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MORMON DOMESTIC LIFE
IN THE 1870s
Pandemonium or Arcadia?

by
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Introduction

F. Ross Peterson

The establishment of a lecture series honoring a library’s special collection and a donor to that collection is unique. Utah State University’s Merrill Library houses the personal and historical collection of Leonard J. Arrington, a renowned scholar of the American West. As part of Arrington’s gift to the university, he requested that the university’s historical collection become the focus for an annual lecture on an aspect of Mormon history. Utah State agreed to the request and in 1995 inaugurated the annual Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture Series.

Utah State’s Special Collections and Archives is ideally suited as the host for the lecture series. The state’s land grant institution began collecting agricultural and economic records very early, but in the 1960s became a major depository for Mormonobilia. Utah is unique in that one religion dominated the historical evolution of the state. Leonard Arrington, accompanied by his wife Grace Fort, joined the USU faculty in 1946 and along with S. George Ellsworth, Joel Ricks, and Milton C. Abrams focused on gathering original Mormon diaries, journals, and letters for the library. Professional archivists were hired and the concept of “special collections” was born at Utah State University.

In many ways, Leonard Arrington profited from this vision. Trained as an economist at the University of North Carolina, Arrington became an economic historian of international repute. Each month, Arrington and Ellsworth met with Eugene Campbell and Wendell Rich and presented their ideas on specific historical topics. Arrington, a native of Twin Falls, Idaho, published Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints in 1958. Utilizing the available collections and always seeking additional material, Arrington and his associates made Utah State University their base as they embarked on numerous publishing and editorial ventures.
They helped organize both the Western History Association and the Mormon History Association. They followed the professional organizations with the creation of journals such as the *Journal of Mormon History*, *Dialogue*, and the *Western Historical Quarterly*. The *Quarterly* has been edited at Utah State University since its inception twenty-five years ago. In fact, Arrington and Ellsworth were the first editors. Their idea was to provide new alternatives and opportunities for young scholars of the West in general and the Mormon West in particular.

Arrington began writing biographies and institutional histories during the 1960s. He fostered careers, encouraged students, and employed many as researchers. His studies of Charles C. Rich, William Spry, and David Eccles illustrate this phase of his endeavors. At the same time, he also finished histories of the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company and of Kennecott Copper. Arrington’s role as researcher, writer, founder, editor, nourisher, and friend continued to blossom.

His reward was an appointment as LDS church historian in 1973, a position he held for ten years. Simultaneously, Arrington assumed the newly created Lemuel Redd Chair of Western History at Brigham Young University. Arrington’s focus became exclusively Mormon history and he attempted to create an atmosphere of open professional research. The church allowed him to hire a number of historians to work on special projects and assignments. Mormon history flourished during his tenure as historian and his own career was enhanced by the publication of *The Mormon Experience*, co-authored with Davis Bitton, and *American Moses: A Biography of Brigham Young*.

In 1981, Arrington and his staff moved to BYU full-time and established the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of History. He continued to publish and mentor other prospective historians. Since retirement, he has published the monumental two-volume *History of Idaho* as well as numerous biographies of such western figures as Harold Silver and Charlie Redd. Widowed, he married Harriet Horne during this period, and she became his travel companion as well as an active partner in his research and writings. They chose to deposit their vast collection of primary material as well as their library at Utah State University. Thus the Leonard J. Arrington Historical Archives in Special Collections and Archives was established.
A Note on the Author

Cherry Silver

Many of us admire Claudia Bushman as a dynamic personality and see her on the forefront of creative thinking among Latter-day Saint women. Reared in San Francisco, the second of four musical Lauper daughters, Claudia studied English literature at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. There she met and married Richard Bushman. While he was in graduate school at Harvard, she completed her senior year at Wellesley. They studied in England for a year on his Sheldon Fellowship.

In Provo, when Richard began teaching history, Claudia completed her M.A. at Brigham Young University with a focus on American literature, but her academic interests broadened to social history and women’s studies. While Richard taught at Boston University, Claudia entered a doctoral program in American Studies at BU. She taught part-time at BYU and BU, as well as at Rhode Island College when Richard took a sabbatical at Brown University. I recall her teaching women’s history at Boston University, delighted because she was bringing an original suffragette to speak to her class. Claudia’s doctoral dissertation was published as “A Good Poor Man’s Wife”: Being the Chronicle of Harriet Hanson Robinson and Her Family in Nineteenth-Century New England. (Hanover, N.H.: The University Press of New England, 1981. New edition, 1998).

The Bushman’s children were born in Boston, London, Provo, and Providence, locations corresponding with the parents’ studies and early teaching. Six children, three degrees received over three decades from three institutions, seven major publications plus articles: such forms the pattern of Claudia’s career. But that is not the complete story.

In addition to scholarship, many of us connect Claudia with innovation. She sees the potential in ideas and people—she motivates, energizes, works tremendously hard herself, and brings forth amazing
products. The editing of *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* in 1976 began with her idea that she and her friends could study and write together. When existing publishers would not print their collection of articles, these Boston women formed their own Emmeline Press and sold copies widely. That volume raised interest in the history of LDS women that has yielded scores of articles and books. Last year Claudia contracted with Utah State University to republish *Mormon Sisters*, with new introduction and photographs.

Claudia was the founding editor of *Exponent II*, the Latter-day Saint women’s journal inspired by the *Mormon Sisters* project. Out of household budgets, Claudia mustered the cooperative energy to produce a women’s quarterly that, now in its twenty-sixth year, distributes internationally.

When the Bushmans moved to the University of Delaware, Claudia not only taught in the honors program but also became Executive Director of the Delaware Heritage Commission from 1984 to 1989. In commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, she coordinated events ranging from releasing two U.S. postage stamps, to creating scholarships, to performing full-dress re-enactments on horseback, to having school children write essays and release lady-bugs. *Proceedings of the Assembly* of the state of Delaware appeared in two volumes she helped edit. Not surprisingly, she received awards from state and national organizations for her achievement.

Now, in New York City, Claudia teaches history and advises the American studies master’s students at Columbia University. She serves on the steering committee for, and was interim director of, the commemoration of the two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Columbia University. Typically, she begins as a committee member; then when others bow out, she is offered leadership and proceeds with what she calls “plans and manoeuvres."

Last spring she produced a concert by Latter-day Saints in Carnegie Hall. Every Christmas she chairs the New York Stake living nativity scene. In past summers she has encouraged LDS participation in Manhattan’s street fairs. She is working toward the installation of a permanent plaque in downtown New York City, honoring the ship *Brooklyn* which sailed from New York in 1846, carrying Sam Brannan and more than two hundred other Mormons to San Francisco. All this,
Claudia points out, is “negotiating the boundary between the Latter-day Saint community and Greater New York City.”

Hers is a life full of “colorful things,” not the least of which being her and Richard’s six married children and sixteen grandchildren. My personal favorite among her shorter published pieces is “Sunset Ward,” a retrospective of growing up in San Francisco (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought [1989]). I admire the perception and lively style of her personal essays. I have profited from her study of Columbus in America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992). We also enjoy Mormons in America, the 1999 history of the Church written with her husband Richard for Oxford University Press’s Religions in America Series. She has recently completed a book-length study of antebellum Virginia farming, centering on John Walker’s journal of 1824–1867.

With interest in meshing communities, it seems appropriate that Claudia Bushman turns our attention to Western families seen through Eastern eyes for the fifth annual Arrington Lecture: “Mormon Domestic Life in the 1870s: Pandemonium or Arcadia?”
MORMON DOMESTIC LIFE IN THE 1870S: 
PANDEMONIUM OR ARCADIA?

I am greatly honored to be delivering this lecture in honor of Leonard J. Arrington, a person who has so deeply influenced me as well as a generation of others. Leonard was present for the first four of these lectures. He is no longer with us. I have been pleased to inspect his new portrait, however, and to see that it projects the authentic Arrington persona. Those coming along will be able to get an inkling of this remarkable man. Certainly those of us who knew him have greatly benefitted from the experience.

This evening I will revisit Zion in the early 1870s when the desert was actually blossoming. William Staines, Brigham Young’s gardener, recalled the garden festivals in Salt Lake City. At first, the Utah peaches had been winter killed, year after year. Eventually, Staines could exhibit a half bushel of fruit. And by the 1870s he could point, with pardonable pride, to thousands of orchards and vineyards thriving in Utah in fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise.1 Now, over a hundred years later, those same orchards are disappearing acre by acre, as is the society that made them grow. Tonight we revisit the time when the early settlers of Utah were reaping the first fruits of their labors in building homes and planting gardens.

Eastern interest in the Mormons had not decreased. In 1870, the gap was narrowing between the people in the desert stronghold and the rest of the nation, and the Eastern press presented a succession of caricatures of them. The Mormons had purposely distanced themselves from the United States, but after 1869, the transcontinental railroad crossed the plains they had laboriously walked for over twenty years. The Mormons were steadily pulled back into the national orbit. The railroad and the telegraph kept Utahns in close touch with the East, while also bringing the Mormons under unwelcome scrutiny. Visitors came to inspect and reform this strange sect.

Much of the outsiders’ attention focused on Mormon women. In the 1870s, women became critical, central figures in the church’s relationship with the world. Visitors were immensely curious to know about the oppressed polygamous wives. How could civilized women submit to this enslaving patriarchal system? Ignorant women must have been coerced and held under duress. On the other hand, the Mormon women sometimes reversed this negative judgment by their refinement and independence. The case for or against Mormonism rested on its women.

With this attention on women, the Mormon household was suddenly charged with meaning; the quality of home life measured the success of the Mormon experiment. A well-set table or a floor rug gauged Brigham Young’s success in creating a viable western kingdom. Were these people really civilized? Household evidence provided the answer.

In this atmosphere, the visit of Thomas and Elizabeth Kane to Utah in 1872 assumed an importance beyond the ordinary. They came as privileged guests of Brigham Young because of Thomas Leiper Kane’s role in defending the Mormons. Kane had interceded for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints on several occasions, notably in connection with the Mormon battalion in 1846 and later in 1857–58 when he came to Utah to help mediate the Utah War.

The Kane connection continued to benefit the Mormons in succeeding years. Everett L. Cooley notes that Kane’s services were sought in 1869, and in 1871, Brigham Young urged Kane to come to Utah to confer on governmental matters. In 1872, after an unsuccessful run for Congress in Pennsylvania, Kane agreed to the trip, partially for health reasons. He had never been robust, and still suffered from Civil War wounds acquired when he mustered and served as colonel of the “Wildcat” Bucktail Regiment of 307 Pennsylvania backwoodsmen. The New York Tribune noted Kane’s reputation for hard service and “unflinching” loyalty. Kane also hoped to write a book on Brigham Young during the St. George winter.

3. Everett L. Cooley, introduction, to Elizabeth Wood Kane, Twelve Mormon Homes: Visited in Succession on a Journey through Utah to Arizona (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Library, 1974), xiii–xv.
Thomas Kane was exceedingly sympathetic to the Mormons. His speech before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1850 glowingly described a visit to Nauvoo. He spoke of the Mormons’ impressive industry and enterprise. He was complimentary of the women, in their worn clothes, who kept the “altar fire of home” alive on the trail, as their first duty. Kane’s friends urged him to tone down his praise of the Mormons, but he said that he could not, referring to their “general correctness of deportment, and purity of character.” When critics, “with a vile meaning,” noted that he said little about the marital practices, he praised the women as everything that Americans dignified by “the names of mother, wife, and sister.”

Kane’s sympathy and his governmental service made him a Utah hero.

Kane’s wife Elizabeth did not share his enthusiasm for the Mormons. She was frank in her distaste for their way of life, particularly polygamy and, reflecting what she had read in the East, suspected that the women were ignorant and misguided. Only her hopes for her husband’s improved health had brought her on this journey. Still, while traveling from Salt Lake to St. George, she inspected the women with curiosity to see what Mormonism had wrought. She sent letters home describing the contradictions and opposites she observed. Was this pandemonium or Arcadia? The economy had aspects of the industrialized east and the primitive west. The people dressed in homespun while following Eastern fashion and genteel behavior. Kane herself was caught between revulsion and admiration.

Mrs. Kane, with literary skill and fixed opinions, was equipped to observe and judge the Mormon women. She came from a large traditional Christian family and was convinced of their superior ways. Born in 1836, she was the third child of six in an upper-middle-class merchant family devoted to business and Christian living. Her father traveled between Great Britain and the United States, and he was frequently away on business. During separations, the parents wrote long letters setting out their opinions of family life. They quite clearly saw their Protestant Christianity as God’s way.

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When Elizabeth was a child living in Liverpool, her mother’s cousin Thomas L. Kane, then about sixteen, came to visit. He was “a little fellow . . . full of mannerism,” which he continued to display throughout his life. When he went on to Paris, young Kane was arrested as a spy, the police suspecting the small, young man of a sinister purpose. Forceful beyond his age and size, Tom made the police apologize,5 fore-telling his verbal effectiveness. Elizabeth, precocious herself, loved him from an early age and planned to marry him.6 He began to court her when she was fifteen, and they married the next year.7

When the Kanes visited Utah, some twenty years later, they traveled by train from Pennsylvania to Salt Lake City. The Woman’s Exponent, a new periodical, announced their presence, indicating the reverence in which Kane was held: “General Thos. L. Kane . . . has been paying our city a visit with his wife and two children. The heartfelt prayers of thousands have often been offered up for him, for the truthful and noble manner in which he recorded the acts and sufferings of a devoted people in their struggles to preserve their religious liberty. . . . We regret to learn, though, that Mrs. Kane contracted a severe cold on their way this far westward.”8 Kane was revered, but the editor had some doubt about the wife. Kane was a sympathetic insider, his wife admired but distant, known only through her husband. Still, the Mormons were hopeful. Eliza R. Snow, then en route to the Holy Land, wrote to Brigham Young, “I am heartily glad that Gen. Kane is with you, and also that his dear ‘Bessie’ is with him. How I would like to make her acquaintance personally, although I have heard the General speak of her so much, I almost feel that she is an intimate acquaintance.”9 From Salt Lake, the Kanes took the Utah Southern Railroad as far as Lehi. Thence they embarked in carriages with six baggage wagons to travel hundreds of

9. Historian’s Office Journal, Brigham Young Incoming Correspondence, 1839–1877 (MS 1234), George A. Smith to Brigham Young, January 3, 1873, box 44, fd. 21, p. 3, Eliza R. Snow to Brigham Young. I am indebted to Jill Mulvay Derr for this reference.
miles south. The party of sixteen included church leaders, their families, Thomas and Elizabeth Kane, their two youngest sons, and their cook, a “colored gemman.”

Traveling through the desert landscape, they stopped each evening at one of the small settlements along the way. Kane, disoriented from Eastern life, felt herself moving into a different world, an old Syrian Biblical world. She felt she was meeting ancient pastoral people like those Isaiah spoke to who had also come out of Egypt in search of a Promised Land. Kane was part of a religious procession. Twice a day, the travelers gathered for long prayers. Everyone attended and knelt while an honored person prayed aloud in great detail, nomads praying over congressional action. Elizabeth Kane participated and observed, describing and recording the scenes, as she clearly stated her prejudices.

At the start of the journey south, Elizabeth Kane and Brigham Young circled each other warily. They were, after all, competitors for the interest and affection of Thomas L. Kane. Elizabeth found Young colorful and flamboyant. She described him inspecting the wagon train “like a well-intentioned wizard” carrying an odd six-sided staff. He wore a great fur-lined cloak of dark-green cloth reaching to his feet, as well as a fur collar, cap, and sealskin boots with undyed fur outside. At first amused, she soon respected him. When he removed his green goggles, his “keen, blue-gray eyes met mine with their characteristic look of shrewd and cunning insight. I felt no further inclination to laugh.”

She later praised his “wonderful voice” and “very distinct enunciation”: “He seems to be using only an easy conversational tone, yet is distinctly heard at the farthest part of the Meeting.” She described him as “shrewd and full of common sense.” When he visited in Parowan, he gave his attention to everyone who came near him. “I used to fancy that he wasted a great deal of power in this way,” she noted, “but I soon saw that he was accumulating [power].” Her admiration, however, was undercut by his Mormon identity. When he answered a question as a Mormon, she was completely taken aback. “I felt as if I had asked one lunatic his opinion of another!” “Poor Brigham Young,” she later

remarked. “With such powers, what might he not be but for this Slough of Polygamy in which he is entangled!” 12

Elizabeth Kane described the Mormon women after observing them at the first church meeting she attended in Nephi: “I was so placed that I had a good opportunity to look around, and began at once to seek for the ‘hopeless, dissatisfied, worr’ expression travelers’ books had bidden me read on their faces.” But she found no hopeless, worn expressions. She saw ordinary women who looked like those in any large rustic congregation. 13

If these were normal women, how could she then account for their faithful adherence to this unsettling faith? At first she thought “somewhat contemptuously,” that these were “ignorant English women led astray,” few of them being educated. She found women of the “small-shop keeping class,” who plainly lacked “superficial culture.” But she later came to another explanation: “These are women sufficiently educated to have studied their Bibles, and are clever enough to feel the difference” between the simple Christianity of the New Testament and the excesses of the Anglican state church in England. In her distinction between sincere and ornamental Christianity, she blamed the excesses of Christian churches for the success of the Mormons. She met many Englishwomen who were thoughtful and intelligent, who expressed themselves clearly and sometimes eloquently about their faith. She saw fewer American Mormons among the recent converts, and again, she postulated that American churches were “a little less far from the Primitive Church of the Apostles,” 14 than English churches. She divined no virtue in the church of the Mormons itself. Those who joined must be reacting against existing Christian churches.

Kane’s observations of the Utah trip afford a glimpse into the households and lives of Mormon women through the eyes of an astute observer. Her details take us inside a number of 1872 households. We look mostly into the homes of the elite Church leaders where Kane’s prosperous hosts prepared carefully and offered their best in a combination of refinement and simplicity. But Kane also visited common

13. Elizabeth Wood Kane, Twelve Mormon Homes, 41–42.
homes. In Scipio, “the poorest and newest of the settlements,” she visited the bishop’s second wife in a one-roomed, log-cabin with a lean-to behind, a fair specimen of the humbler homes she visited. She noted the “unusual cleanliness.”

The living-room was given up to us. Its main glory consisted in a wide chimney-place, on whose hearth a fire of great pine logs blazed, that sent a ruddy glow over the white-washed logs of the wall and the canvas ceiling, and penetrated every corner of the room with delicious light and warmth. There was a substantial bedstead in one corner, and curtains of old-fashioned chintz were tacked from the ceiling around it as if it had been a four-poster, and a neat patchwork counterpane covered the soft feather-bed. A good rag-carpet was on the floor; clean white curtains hung at the windows; and clean white covers, edged with knitted lace, covered the various bracket-shelves that supported the housewife’s Bible, Book of Mormon, work-basket, looking-glass, and a few simple ornaments. Two or three pretty good colored prints hung on the walls. Then there was a mahogany bureau, a washstand, a rocking-chair, and half a dozen wooden ones, with a large chest on which the owner’s name was painted. . . . The small, round table was already spread for our supper with cakes, preserves, and pies; and the fair Lydia was busily engaged in bringing in hot rolls, meat, tea, and other good things, while a miniature of herself, still fairer and rosier, about two years old, trotted beside her . . . with the assistance of a blue-ribboned yellow kitten.  

What is interesting in this modest and charming scene? All the specifics, under flattering firelight, are positive. Textiles, all imported from the East, bring comfort and refinement: the chintz of the bed curtains, the cloth of the good rag-carpet and neat patchwork counterpane, the clean white curtains and bracket covers are all produced far from Scipio. Fabrics soften surfaces and are enhanced by the artistic eye and hand of the housewife. The covers of the bracket-shelves,

edged with knitted lace, turn utility to decoration; the kitten wears a blue ribbon; the bed-curtains suggest a four-poster bed, although the wife must tack the curtains into place rather than drawing them. Yet the cabin shows no textile producing equipment, no loom nor spinning wheel, and no sewing machine. None of the women visited engaged in any textile production but knitting. The shelves hold scriptures for religion, a work-basket for hand-work, and a looking-glass for beauty. The “few simple ornaments,” not described, are beauty for its own sake. Kane’s hostess has a mahogany bureau, a washtub, a rocking chair, and six straight chairs, as well as a large chest. These wooden items were probably not made in Scipio. The furniture was likely purchased in Salt Lake City, perhaps made there, as artisans were skilled at faux wood grains, imitating the fine and fashionable furniture of the East. The furniture might have been freighted from the East and on to Scipio, though.

So this pretty second wife in her clean, one-roomed log cabin enhanced every surface: the walls were white-washed and the ceiling covered with canvas. She imitated, as best she could, a more elaborate, refined interior. And she succeeded, according to her critical guest. These people roughed it no more than they had to.

Compare this picture to the first home of M. I. Horne, a pioneer of 1847, whose first two-room house thirty years before had neither floors nor doors. Lumber then had to be laboriously pitsawn. The Hornes made a bed by boring holes in two log walls and inserting poles which met at one single foot. Rawhide strips were woven to form a mattress. Packing boxes were adapted as cupboards, tables, and stools. No fabric was mentioned. But even this true pioneer house relied on the technology of the East; the Hornes had brought a little cook stove, a rocking chair, two small windows, and even the packing boxes with them.

Compared to the Horne’s primitive house, the fair Lydia of Scipio had made her place very nice, and she served well-prepared food. Lydia’s sister wife, the first Mrs. Thompson, was no slouch either. She had what Elizabeth Kane called “faculty,” serving meals with “heat in them and

16. Elizabeth Wood Kane, Twelve Mormon Homes, 128.
coolness in herself.” Kane expressed “wonder at her deft ways,” and asked, “Ought I to despise that woman? She certainly came up to Solomon’s ideal of a virtuous wife.”

The triumph of cleanliness over dirt is stunning considering the tiny houses in barren settlements. In Cove Creek Fort, Kane thought her hostess, with children hanging to her skirts, would have difficulty providing any food at all for her hungry guests. But she noted “the shining cleanliness of the table-linen and glass” and then discovered that every drop of water was carried a mile and a half into the settlement. Devotion to cleanliness triumphed even in a poor house where “everything was spotlessly clean, but everything showed the marks of poverty. The rug-carpet had large holes in it, but then the edges of each hole were carefully bound with wide braid.” The rug was past darning, but the housewife still made it nice.

Kane found many fine houses and orderly towns. One of Bishop Lorenzo Snow’s wives in St. George lived in a nice adobe house with pretty mauve-tinted paper on the walls, windows neatly draped with white curtains, a nice rag carpet on the floor, knitted mats before the door and fireplace, a lounge, rocking chair, and sewing machine. Someone even played the melodeon. A house in Payson had two well-furnished parlors and a costly carpet, all “virtuously clean and well-aired,” with trailing plants climbing around the windows and a singing canary. Provo, with its adobe or unburnt brick houses, was a dove-colored city. “The walls of the best houses in Provo were white or light-colored, and, with their carved wooden window-dressings and piazzas and corniced roofs, looked trim as if fresh from the builder’s hand.” Even more primitive towns had wide streets, young fruit trees, and irrigation water. Each town had its open central square, some unfenced, some surrounded by the crumbling adobe and cobble-stone walls of the old forts.

19. Elizabeth Wood Kane, *Twelve Mormon Homes*, 76.
These towns were laid out with community identities rather than miscellaneous structures. Less than twenty-five years after settlement, Utah had civilization of the Eastern style even in tiny towns far from Salt Lake City. By the time the railroad arrived, Utah was already saturated with national domestic culture.

All this squares with the advice of the *Woman’s Exponent*, the LDS journal published to critique Eastern views of Mormon women. The *Exponent* described no houses but gave the theory of refinement in its Household Hints column. This language, from Eastern periodicals, viewed woman as ornamental, the gracious mistress of the house, a very high standard for people in small log cabins. Here is an example: “A lady never appears to so much advantage as when doing the honors of her home. There she has opportunity for the full development of her character and a display of the charms which are truly her highest ornaments.”

The descriptions go well beyond the virtues observed by Elizabeth Kane but stand as the accepted aspiration. Another quotation told “every true woman to look as beautiful” as she could, “to brighten and gladden the world with her loveliness” so her mind will become “the home of sweet and lovely things.” The high standard was tempered by hard actualities for the poor, hatchet-faced pioneer women. But the generally light-hearted, realistic *Exponent* ran a continuous stream of refinement talk. One entry told the women that real etiquette was natural and not learned from books and charged the pioneers to turn out educated and poised children even as they eschewed outward fashion. The *Exponent*, advocating Victorian gentility, relentlessly urged ever higher standards of behavior.

Kane recorded her views of people, as well as houses. She was curious about life in polygamy, a condition to which she was clearly averse. How did women relate to their husbands and sister wives? While the *Exponent* urged lofty standards in marital relationships as in housekeeping, Elizabeth Kane observed real people and her comments yield interesting nuances. How did these women get along with each other and with their

William Carter Staines, Brigham Young’s gardener, who made the desert fruitful. Courtesy of LDS Archives.
Elizabeth Wood Kane, articulate visitor to Mormondom in 1872–73. Courtesy of Manuscripts Division, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.
The sisters of the Provo 3rd Ward Relief Society. Courtesy of LDS Archives.

This early painting of Parowan, Utah, artist unknown, shows houses grouped around a center block where the fine Parowan Rock Church was constructed in 1870. Special Collections, Gerald R. Sherratt Library, Southern Utah University.
Beaver, Utah, about 1875. Note the ambitious buildings and the fence. Courtesy of LDS Archives.

Pine Valley, Utah, about 1870, a small Mormon settlement in the shadow of the mountains. Courtesy of LDS Archives.
The Cedar City Tithing Office, bordered by flourishing young trees. Courtesy of LDS Archives.
This photograph of Cedar City ca. 1890 from the Alva Matheson collection shows telegraph lines already in place when Elizabeth Kane visited, as well as the more mature trees of the town. Special Collections, Gerald R. Sherratt Library, Southern Utah University.
The presidency of the Provo 3rd Ward Relief Society. Courtesy of LDS Archives.
William H. Dame and three of his four wives of Parowan. Elizabeth Kane, who referred to Dame as Bishop Norman, mistook one of the wives for a daughter. Of interest in this picture are the knitted lace, the prominent featuring of the fruit, and the house which is finished on the front, but not on the side. Special Collections, Gerald R. Sherratt Library, Southern Utah University.
The daughters of LDS Sunday School leaders. Courtesy of LDS Archives.
Two views of Salt Lake City’s Main Street in the 1870’s. Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved.
husbands? Where were their primary loyalties? What kind of marital relationship could a man have with several wives?

She visited a “lovely-looking wom[an]” who feared Mrs. Kane might have misunderstood her remarks on a previous visit. She had said then, laughingly, “Oh Mrs. K. don’t you ever consent to give your husband another wife! It’s a perfect pleasure to see one woman as happy as you are.” The remark suggested that a woman was not happy under polygamy and that she regretted allowing her husband another wife. But the woman’s later explanation of the earlier remark was “that she had not been envious: that she was perfectly satisfied with her condition as a plural wife, and thought her husband the best man on the whole earth. She admitted that if she had married the young man whom she had once loved in the ‘States’ and she had been henceforward his one darling wife that her earthly felicity might have been greater. But he was poor, they were very young, and when she joined the Saints he parted from her. And he had turned out badly.”

What do we get from this? Plurality brought satisfaction. She respected her husband, but did not expect the romance of young love. Love was sacrificed to eternal concerns. She felt that the “highest elevation in the next world” required plural marriage. She, and many others, were content to live dutifully in expectation of a glorious future. Devotion to the gospel and a belief in a higher purpose kept them in polygamy. Kane responded that she would be content with a lower place in heaven rather than sacrifice her “undivided ownership of a husband” on earth. She concluded that an intimate relationship of mind and heart, was impossible under polygamy.28

How did these husbands and wives get along? Relationships seemed to be formal. In St. George she stayed with Erastus Snow in the Big House. The first day, he brought his wife Artemisia in for some pleasant conversation. Kane was nonplussed when he returned in a few minutes with another woman he introduced “with grave simplicity” as his wife Minerva. A few minutes later, he was back with another woman, Elizabeth. A fourth, Julia Josephine was indisposed. Kane was always surprised when the Mormons said “my wife” and not “one of my wives.” Snow brought in his wives individually rather than as a group, indicating

that the relationship was between the husband and each wife, rather than the family.  

Could a husband of several wives actually love each one? Kane was surprised by evidence that they could and did. In Prairie Dog Hollow, Thomas Kane inquired about the wife of an old friend. The husband sadly produced her picture, speaking with great emotion of her death two years before. “Here, at last,” Elizabeth Kane exulted to herself, “is one man, high in Mormon esteem, yet a monogamist.” She was dumfounded to discover two other beloved wives. Bishop Macbeth’s house in Beaver, under the direction of his pretty, invalid wife, appeared thoroughly monogamic in tone. Kane’s satisfied diary note reads, “once more under a true wife’s roof.” But, she discovered, Macbeth had three wives. The husbands seemed devoted to individual multiple wives and did not seem to think them interchangeable. One sister wife thought that “of all the forlorn creatures . . . a man that has lost a wife is the forlornest. . . . He don’t know what to do for himself.” Her own husband had lost three wives since they had been married, and “I’m sure you’d have pitied him! He seemed so lost, we (we meaning the other wives!) scarcely knew how to comfort him.” If a parent might love several children individually with a great love, perhaps a husband might also love and value several wives as individuals.

While these women loved and respected their husbands, the wives themselves often moved in interesting counterpoint, almost like a married couple themselves. The women figured as the basic group while the men were less distinct, away, sometimes scarcely mentioned. When Mrs. McDiarmid, whom Kane had fancied an only wife, turned out to have four sister-wives, Kane asked whether the women were generally happier living together or in individual houses. Happier together, she was told. “If a man governed his wives according to the Gospel, and they tried to live up to their religion, they were far happier together.” In her case the harmony was due to her husband’s just government; he treated them all exactly alike. She was “treated with the utmost respect” as the first wife.

32. Elizabeth Wood Kane, *Twelve Mormon Homes*, 49.
and the head of the family; she got information from the husband and managed affairs with the other wives. In this apparent contradiction, all were equal, but some were more equal than others.

Apart from the family, the women worked together in the Relief Society, an institution of growing importance, Kane observed, because “women are found to give their confidence more freely to each other than to men.” A major responsibility of the sisters was to “pick up the dropped stitches of the Bishops.” The monthly Fast Day provided a holiday for the women who had no dinner to cook. They gathered at meetings, bringing food and goods to the Tithing House, distributing them to the poor. This cooperative self-denial encouraged sisterhood and aided the community in general.

The Exponent regularly reported on the activities of the Relief Societies, promoting their programs and doctrines and explaining them to outsiders. The Relief Society, considered by its members “the best organized benevolent institution of the age,” encouraged this female world. Joseph Smith said the Society would “assist, by correcting the morals and strengthening the virtues of the female community, and save the Elders the trouble of rebuking, etc.” Eliza R. Snow, in her brief history, said the Society was so popular in its early years, that even women of “doubtful character . . . applied for admission.” To prevent the inadvertent admission of shady ladies, applicants were required to present certificates of good moral character. Clearly this elitist organization encouraged pride of membership as well as good work. The Provo Fourth Ward announced their motto: “The poor to be filled first, the treasury next.”

The women cooperated in marriage as well. Kane saw several sister-wives living in the closest friendship and cooperation. She was amazed to see Artemisia Snow’s sister-wife help serve dinner just as a married daughter would; she had expected competition. She found the two Steerforth wives in Nephi remarkably close. They pointed out “the comfort, to a simple family,” in having two wives to lighten the labors of the

36. “The Female Relief Society,” *Woman’s Exponent*, 1 (June 1, 1872) 1: 2; 1 (June 15, 1872) 2: 8.
household. While all the children had been born by one wife, the two shared them. Kane was there long enough to see the tender intimacy between the wives and to feel sympathy, not revulsion, for them.38

Still, how could these husbands relate to their complex families? The children were certainly closer to their mothers than to their fathers. Kane had seen “a Mormon father pet and humor a spoiled thirty-fifth child.”39 but how often could that have occurred? There must have been real truth to a Mormon nursery rhyme which Kane quoted, “My mother’s my mother all the days of my life./But my father’s my father, only till he gets a new wife.”40 When things worked well, there was harmony and affection, but these women suffered slights and miseries. Mrs. McDiarmid admitted that she had had to pray hard to overcome bitter feelings about sharing with the other wives, and she blushed “till her eyes burnt” when she admitted that “I’d have slapped any one’s face twenty years ago that dared to tell me I’d submit to what I have submitted to.” Still, she found no fault with her husband. Her trials were with herself.41

Some of Elizabeth Kane’s antipathy to Mormon marital practices can be attributed to her own family history. Her father, the Scottish William Dennistoun Wood, met the charming American Harriet Kane, the “prettiest and wittiest girl in New York,” when not yet twenty and pronounced himself “desperately in love.”42 Kane’s parents had a love match, as did she. But perhaps she married so young because her own home life fell apart. Kane’s mother, “a beautiful and interesting lady,” died after childbirth when the parents had been married just fifteen years. Her husband grieved: “In life and death she was lovely in body, and, oh! How lovely in mind.”43 She had been lively, angelic, devoid of selfishness. “God only knows what I shall do without her,” he mourned.44 Said the daughter, “With my mother’s death, our happy childhood ended.”45

The mother had said that her husband might marry again, if he wished, though she preferred that he remain single, not venturing the family happiness “in so perilous a lottery.” But the thirty-nine year old widower departed for England for three months leaving his houseful of motherless children, one the new infant who soon died. Widower Wood then married Margaret Lawrence, whom Bessie carefully described as “not only a very beautiful woman, but a most admirable and careful housekeeper.” On his next visit to Liverpool, Wood’s old Aunt refused to see him, “partly, I think, from being disgusted at my remarriage so soon, as she was a great friend and admirer of Harriet.” He returned to America as Margaret’s first child was born, just two years after his first wife’s death. Other children followed in rapid succession.

At this point, Bessie married Thomas L. Kane. After the wedding, the family returned to the house. Bessie’s father noted that he was “a very busy man in those days, and could ill spare the time from Wall Street for weddings or any other ceremonies.” He thought he might “kill two birds with one stone,” an unfortunate phrase, and so asked Dr. Potts, who had performed the wedding, to baptize his new son at the same time. Potts hesitated, but assented. Bessie’s father was too busy to give his daughter an exclusive celebration. Bessie could well believe, with Utah’s polygamous children, that her father was her father until he got a new wife. Wood later married a third time.

When Elizabeth Kane edited her father’s autobiography, she reworked it as “a loving tribute to his blessed memory.” She kept her own mother at the center of the family, shaping their lives into a great love match, making her mother’s death “the great sorrow of his life.” She emphasized his consideration, justifying his self-centeredness. For his late wife’s sake, he controlled his temper and overcame his impatience and dislike of children. They grew to trust him. Bessie began to love him when he first apologized for an undeserved punishment. Elizabeth Wood Kane’s

47. William Wood, Autobiography, 388, 482.
story suggests that in her youth she suffered the same alienation of affection which she observed in polygamous homes. Her own father had three, if serial, marriages, which influenced her family life. Her story made poignant her observation in St. George about an older man's marriage: “I am quite used now to seeing with tranquillity several wives of nearly the same age with a hale middle-aged husband, but it strikes me with the old repulsiveness, when I see an old man going down the generations to his grandchildren's time to seek a new partner, while she who shared the joys and sorrows of his youth looks on, withered and gray. He will dandle babies on his knee, and enjoy a wintry sunshine, but her day is over.”

Elizabeth Kane was surprised to find the Mormon women independent. She compared the polygamous wives to an Eastern harem and found considerable and curious differences. “So many of [the Mormon women] seem to have the entire management, not only of their families, but of their households and even outside business affairs, as if they were widows; either because they have houses where their husbands only visit them instead of living day in and day out, or because the husbands are off on Missions and leave the guidance of their business affairs to them.” This statement indicated not only equality, but once again the absence of men on the scene. In this desert outpost, women did the work of men for simple practicality. Independence was thrust upon them. They voted, Kane noted, and prayed over congressional debates, but they took no general interest in politics. Kane thought the Mormons “thousands of years behind” in some customs; but in others, “you would think these people the most forward children of the age.” No career by which a girl could earn a living was closed to her. Mormon girls were not ashamed to work for a living, even at domestic labor. Hired girls could aspire to marry their masters, assuring themselves prosperity as well as blessings in heaven.

Brigham Young directly encouraged the women to work, not for feminist reasons, but because the territory needed much done, and he disapproved of strong men doing work women could do. He wanted women

employed as “type-setters, proof-readers, book-binders, clerks in stores, tailors.” He wished the girls among the Saints to be educated to do all such work as belonged to women. He thought they should prepare school books as “the female mind was naturally better fitted for such pursuits than that of the male.” It was a “mistake to have girls taught nothing but to play the piano, and when tired of that to go to reading novels.” They should be taught all desirable knowledge with the “useful and practical” taking precedence. The Exponent pronounced him the most “genuine, impartial and practical ‘Woman’s Rights man’ upon the American continent.” Kane mentioned several attractive and businesslike lady telegraphers. She also mentioned two “brave little wives” in Cedar City who ran an inn and managed the telegraph to support their blind husband.

Elizabeth Kane had been unwilling to come among the Mormon people at first, though she hoped the climate might benefit her husband. She considered the Mormons misguided and barbaric. She had not shared her husband’s sympathy for these misled people. Yet she came to admire their dedication; she believed they were sincere. She asked one elderly woman, a first-class gardener, why she had come to St. George, when her skills were lost on that desolate landscape. She answered, “Because I have Hope and Faith. When they wanted colonists for St. George, [she] said ‘Here am I, send me.’ And mind you, Mrs. K. I don’t repent.”

Kane felt that anyone who had “gone through suffering voluntarily for an elevated motive” was well worth listening to. She loved to see people in earnest. She liked the middle-aged women who had joined the church in their youth. The two Steerforth wives of Nephi impressed her with their “simple kindliness of heart and unaffected enthusiasm.” They had been among the first in the valley in difficult pioneer times. Yet they did not call them dark days. “We were starving, we were dying, suffering was then consuming life itself; but it was that which gave its brightness to the flame. The flame of true religion was burning then.

56. Elizabeth Wood Kane, Twelve Mormon Homes, 109–111.
57. Elizabeth Wood Kane, A Gentile Account, 70, 89.
God was with his People. I would give a thousand days of the present luxury and folly, for one hour of that exalted life.”

Perhaps in light of testimonies like the Steerforths, Kane thought that the effects of fashion would undo the Mormons. The *Exponent* voiced the same tension in its encouragements to be refined, but frugal. Was fashion overpowering Mormon simplicity? The Steerforth wives of Nephi called 1872, days we would consider austere, a time of “luxury and folly.” Many rural Mormons may have deplored the effects of fashion. At a meeting in St. George to discuss the Order of Enoch, a speaker commented on gender differences in Salt Lake City. He was always able to go into the “best society” and no one ever made him think he was rich or poor. But when he took along his wife in “her plain dress,” there were difficulties: “It isn’t that she isn’t made welcome but she herself objects to going among sisters dressed in laces, and furs and diamonds. I don’t grudge them anything beautiful in God’s kingdom, not a mite. Their rich dresses are honestly bought and paid for. Still, I find I don’t take [my wife] among them.” He went on to say that some folks objected to girls, including President Young’s daughters, being richly dressed. He didn’t fault them. But he hoped that the Order of Enoch might bring equality. Other brethren complained that they lived poorly and went on missions, “leaving their wives to toil for a living;” when they returned, they found that those who had stayed at home had grown rich. Fashion led to envy and friction.

When Elizabeth Kane traveled back to Salt Lake City, the proud center of Mormonism, she was uneasy. The wealth of the city spoiled it for her. A passing traveler, she thought, could foresee the religious decay of the Mormons by looking at the “growth in material prosperity and worldly spirit.” She preferred the rural life. She had found “the best men and women, the most earnest in their belief, the most self-denying and ‘primitive Christian’ in their behavior clad in the homespun garments of the remote settlements.”

Even Brigham Young indulged in luxury, indicating the tensions and contradictions of fashion. Clarissa Spencer, one of his daughters, noted


that she was one of only two sisters married publicly in the Lion or Beehive Houses. Most of the Young girls married quietly into polygamy, which their father urged, in small quiet weddings. Clarissa, having a bridegroom to herself, had a large wedding, wearing a white, brocaded, satin dress and matching shoes and ribbed silk stockings. She traveled to the endowment house in a big barouche drawn by a fine span of horses. The family cooked for days for the reception supper of 350 people. While preaching simplicity and polygamy, the Young family lived elegantly and rewarded monogamy. The Beehive house, the only place to entertain visitors, was tastefully, even elegantly furnished, and served bountiful repasts.62 The living standards of the leaders were at odds with those of the people.

Despite her concerns about fashion, Elizabeth Kane was converted to the kindness of the Saints. Her husband regained his strength in the desert and was able to walk long distances without his cane, but then he relapsed from the old wounds and came close to death. He suffered a great deal before he began to recover. During his illness, the Mormons watched at his bed, brought him delicacies, and prayed for him. For his recovery, Elizabeth Kane believed herself indebted to the “kind and able nursing of the Mormons. I shall not forget it.” As a result she wrote a memorandum to herself in her journal in red ink and signed it. “If I had entries in this diary to make again, they would be written in a kindlier spirit.”63 As erring as the Mormons might have been, she could not forget the “rest and peace of soul I have enjoyed among them.” She meant to remember that she felt she had done right “to worship with the Mormons as with Christians.”64 The “barbarous people” had shown them “no little kindness.”65

As she left St. George, she received letters from the East urging her to hasten back from “those dreadful Mormons.” She wrote, “Farewell, Arcadia! Or Pandemonium—Which?” but did not answer her own question. In Salt Lake, she spent a week at the Lion House, as the wife of an

64. Elizabeth Wood Kane, A Gentile Account, 175–76.
65. Elizabeth Wood Kane, A Gentile Account, 125.
honored and trusted friend of the household and as a “public testimony . . .
that my opinion of the Mormon women had so changed during the winter
that I was willing to eat salt with them.”66 This was a dramatic and public
change of heart. Kane, who had kept her distance from the “barbaric peo-
ple,” publicly embraced them. Unfortunately for us, she put away her
diary. As a friend, she could not report on her hostesses.
This change of heart infused the last journal entries, but not her basic
beliefs that the Mormons were wrong and that they were doomed. She
saw internal decay through luxury, and she thought the nation was
resolved to crush Mormonism. She saw “no prospect before these people
but one of wretchedness—and it will be in the name of the Law that our
President and Congress will bully and terrify these helpless women and
innocent little children!” By the next year, 1874, Kane expected that the
Mormons would be driven from “their hospitable homes.” She felt her-
sel, a non-voter, blood-guilty for the terrorism. She wrote in penance for
the hard thoughts and contemptuous opinions she had harbored and
instilled in others.67 She left Utah in sorrow, regretting what she foresaw
for the people there.
She saw only one salvation for the Mormons. Their community
would pass away “unless Persecution befriends them by making the
young pass through the same purifying fires their elders traversed, burn-
ing out the impure and unsound in faith. . . . No use for us to ‘put
down the Mormons.’ The World, the Flesh, and the Devil sap earnest-
ness soon enough.”68 In yet another contradiction, she thought that the
Mormons would benefit from the persecutions and mistreatments of
the national government. That refiner’s fire would allow them to survive
and to prosper.
Elizabeth Wood Kane returned to Pennsylvania. Her father published
her account of Twelve Mormon Homes to assist in understanding the
unfortunate desert people, and the book has been read since 1874 as a
valuable inside account. In the preface, her father said the book was pub-
lished to command “sympathy for the MORMONS, who are at this time
threatened with hostile legislation by Congress.” He believed, like his

66. Elizabeth Wood Kane, A Gentile Account, 177.
67. Elizabeth Wood Kane, A Gentile Account, 170, 175.
68. Elizabeth Wood Kane, A Gentile Account, 179.
daughter, that “any renewal of the persecution to which these unfortu-
nate people have been subjected will confirm them in their most objec-
tionable practices and opinions, and contribute directly to augment
their numbers and influence as a sect.” Enemies of the church, he said,
could not stamp out Mormonism; persecution strengthened the sect.
The sequel to this book, Kane’s diary of her days in St. George, only
recently rediscovered, was first published in 1995 as A Gentile Account of
Life in Utah’s Dixie, 1872–73. Back in Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Kane
entered medical school and graduated in 1883, the year her husband
finally succumbed to his ailments.

What can be learned from the diary entries of Elizabeth Wood Kane?
This historical moment, 1872–1873, then seemed a climactic one. But
the period has since receded, sunk into a valley between the pioneer
period and the persecutions which led to the loss of the vote, to the
Manifesto, and to statehood. Was this pandemonium or arcadia?
Looking through Elizabeth Kane’s eyes, I have to think arcadia. This was
a good time for the Mormons, and thanks to Kane’s writings, we can
revisit it. Full of complexities and contradictions, the seventies featured
pioneer life emulating Eastern fashion, kindly people in bizarre mar-
rriages, independent women subject to strong leadership, and a people
targeted for destruction who survived and flourished, perhaps because of
their bad times. If these entries seem illuminating, remember that it is
within your power to write documents that will similarly enlighten peo-
ple yet unborn. Go and do likewise. Return to your homes and take up
your pens.