

NEWS AND COMMENTARY

WARREN JEFFS AND THE
MORMON ART OF FORGETTING

By Hugo Olaiž



HE WAS ONE of the best known leaders of polygamy in America and a wanted man. His picture was posted everywhere, with a substantial reward offered. When he was apprehended by federal agents in Nevada and returned to Utah to be jailed, the arrest set off a media frenzy, with stories appearing in the national media, in addition to the *Deseret News* and the *Salt Lake Tribune*. The news of his arrest came as a shock to his followers. He himself maintained that he was the victim of religious persecution.

I am speaking of George Q. Cannon, who in February 1886 was arrested in Humboldt Wells, Nevada, en route to Mexico.¹ If you do not remember this episode from the LDS past, you are far from alone. “Mormons study the *art* of forgetting what they have seen and heard,” U.S. district attorney P. T. Van Zile wrote sarcastically in 1887. “It often happens that a Mormon . . . goes upon the witness stand, and testifies that he cannot remember having performed a marriage ceremony that took place within a week past.”²

Just as our noble pioneer forebears had trouble remembering the polygamous marriages that could land them in jail, so we 21st-century Mormons cultivate the art of forgetting our polygamous past. And we are

not just forgetting that past: We become outraged when someone dares to remind us of it.

In a section on the Church’s website, www.lds.org, titled “Comments on the News,” LDS officials recently published a litany of protests against the media for sins ranging from calling Warren Jeffs a Mormon and using the expression “Mormon Polygamist,” to airing a show on polygamy from Salt Lake City with Temple Square in the background.³ Are such protestations legitimate or a public relations ruse, part of the “we’re-not-weird” campaign?

Long after having abandoned polygamy, we wish we could forget it. Polygamy led Joseph Smith to lie, Brigham Young to defy the government, John Taylor to become a fugitive. Yet, ironically, most Latter-day Saints would likely agree that despite the temporary discontinuation of its practice, the Principle hasn’t really been abolished—that polygamy will be restored during Christ’s Millennial reign.⁴

After all, a form of polygamy is still practiced today by LDS men who, after divorcing their first wives or becoming widowers, have a second wife sealed to them.⁵ For this reason, a recent campaign protesting Elder Russell M. Nelson’s support of a “defense of

traditional marriage” petition bluntly accuses the apostle of practicing “celestial polygamy.”⁶ As historian Martha Sonntag Bradley explains, despite the abolition of the practice, we “are left with the same unanswered doctrinal questions as were Church members a hundred years ago.”⁷ So the question must be asked: When members of the media mix up Mormons with polygamy, are we upset because we perceive them to be distorting our religion, or because they are throwing a spotlight on an aspect of our religion we desperately want to forget? When we bristle at the possibility that the public will confuse the LDS with the FLDS, does our concern arise from our being aware, at some level, of the many genuine similarities between the LDS of the 1880s and the FLDS of today?

CONSIDER, for example, the rhetoric of war that Warren Jeffs used in a speech to FLDS members captured on tape before he went on the lam: “Our prophet and the Celestial Law, the principle of revelation, are under attack,” Jeffs declared. “There is a combined effort in the state of Utah and the state of Arizona to come against our prophet and our people, trying to stop the work of God.”⁸ How far is Jeffs’s rhetoric from that of ardent polygamist and LDS president John Taylor, who once stated that “the people of the rest of this country are our enemies”? “We must not yield to them,” Taylor urged. “When they enact tyrannical laws, forbidding us the free exercise of our religion, we cannot submit.”⁹

Or consider how the Saints were galvanized around their belief in the approaching end of the world. What fear could 19th-century “cohabers” have of the federal government when their beloved prophet John Taylor had prophesied that the nation would “fall and crumble until it is no more”?¹⁰ Jump to the present: In 1999, when FLDS leaders predicted impending apocalypse, a Hildale family cavalierly amassed \$47,612 in credit card debts.¹¹ More recently, when Warren Jeffs reportedly announced that the world would end on 6 April 2005, an army of followers worked night and day in Eldorado, Texas, to finish an FLDS temple just in time for the momentous event.¹²

Or consider how both conflicts quickly became national obsessions—the one sensationalized in anti-polygamy novels, the other in cable news, talk shows, and blogs.¹³ In the 19th century, national discourse bent toward fantastic claims about rape, incest, and genetic abnormalities. But in an ironic twist, current media stories about polygamy sug-



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gest there may have been grounds for those nineteenth-century fears. Themes of sexual and domestic abuse may seem more imagined than real when we read them in *Mormon Wives* and other 1850s anti-polygamy novels—but not today, when polygamists are indicted for rape and incest. Predictions by scientists of the 1860s that polygamy would result in genetic abnormalities may not have been realized in the days of Brigham Young,¹⁴ but last February, both the *Deseret News* and the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported that perhaps as many as twenty FLDS children suffer severe mental retardation because of a rare genetic disorder blamed on inbreeding.¹⁵

Or consider how, in both cases, the moral and legal campaigns against deviant sexual behavior (bigamy in the 19th century, sex abuse in the 21st) led men to disappear from their communities and turned religious leaders into wanted fugitives. “Those who did not submit to arrest had to be constantly on the move,” wrote Richard S. Van Wagoner in his description of the Raid that drove the LDS Church’s First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve into hiding.¹⁶

Women and children were left to provide for themselves as best they could. Secret codes were employed in letters and messages, and children were taught to be evasive under questioning so as not to give away the details of polygamous relationships.¹⁷

The same could have been written of the situation currently faced by FLDS families.

Or consider how, in both conflicts, religious leaders on the run availed themselves of loyal accomplices, shady legal maneuvers, and the sacrifices of devoted followers. As John Taylor grew old and frail, George Q. Cannon, a recaptured fugitive, forfeited a then-astronomical \$45,000 bail bond so that he could continue running the Church from the underground. Warren Jeffs reportedly bled the coffers of the FLDS so that he could

stay out of jail. “The people say that you and Cannon and [Joseph F.] Smith have run away and left the masses to go to the penitentiary or humiliate themselves before the courts,” a frustrated Mormon complained to John Taylor, who was then in hiding. “You will

“Principle Voices,” as they call themselves, seek to educate the public and to dispel myths through their own publications, in interviews with the media, and on their website.²¹ In the 19th century, prominent women such as Ann Eliza Young and Sarah M. Pratt wrote passionate condemnations of polygamy. Their work is echoed in the contemporary denunciations of Andrea Moore-Emmett and Rachel Strong.²²

Not only in the court of public opinion, but also in the courts of law, a woman’s testimony is as important for making a case against polygamist men today as it was in the 1880s. One of the turning points of the landmark case *Reynolds v. the United States* occurred when Amelia Jane Schofield Reynolds, uncoached, testified that she had been married to George Reynolds by the man who only moments earlier had told the court he could not recall performing the ceremony.²³ Recent legal testimony by Mary Ann Kingston, LuAnn Kingston, Ruth Stubbs,²⁴ and others suggests that cases built against polygamist men continue to rely

heavily on the testimony of wives who, either willingly or under pressure, are more forthcoming and less forgetful than their husbands.

JUST like their pioneer forebears—who are also *our* pioneer forbears—members of the FLDS Church retreated to remote deserts so they could worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience. Like our great-grandparents, they created an *imperium in imperio*, a modern-day theocracy, and exalted loyalty and obedience to their prophet as supreme virtues. When they are left alone by the government, they survive and even prosper. When the government falls upon them, they resist fiercely because, unlike us, they still remember Rudger Clawson’s 1884 dictum: “I very much regret that the laws of my country should come in conflict with the laws of God, but whenever they do I shall invariably

\$800 REWARD!



JOHN TAYLOR. GEORGE Q. CANNON.

To be Paid for the Arrest of John Taylor and George Q. Cannon.

The above Reward will be paid for the delivery to me, or for information that will lead to the arrest of

JOHN TAYLOR,
President of the Mormon Church, and
George Q. Cannon,
His Counselor; or

\$500 will be paid for Cannon alone, and \$300 for Taylor.

All Conferences or Letters kept strictly secret.

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WANTED BY THE FBI

UNLAWFUL FLIGHT TO AVOID PROSECUTION - SEXUAL CONDUCT WITH A MINOR, CONSPIRACY TO COMMIT SEXUAL CONDUCT WITH A MINOR

WARREN STEED JEFFS



DESCRIPTION

| | | | |
|---------------------|--|--------------|----------|
| Date of Birth Used: | December 3, 1955 | Hair: | Brown |
| Place of Birth: | San Francisco, California | Eyes: | Brown |
| Height: | 6'3" to 6'4" | Sex: | Male |
| Weight: | 150 to 155 pounds | Race: | White |
| NCIC: | W94749941 | Nationality: | American |
| Occupations: | Private School Teacher, Accountant | | |
| Scars and Marks: | None known | | |
| Remarks: | Warren Jeffs is the leader of a polygamous sect known as the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints (FLDS) and is considered a "prophet" by his estimated 10,000 followers. Jeffs has ties to Utah, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, and British Columbia. Jeffs may be in the Leesburg, Florida, area. Additionally, Jeffs may travel with a number of loyal and armed bodyguards. | | |

CAUTION

WHEN MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA MIX UP MORMONS with polygamy, are we upset because we perceive them to be distorting our religion, or because they are throwing a spotlight on an aspect of our religion we desperately want to forget?

force men to go to the pen when you will not go yourselves.¹⁸

This uncomfortable part of our past (who wants to remember our prophet as a fugitive on the lam?) made a dramatic “return of the repressed” when Warren Jeffs’s brother Seth was captured with \$140,000 in cash and a donation jar labeled “Pennies for the Prophet.” When Warren himself was apprehended, riding in a luxurious Cadillac SUV, he had with him more than \$67,000 in cash.¹⁹

Or consider how, in both conflicts, women of polygamous marriages, stereotyped as passive, silent victims, showed themselves empowered to speak out both for and against the Principle. In the 19th century, women such as Emmeline B. Wells and Martha H. Cannon defended polygamy by writing in the *Women’s Exponent*, organizing rallies, even lobbying in Washington.²⁰ Today, Anne Wilde, Mary P. Batchelor, Marianne Watson, Linda Kelsch and other

choose the latter.”²⁵

If we protest today when we see CNN's Anderson Cooper hosting a show on polygamy with Temple Square in the background, is it because we fail to understand how Mormonism could possibly be associated with the crimes ascribed to the FLDS? Or is it, rather, because we know that Temple Square was once Polygamy Central—and that knowledge sits uncomfortably with us? If we resent it when the media call these polygamist groups “Mormon,” is it because we genuinely believe the practice of polygamy is inconsistent with that label—that they have abandoned the faith of our forebears?²⁶ Or is it because we don't want to be reminded that polygamy was—is?—a defining characteristic of a brand of Mormonism we have long since forgotten? ☹

NOTES

NOTE: The author wishes to acknowledge the feedback and insights of Lavina Fielding Anderson and John-Charles Duffy in drafting this essay.

1. See B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 6:122–32.

2. “The Twin Reliq,” in Jennie Anderson Froiseth, ed., *The Women of Mormonism* (Detroit, Michigan: C. G. G. Paine, 1887), 320; see also Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 162.

3. See www.lds.org/newsroom (accessed 1 August 2006); see also “Media Gets a Big ‘F’ for Stories on FLDS,” *Deseret Morning News*, 12 May 2006. The news story about polygamy with Temple Square in the background was a special report by CNN's Anderson Cooper that aired 10 May 2006. Elder Earl C. Tingey, from the Seventy, complained to Cooper on the 17 May show. See page 71–72 of this issue.

4. Eugene England has strongly questioned whether polygamy is an eternal principle, even though many early LDS leaders, including Brigham Young, Joseph F. Smith, and John Taylor, argued for it. See Eugene England, “On Fidelity, Polygamy, and Celestial Marriage,” *Dialogue* 20:4 (Winter 1987): 138–254.

5. See the 1998 *Church Handbook of Instructions*, 1:73–74. Even though it is not mentioned in the *Handbook*, before remarrying in the temple, divorced men who have their first wives still sealed to them may request, and successfully obtain, a cancellation of their first sealing so not to enter into celestial polygamy, even if the first wife doesn't have plans to get sealed to another man.

6. For recent stories about apostles Dallin H. Oaks and Russell M. Nelson entering celestial polygamy, see “Church Changes Policies for ‘Temple-Only’ Marriages,” *SUNSTONE*, December 2003, 79; “Married,” *SUNSTONE*, April 2006, 78; see also the news story on page 74 of this issue.

7. Martha Sonntag Bradley, *Kidnapped from That Land: The Government Raids on the Short Creek Polygamists* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 194.

8. “Transcript: Barlow Describes the Coming Battle with Utah and Arizona Authorities,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 16 July 2005; “Tapes of Jeffs Illuminating” (*Deseret Morning News*, 9 April 2006).

9. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 169.

10. *Ibid.*, 158; see also 161, 168, 203–04.

11. “FLDS Church Teachings Lead Members into Financial Mire,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 5 May 2004.

12. “FLDS Awaits April 6 Anniversary,” *SUNSTONE*, March 2005, 75–76; “On ‘Doomsday’ Eve, Eldoradoans Poke Fun at FLDS,” *SUNSTONE*, May 2005, 77.

13. Gordon, *The Mormon Question*, 29–54.

14. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 159–160;

15. “Birth Defect Is Plaguering Children of FLDS Towns,” *Deseret Morning News*, 9 February 2006; “Rare Genetic Disorder Common in FLDS,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 11 February 2006.

16. The anti-polygamy campaign of the 1880s, which Mormons called the “Raid,” non-Mormons called the “Crusade.” The Boyden Raid of 1944 was also called the “Boyden Crusade.” The infamous Short Creek raid of 1953 was called “Operation Short Creek” or “Operation Seagull” (after the name of a bill which the Arizona legislature had passed, ostensibly for “grasshopper control” but in fact as a secret source of funding for the raid). The simultaneous search of four homes in Hildale and Colorado City last May was called the “mini-raid.” See Gordon, *The Mormon Question*, 155; Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 287, 295; Bradley, *Kidnapped from That Land*, 121; “Police Probing Sex Abuse Raid Colorado City Homes,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 26 May 2006.

17. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 177–78.

18. *Ibid.*, 192.

19. “Polygamist Sect Leader Warren Jeffs Arrested in Las Vegas,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 29 August 2006; “Fugitive Polygamist Leader Warren Jeffs Arrested Near Las Vegas,” *Deseret Morning News*, 29 August 2006.

20. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 142; Gordon, *The Mormon Question*, 97–101; 163–66.

21. See www.principlevoices.org.

22. Andrea Moore-Emmett, *God's Brothel: The Extortion of Sex for Salvation in Contemporary Mormon and Christian Fundamentalist Polygamy and the Stories of 18 Women Who Escaped* (San Francisco: Pince-Nez, 2004); John R. Llewellyn, *Polygamy's Rape of Rachel Strong: Protected Environment for Predators* (Utah: Agreka Books, 2006); see also “Polygamist Is a Predator, Book Says,” *Deseret Morning News*, 21 May 2006.

23. Gordon, *The Mormon Question*, 115–16. During the second Reynolds trial, Amelia was nowhere to be found.

24. “Sex Abuse Victim Sues Kingstons,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 29 August 2003; “Another Kingston Goes to Court on Sex Charges,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 6 August 2003; “Third Wife Testifies Tearfully in Trial,” *Deseret Morning News*, 13 August 2003.

25. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 180.

26. Current LDS complaints about the media calling polygamists “Mormon” echo a complaint lodged by Mark E. Petersen of the Quorum of the Twelve shortly after the 1944 Boyden Raid. Petersen protested to the United Press that polygamists should not be called fundamentalists: “Use of this name has caused confusion in the public mind and has tended to give the impression (which is what the cultists sought) that they are old line Mormons, which they are not.” Quoted in Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 287–88. Ironically, polygamist Leroy Johnson wrote that it was Petersen himself who started to call them “fundamentalists.” See Bradley, *Kidnapped from That Land*, 28.

