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Book Review: *Elder Northfield's Home or, Sacrificed on the Mormon Altar: A Story of the Blighting Curse of Polygamy*

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***Elder Northfield's Home or, Sacrificed on the Mormon Altar: A Story of the Blighting Curse of Polygamy*, A. Jennie Bartlett, Edited with an Introduction by Nicole Tonkovich, 2015. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln. 313 pages. Endnotes included. \$23.18 .Paperback.**

Reviewed by:
Pamela Hayes-Bohanan¹

The practice of polygamy was sanctioned by the Mormon (Latter Day Saints, or LDS) Church from the early days of the religion (in the 1830s) until it was officially ended in 1890. *Elder Northfield's Home*, originally written in 1882, follows the story of Marion Westcott who marries missionary Henry Northfield and leaves her native England in order to follow her new husband to Utah. The two have heard rumors that some practitioners of their chosen religion are also practitioners of plural marriage and the two agree that they will not become involved in such an arrangement. However, once they arrive in their new home it becomes clear that keeping this vow will be difficult for Henry. The couple start a family but eventually Henry marries a second wife and has another family. Marion is distraught at the arrangement but ultimately stays with her husband, although she has given up the religion. After the death of his second wife, Henry marries a third time, however this marriage is strictly platonic. The novel does demonstrate that polygamy makes victims of both women and men. Elder Northfield is clearly pressured into taking additional wives by the church hierarchy, and is pained to see the suffering of each of his wives. However, having more than one wife also provides him with a status in the church he otherwise could not enjoy.

In this new republication of the novel, Nicole Tonkovich's introduction provides historical background, and contextualizes the story. She explains that this novel was part of a genre of antipolygamy literature (both fiction and non-fiction) not uncommon at the time of its original publication. "Reform fiction" such as *Elder Northfield's Home* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from which, Tonkovich points out, Bartlett "borrows heavily"(p. x) was one venue in which women of the day could make their voices heard to effect change. Bartlett's readers likely shared similar Protestant values and "found this antipolygamy novel to be interesting, inspiring and compelling" (p. xi) which would have served as a call to action for them. In fact, Bartlett makes this explicit in the preface she wrote in the original work. This call to action also borrowed from the Republican platform of the day, which likened polygamy to slavery. Bartlett's Preface doesn't hold back using words such as "barbarism", "superstition", "tyranny", "oppression", "fiendish", and "horrible" to describe plural marriage. Tonkovich further explains that this work may have been more credible than other anti-polygamy novels because it is "largely factually accurate." It does appear that Bartlett did a fair amount of research in order to write the book "Marion Westcott typifies many women who 'married within a year' of emigrating, about half of whom joined polygamous families" (p. xvii). It was also not atypical for subsequent marriages to be unconsummated. However, Bartlett's "call to action" to help those who left Mormonism to repatriate "largely ignores the extent to which...the Saints did not—and could not—remain

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isolated from the surrounding nation” (p. xvii). Railroads, other westbound emigrants, and telegraph lines connected Salt Lake City to the rest of the country.

As with any historic fiction, it is also sometimes hard to tell what was “factual”. Details about the difficult journey across the West in order to get to Utah are accurate. Bartlett muddies the waters by including stories about a real individual as a character in the novel. It is true that Brigham Young had at least 50 wives and he fathered well over 50 children. It is not hard to believe, then, that some were favored more than others, and that he had children that he saw seldom enough as to not recognize them, but the veracity of passage in the book in which Young dismisses one son, dressed in tatters, entirely to the favor of another is harder to determine.

Of course there were some women who were not opposed to polygamy. As Tonkovich explains

The Women’s Experiment, a paper founded by Mormon women in 1872 ‘often carried editorials defending the practice.’ Women who supported plural marriage mentioned the pleasure they found in the company of other wives, with whom they devised ingenious systems of cooperative housekeeping and childcare. (p. xxv)

These women are absent from the novel. In one passage Barrett describes sister-wives work who have formed a friendship only over jealousy for the newest (and youngest) wife. The wives are seen almost as toys are for children. The newest one getting the most attention until there is yet another novelty.

Additionally, Tonkovich points out that polygamy, while illegal, is still practiced today, and remains a part of the popular culture through reality television. Shows like *Sister Wives* and *Big Love* titillate modern audiences the way that anti-polygamy literature did in its day. Tonkovich also highlights the novel’s contemporary relevance regarding “how extensively federal law may regulate interpersonal relations” (p. xxxvi) in light of the recent Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage.

It was clearly not just polygamy that Bartlett criticized in her work, but also other aspects of the LDS culture as well. Her condemnation of the lack to schools in Salt Lake City is evident. When Marion wonders why there are no schools at all in her new home and concerned with all the children she sees in the street she is surprised to discover that

Brother Brigham did not approve of educating their children. They were to be unlike the world’s people-not seeking worldly wisdom, but wisdom from on high. It was sufficient for girls to be taught reading, writing, housework, and needlework, and the boys should go so far as to learn a little arithmetic. The parents were expected to teach them, but especially to instruct them in the religion of the Church (p. 89).

Knowing that the LDS church leaders are suspicious of her, Marion starts a school in her home “meaning to be very wary about it” she intends only to teach the children to sing. Her project was short-lived, however, when Brother Brigham puts an end to it, concerned that a woman of such weak faith should have any influence over the children “who take naturally enough to the ways of the world without help in that direction” (p. 91). Likewise books brought in by Gentiles (those who are not Latter Day Saints) were suppressed or destroyed leaving only LDS-church sanctioned material for reading.

Henry Northfield’s third marriage is to Edith, who is a friend of Marion. Bartlett creates a melodramatic scene (common in antipolygamy novels) in which Marion faints at the wedding,

falls ill and wakes up from a delirium in a hospital several weeks later. Edith is waiting by her friend's bedside to explain why she married Henry. Hearing her story Marion learns that Edith had little choice in the matter. As a Mormon woman she was under the control of her father, who arranged the marriage in order to rid himself of the obligation he had to her. And Henry offered to marry Edith so that she would not have to marry her other suitor, a rather unkind man.

As the novel progresses Bartlett makes the LDS Church to be as devious, almost evil in fact. Marion's daughter (Mayon) leaves Salt Lake City to live with her relatives in New York. She receives a letter calling her back to Utah, though, under the pretense of learning that her mother is ill. Once she arrives back home she discovers that her mother is in good health and knows nothing of the letter. All of this turns out to be a ruse in order to get her home in order to marry a Mormon who is posing as a Gentile - a scheme concocted by the Church elders. Furthermore, Brigham Young himself threatens her safety after Mayon successfully convinces several Mormon women to return with her to New York.

Tonkovich points out the ridiculousness of the situation in the Utah Territory as painted by Bartlett

Elder Northfield's Home shocked its readers with a funhouse-mirror exaggeration of family stability and mutual devotion in Utah Territory, where polygamous families were headed by a father who embodied the civic and theocratic identity of the family...His wives had knowingly and apparently willingly consented to the perverse arrangement. The family may have included so many offspring that a father could not recognize his own children on the street... (p. xxii).

However, Bartlett's happy ending is likewise completely farcical, with all the Northfield family members regrouping, albeit with different roles. For instance one son's young stepmother becomes his wife. This same son had to break off his first engagement (with Mayon) when he discovers he is actually Mayon's half-brother. Despite the musical chairs being played with family dynamics at the book's close everyone is satisfied in the end, even as, Tonkovich points out, that this arrangement is intended by Bartlett to demonstrate that "polygamy may taint even the relationships of those who have never practiced it" (p. xxii).

Mormon wives in the novel are portrayed as disillusioned, abused, exploited, crazed, or weak. Contrasting with the broken women who live in Salt Lake City, the picture Bartlett paints of Elise, Marion's twin sister who stays in New York and marries a gentile, is one of radiance - a young mother who is "the perfect picture of health, beauty, and joy". It is only when the Northfield's renounce Mormonism and adopt a Gentile way of life that they can enjoy true happiness.

The first anti-Mormon and literature appeared in the mid nineteenth century, partly in an effort to ban polygamy. Bartlett's novel, first published in 1882, was part of this wave. Other antipolygamy works included Fanny Stenhouse's *Exposé of Polygamy: A Lady's Life Among the Mormons*; Jennie Anderson Froiseth's *Women of Mormonism*; and Ann Eliza Young's memoir *Wife No. 19: The Story of a Life in Bondage*. Many of the other novels used sensational plot devices involving rape, torture, or kidnapping to tell the story. In contrast, the women in Bartlett's novel have some agency. This difference was important in realizing her intension, to demonstrate that dissolved polygamous families could successfully reintegrate into "Gentile" society.

Bartlett's book was republished in 1891 just a year after Church's president Wilford Woodruff declared that the Church should discontinue these marriages, as men who practiced

polygamy were disenfranchised and their wives forced to testify against them. As debates about Utah's statehood came to a head, the book was republished two more times, in 1894 and 1895. The final republication came just before Utah gained statehood in 1896.

Little is known about Jennie Bartlett, and according to Tonkovich this was by design:

Anonymity seems to be part of Bartlett's rhetorical strategy. She did not protest polygamy as a celebrity advocate, nor appear under the endorsement of a well-known reformer. She did not identify herself as a former victim of polygamy...She assumes an authorial stance as an everyday woman... (p. xxxii).

Bartlett used a variety of strategies in the writing, and timing, of this work. Her use of strong women characters (in Marion, Mayon, and Edith) in contrast to the victims portrayed in other antipolygamy works (and even the other Mormon wives in her own novel) combined with a strategic publication schedule, and the author's relative anonymity, allowed her to create a work that resonated with other Protestant women of her day. While certain aspects of the novel may seem absurd (particularly the ending) Bartlett's intention to create a call to action for other women was clear as her work contributed to antipolygamy, and indeed, anti-Mormon sentiment of the time.

Marion is a Phoenix rising from the ashes. Bartlett tells the story of a woman who is broken by degrees. She is first taken in by a promising new religion, personified by her handsome husband. Their journey to the Utah Territory is the first inclination of difficulties to come, and she becomes more and more disillusioned with the LDS church once she is enmeshed in its culture. Her breaking away likewise comes in pieces, first in releasing her daughter from the fate that she endured, ultimately bringing her whole family (including her sister-wife) into the Gentile life. Bartlett's writing is not subtle. There is no hedging. The message that all is well in the world of the Gentiles (in this case mainstream Christianity) and that those who follow false prophets into promised lands will find themselves disillusioned at best. This device was part of the call to action, demonstrating that the institution of polygamy could be eradicated, and that the survivors could be successfully repatriated.