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Polygamists and Political Activists: The Unlikely Marriage in *Pioneering the Vote*

Hanna Seariac

Review of Neylan McBaine, *Pioneering the Vote: The Untold Story of Suffragists in Utah and the West* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2020). 240 pages. $19.99 (hardback).

Abstract: *Pioneering the Vote by Neylan McBaine provides a cogent and concise history of the role of Latter-day Saint women in the suffrage movement. McBaine interweaves a fictionalized narrative centered on Emmeline Wells with primary source excerpts and summaries of particular events. The book brings to life the women described and succeeds in explicating many of the important barriers that Latter-day Saint women faced while trying to participate in the suffrage movement — namely, polygamy. McBaine accurately portrays the aversion to polygamy, but she could have spent more time describing why and how Latter-day Saint women found polygamy empowering. While the book succeeds in recounting history and begins to analyze Latter-day Saint women's role in this movement, more interaction with Latter-day Saint theology as a way of showing why women would feel passionately about obtaining suffrage while still maintaining polygamous relationships would create a more complete picture. Nevertheless, McBaine's historic contribution to this field of study acts as a milestone from which we can advance to more nuanced discussions about the way polygamy empowered women.*

February 14, 1870, marks the first day a woman ever cast a ballot in the United States.[1] Seraph Cedenia Young Ford, the grandniece of Brigham Young, cast her vote in a Salt Lake City municipal election on

1. "The Women to Vote in Utah," *Elmira Daily Advertiser*, 1870.

this day in response to the passage of an equal suffrage law in Utah. One cannot ignore the role polygamy had in the subsequent drafting of disenfranchisement laws, reacting to the widespread, women-based support for polygamy. Polygamy cast Utah's suffrage in a different light, and many famous suffragettes such as Susan B. Anthony vocally opposed this practice, which complicates our understanding of the suffrage movement. For a time following 1870, Utah did not permit women to vote, but in 1895, when proposing statehood, Orson F. Whitney argued in favor of woman suffrage, saying: "She was designed for it. She has a right to it."[2] Utah included this proposal while petitioning for statehood, and it was subsequently granted. Although the Nineteenth Amendment passed in 1920, not all women had the right to vote at that point because of naturalization laws.[3] Just over a hundred years later, all women have secured the right to vote within the United States of America.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a distinct relationship with promulgating women's suffrage. Sarah Kimball in *Woman's Exponent* wrote:

> Mrs. Wells, Editor of the Exponent, saying the women of Utah as a body MUST fight for the maintenance of the right to vote, and also to get national guarantee for all women in the nation. President Smith the Prophet said women should ask us for advice, and the time should come when the women of this Church should lead in such matters.[4]

Women like Emmeline B. Wells, Sarah M. Kimball, Emily Hill Woodmansee, Zina Young Williams, and others joined with national suffragettes, attended national conferences, wrote persuasive prose and poetry, and encouraged the nation to extend suffrage to women, echoing what the prophet Joseph Smith said should happen. The salient words of Woodmansee ring true: "If we stand but still,

2. See Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Carol Cornwall Madsen, and Jill Mulvay Derr, "The Latter-day Saints and Women's Rights, 1870-1920: A Brief Survey," in *Battle for the Ballot*, ed. Carol Cornwall Madsen (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1997), 102. For more on the convention debate on woman suffrage, see Jean Bickmore White, "Woman's Place Is in the Constitution: The Struggle for Equal Rights in Utah in 1895," in *Battle for the Ballot,* 221-44.

3. See Kathleen R. Arnold, ed., *Anti-Immigration in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 1:413-15.

4. Sarah M. Kimball, "Third Quarterly Conference," *Woman's Exponent* 7, no. 3 (July 1, 1878), 18, https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/WomansExp/id/6626.

nor progressive be,/We may wear these chains to Eternity;/And like many a woman, never know,/That gallantry often, is outside show."[5] McBaine's book *Pioneering the Vote*[6] pays special attention to Latter-day Saint women's impact on advancing suffrage while also speaking broadly about how suffrage moved from the West to the East until all women were guaranteed this right. In this review, I will summarize the contents of her book while providing commentary on points of particular interest and advance the conversation.

McBaine intermingles historical documentation with narrative to chronicle how the radical women's suffrage movement first experienced success in the frontier West before transitioning into the East. This work acts as an homage to the Nineteenth Amendment as 2020 marks its centennial and as one of the only works that discusses how women in the West participated in the suffrage movement. In her introduction, McBaine emphasizes that "we have to work harder to excavate the words and deeds of nineteenth-century women" as a way of amplifying these women to avoid falling "into the anti-feminist trap of silencing women's voices" (ix). By intermingling direct quotations from the women whose work she cites and constructing an accurate historical narrative around this evidence, McBaine gives these women a chance to tell their story.

The narrative focuses on Emmeline B. Wells, who becomes humanized through this method. While many historians have neglected women like Wells because of their polygamous relationships (and endorsement thereof), McBaine highlights how Wells' advocacy, spanning forty articles advocating for the ability for women to vote and run for office,[7] led her to Susan B. Anthony and other important figures.

Chapter one chronicles Emmeline's liveliness at the age of sixty. She prepared to speak at the Rocky Mountain Suffrage Convention in 1895 and mulled over the challenging work of convincing certain states to provide a suffrage clause within their constitutions. Much of this chapter focuses on Susan B. Anthony, who mentored Emmeline and planned the Rocky Mountain Suffrage Convention. McBaine highlights the connection between autonomy and voting. She flashes back to the Seneca Falls Convention, which

5. Emily Hill Woodmansee, "Simple Justice – Woman's Right," *Woman's Exponent* 8, no. 17 (February 1, 1880), 129, https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/WomansExp/id/26017/rec/187.

6. Neylan McBaine, *Pioneering the Vote: The Untold Story of Suffragists in Utah and the West* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2020); throughout the course of this article, I will cite this work using parentheticals.

7. Carol Cornwall Madsen, *An Advocate for Women: The Public Life of Emmeline B. Wells, 1870-1920* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2006), 51–52.

occurred in 1848, and points out, "Dedication to temperance, educational reform, labor reform, and other areas of civic and social influence were the main takeaways from the convention. It was only later that a woman's right to vote became a symbol of her ability to control her position in society and claim her independent agency" (9). The connection drawn here between voting and claiming agency subtly but surely points to the Latter-day Saint involvement within the suffrage movement. As voting grants individuals autonomy to contribute to the choice of society they want to live in, it seems natural that Latter-day Saints would support movements to reasonably expand the freedom of individuals. This salient point that McBaine refers to throughout the book merits attention.

Proceeding to chapter two, McBaine opens with an interaction between Emmeline and Elizabeth Taylor. This interaction expanded into a larger discussion of the role of African American women in the suffrage movement as well as a note about how Emmeline fought for civil rights for all. This moment illustrates the suffrage movement largely focused on white women, and the battle for African American women continued on afterward. In this chapter McBaine also begins to draw out the connection between polygamy and suffrage — one of the book's most interesting discussions. She highlights Emmeline's own marital struggles and cites how Latter-day Saints typically practiced plural marriage because they viewed it as a commandment of God, but women especially saw marriage as a way to garner influence and be protected (19). McBaine frames the discussion of plural marriage by describing how people outside of the Latter-day Saint community disliked plural marriage and saw it as a contradiction to women's rights. I understand why McBaine would choose to frame this discussion as such, but I diverge from her here in methodology. Naturally, one would have to point out the ways those on the outside saw plural marriage, but I think a more effective framing could be to show the parallels between women's reasoning for entering marriage and women's reasoning for wanting suffrage. Both come down to agency. McBaine certainly does this thematically throughout her book, but I could see value in this framing.

In chapter three, McBaine discusses the refugee status of women. Latter-day Saint women faced persecution for practicing plural marriage, and this led to the denial of statehood as well as polygamy becoming illegal in the United States, as it was seen as a non-Christian practice. This led to the tie between polygamy and suffrage, as many of the discussions around suffrage centered on how Latter-day Saint women would use their vote to uphold polygamy if possible. Race played

a role in the discussion around suffrage as well because of the Fifteenth Amendment. When the Fifteenth Amendment passed, some believed that to balance out giving former slaves the right to vote, women should also have the right to vote. This chapter provides critical background information and discusses the intersection between suffrage and race.

Chapter four discusses how many in the East disapproved of polygamy and could not fathom why Latter-day Saint women would willingly enter into plural marriage and still advocate for suffrage. The chapter centers on the story of Seraph Young, grandniece of Brigham Young, who cast the first vote within Utah. McBaine's narrative prowess here truly shines as she provides a beautiful retelling of this particular story. She portrays Seraph Young's emotions and timid courage eloquently, causing the reader to pause at this particular moment. While I largely like the narrative here, I do wish more attention was given to the philosophical motivations behind enfranchisement of women. McBaine hints at the connection between women finding autonomy in plural marriages and women being able to vote but does not go into the various ways that plural marriage benefitted women. The comparison between the benefits that plural marriage gave these women and how these benefits could have and perhaps did motivate women to want further autonomy from receiving suffrage seems like an apt point the book could make more explicitly. As women shared the responsibility of raising children together instead of living in a nuclear family situation, they had more autonomy to participate in other activities. This autonomy seems connected to agency, which I mentioned earlier, and could contribute quite well to McBaine's discussion.

McBaine continues on in chapter five to provide another instance of women exercising their right to vote. She notes that while many outside of Utah focused on why women in polygamous relationships would want to vote, Susan B. Anthony chose to focus on the fact that women were voting. Anthony saw voting as a right inherent to being a citizen. While she did not approve of any kind of marriage, she joined with Elizabeth Cady Stanton in supporting female polygamists' right to vote. When Anthony and Stanton came to Utah and spoke, they both emphasized principles of self-reliance for women. Anthony met Emmeline Wells, and they began working together later on. Anthony's visit inspired the creation of the *Woman's Exponent*, and Wells' career as a writer and activist launched. McBaine mentions the tension between the *Woman's Exponent* and the *Anti-Polygamy Standard,* but I think it would have been effective to briefly discuss whether supporting a woman's

right to vote was in contradiction with wanting to ban polygamy. This discussion seems critical as the relationship between plural marriage and suffrage is made clear throughout the book.

Moving forward to chapter six, McBaine opens with a quote from Wells on a man not being the point of existence, but she says happiness comes from self-reliance. This quote frames McBaine's narrative of Wells' quest to court religious leaders, politicians, and suffragists to try to convince them to come to the Rocky Mountain Suffrage Convention in May 1895. McBaine dedicates a section in this chapter to Charlotte Cobb Young, who rejected polygamy after living in the Lion House as a daughter of polygamy and who fought fiercely with Wells. McBaine cites the reasons for Charlotte Young's being rejected by Latter-day Saint mainstream leaders: "her rhetoric was too highbrow for the self-preserving Mormons, too philosophical and distant from the practical needs they wrestled with daily in their frontier existences" (70). While this rings true, McBaine seems to neglect that Young tried to undermine a major tenet of Latter-day Saint religion, and this might have contributed *more* to their rejection of her than anything else. I largely agree with McBaine's portrayal of the situation, but more space should have been dedicated to showing the religious conflict that spurred the Latter-day Saint rejection of Young. While one could read into McBaine's statement about self-preservation and assume she refers to the desire of Latter-day Saints to maintain polygamous relationships, this link is not explicitly made, and I find it one of the central factors behind the rejection, based on the evidence McBaine presents.

In chapters seven and eight, we read about how Anthony was welcomed at the Templeton Hotel. At the Rocky Mountain Suffrage Convention, Idaho did not have a delegate, in large part because of the anti-Latter-day Saint bias. The Anti-Mormon Test Oath was a part of the test in Idaho to become engaged civically. This test was essentially that if you identified as a "Mormon," you should not hold political office. *Reynolds v. United States* reinforced that the United States would restrict the rights of Latter-day Saints provided they were in polygamous relationships. The Anti-Mormon Test Oath affected many of the suffragists along with the *Reynolds* case. McBaine includes a discussion about the *Woman's Exponent* and Emmeline's work there as a writer. The rest of the chapter goes over how women lost their suffrage within Utah. This occurred with the Edmunds-Tucker Act, which disenfranchised all those in Utah except monogamous Utah men. Polygamy became a crime that could result in imprisonment, and Utah still had to gain

statehood in addition to gaining civic rights for women. Here McBaine cites polygamy as the reason for losing statehood and mentions that the government considered it a "moral cancer." While polygamy is perhaps the most important issue contributing to this, it seems that general anti-Mormon bias as mentioned earlier in chapter seven contributed as well, so I wish McBaine would nuance this discussion and include more about this element of the persecution, but overall she does a decent job of summarizing the events.

In chapter nine, she describes how the *Anti-Polygamy Standard* came to be, including a conversation about how the society and newspaper believed women were enslaved within the home because of their sex as a result of polygamy. Froiseth, a woman involved in this effort, took a stance against Latter-day Saint women and opposed suffrage for them. Froiseth eventually realized that Emmeline would take center stage and that she should not try to stunt her efforts. McBaine again provides a smooth narrative, but I wish she spoke more to how the Relief Society created a network of women, which she touches on. When she brings up the detail about how Brigham Young brings in mulberry trees and discovers the impact that has upon the ladies' ability to create silk, it seems like a perfect foray to draw out the connection between the Relief Society and women's suffrage, but McBaine does not do so. While the narrative is cohesive, I think McBaine could generally, but especially in this instance, create stronger connections between Latter-day Saint culture and theology to women's suffrage because these elements clearly contributed to why Emmeline and others fought so fiercely for suffrage.

As the last five chapters describe the convention as it occurred and details afterwards, I felt it best to summarize them briefly, but discuss a theme that occurs throughout them. Emmeline's work with the *Woman's Exponent* and other suffrage work led to Utah's statehood and civic rights for women. She continued on to do work internationally and ended up running for office. There are two important moments to focus on within these chapters before concluding with a discussion about the book generally. McBaine dwells on a particular lyric from "O My Father", which reads, "In the heavens are parents single? No, the thought makes reason stare!/Truth is reason, truth eternal Tells me I've a mother there."[8] She follows this by saying, "[T]his radical doctrine made the hymn a favorite of Latter-day Saint women, and they pointed to it as an example to the outside world of how their faith supported and enabled women, rather than oppressing them, as the practice of polygamy suggested"

8. "O My Father," *Hymns*, no. 292.

(121). She even provides a potential reason for focusing more on the work of mankind rather than the connection to Latter-day Saint theology by saying, "More than once, Emmeline had been warned and censured by Snow for her devotion to the causes of mankind rather than exclusively focusing on those of God" (121). Here McBaine provides the first serious discussion of elements of feminism impacting the suffrage movement, but does not flesh them out. As this unique Latter-day Saint doctrine was taught but perhaps not completely understood, it feels important to the rest of the book. Heavenly Mother provides a concrete foundation for understanding Latter-day Saint feminism and proves itself as one of the necessary elements to have interwoven throughout the narrative rather than in one solitary place. While not much is known about Heavenly Mother, the existence of a co-deity with Heavenly Father clearly illustrates a reason Latter-day Saint women in particular, who focus so much on agency, would see themselves as deserving of autonomy. This hinge point within the narrative takes a special place, as it is one of the few moments of authentic spirituality that we see Emmeline experience. With that said, it seems this particular doctrine guides Latter-day Saint belief throughout the rest of the book.

The final moment I will focus on before concluding is the last moment within the narrative. I have reproduced it here in full:

> On March 13, 1906, Susan B. Anthony died in her home in Rochester, New York. The adoption of the "Susan B. Anthony Amendment" into the U.S. Constitution was still fourteen years away. Although unfulfilled in her lifelong dream of seeing all American women enfranchised, she didn't forget her friends in the West. Hours from death, Anthony slipped the gold ring — the same gold ring she had offered to Emmeline years before — off of her finger and instructed those around her to send it to Emmeline. This ring was sent to Utah with a note that reads, "In recognition of her esteem and love for Mrs. Emmeline B. Wells, Miss Anthony sent one of her gold rings on the day of her death to Mrs. Wells in Utah. The bond between these two women was very strong and the friendship had continued for nearly thirty years." Emmeline accepted the ring publicly at a memorial service for Susan B. Anthony held in Salt Lake City on March 17, 1906. Fourteen years later, on October 3, 1919, Emmeline likely wore the ring on the steps of the Utah State Capital building, her tiny, hunched, ninety-one-year-old frame draped in ghostly white, to witness the governor

> of the State of Utah, Simon Bamberger, announce Utah's ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. (196–97)

One must appreciate McBaine's literary prowess here. This passage perfectly ends the book. I particularly enjoy how descriptive the ending is and the sentiment that has been attached to it. While Emmeline and Susan completely differ on their moral and religious views, they were united by their desire for women's suffrage, and this helped them develop a close bond and friendship. McBaine makes this clear here, and her writing is beautiful. Beyond drawing attention to McBaine's writing style, this passage illustrates one critical theme throughout the book, which is that Latter-day Saint and non-member women would sometimes struggle to work together because of polygamy but could overcome it. By connecting Emmeline to a household name such as Susan B. Anthony, McBaine underscores her importance in the suffrage movement.

Overall, *Pioneering the Vote* is a well-done start to documenting Latter-day Saint women's involvement with the suffrage movement. The fictionalized narrative format makes the book accessible to many, and the interspersed factoids provide the reader with intersections to do further research. On the whole, I found myself impressed with the work and enjoyed reading it. I would push again on the necessity to speak more to the uniquely Latter-day Saint elements that inspire women to enter into the suffrage movement. While McBaine adequately discusses the suffrage movement as a whole, the parts where she brings up what is idiosyncratic to Latter-day Saints merit a larger discussion to completely contextualize the work. The focus on polygamy resolves some of the issues I currently speak about, but I felt like plural marriage necessitated further conversation. She does not write much about what opportunities women were afforded through plural marriage and how that connects to the suffrage movement, and this seemed like an aspect of Latter-day Saint religion that would particularly apply. Regardless of my criticisms with it that certainly can be resolved through later works, McBaine's pioneering efforts to document Latter-day Saint women pioneering the vote prove successful.

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