sex and its relationship to plural marriage is discussed in this chapter.

The last theme of this tome is about Latter-day Saints establishing themselves in the American West. Chapter eleven continues the discussion on sex and marriage and divorce in relation to polygamy. Ulrich dispels a commonly dispelled myth about plural marriage regarding children by stating that while "polygamy increases the number of children per father, it actually decreases the number per mother" (271). The next chapter concerns Native Americans and Latter-day Saint women with the founding of an Indian Relief Society. The motivation behind the creation of this relief society being that it was a means to take care of the Indigenous poor. Chapter thirteen follows Caroline Crosby's wandering across the American West into California and eventually into Southern Utah. In her accounts, the readers are introduced to early Latter-day Saint

attitudes towards African Americans and Asian Indians. The chapter after focuses on relief societies and their growth and centrality in Utah communities. This chapter also mentions the roles that women played as gardeners and gatherers. The end of this chapter analyzes the Mountain Meadows Massacre through a female lens. The concluding chapter of this book focuses on the role of the relief society and the Indignation movement. It examines how early relief societies functioned "in some respects an epiphenomenon, a manifestation of a deeper and more pervasive female culture that existed with and without formal structure" (362).

I have one critique for this exhaustive monograph on Latter-day Saint women. My criticism is that 1889 could have been a stronger end point than 1870. Utah became a state in 1896 and women were again enfranchised. Ulrich does not clarify ending the book at 1870 and instead concludes saying "ten of the women who launched the indignation meeting in 1870...lived to see Utah become a state" (386). Ultimately, however, Ulrich's work provides Latter-day Saint women's history with a foundational tome that expounds the beginning of the empowerment of Latter-day Saint women and brings to light countless unheard women.

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