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Abstract

This volume is a strikingly original interdisciplinary study of the diverse practices of polygamy in America from 1500 to 1900. Polygamy was a cornerstone of a number of Native American and African-American civilizations, Pearsall shows, just as much as monogamy was a cornerstone of the American colonies and young American republic. Small wonder then, that American colonization and expansion onto the western frontier brought an inevitable “clash of civilizations”—with fights over the form and the function of the family as a central battleground. The book offers exquisitely documented case studies of these clashes from Mexico to Quebec, from New England to southern California, together with the more familiar federal clash with the new Mormon communities. The law and theology of marriage get blurred a bit with the author’s laser sharp focus on the diverse practices of polygamists and the predictable pugilism of monogamists, but this book is highly commended.

Keywords: Sarah Pearsall; marriage; polygamy; monogamy; Native American polygamy; African slavery; clash of civilizations

Review of Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Polygamy: An Early American History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. 416. \$38.00 (cloth). ISBN: 9780300226843.

Cambridge historian Sarah Pearsall has produced a richly sourced, elegantly written, and strikingly original interdisciplinary study of the diverse practices of polygamy in America from ca. 1500 to 1900. “Like it or not, plural marriages are part of American history,” she writes (292), and the story begins long before the familiar events of nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy and the crackdown by Congress and the federal courts. For three centuries before, various Native Americans and African American slaves followed ancient laws and customs of polygamy, which church and state authorities alike worked hard to eradicate. Soldiers, sailors, merchants, trappers, and frontiersmen sometimes deserted their spouses and children and illegally remarried, earning them charges of polygamy in the colonial and later state courts. Occasional free-love radicals and town-hopping cads were caught with multiple spouses and households and faced severe criminal sanction, sometimes the noose. And polygamous biblical utopians popped up on occasion—inspired by Old Testament patriarchs like Jacob, David, and Solomon and defended by early modern apologists like John Milton,

John Miner, and Martin Madan (181–214), as well as by their own leaders, including women like Belinda Pratt (249–88) who offered a robust defense of Mormon polygamy.

Parts of the long history of American polygamy—and its European and African antecedents and analogues—have been well researched and well told. Pearsall knows this secondary literature cold; she devotes a quarter of her book to footnotes, including detailed colloquies with other scholars and studies. Her main text, however, is focused on primary sources in their original languages. She analyzes these skillfully with the methods of historical sociology, anthropology, philology, and archeology, and she presents them with a striking gift for narrative. Pearsall has dug into mountains of travel diaries, testamentary documents, private letters, missionary reports, town chronicles, newspaper stories, dictionaries, treatises, old maps, burial sites, archeological digs, even records of skeletal and tooth decay patterns, to tell her history of American polygamy. Her account unfolds in eight rich chapters, chronologically arranged, each analyzing two or three poignant episodes or major texts in context that together illustrate the persistent, evolving, and diverse practices of American polygamy and the oft violent collisions with prescribed monogamy.

The first four chapters of part one, “Colonial Clashes,” together with chapter 7 are the most original part of the book and the main focus of this review. They are based on painstaking archival research into sources hard to reach and read. Chapter 1 sets the tone and main themes for these chapters. Here Pearsall offers a lengthy case study of the clashes between colonial monogamist policies and indigenous polygamous practices in Spanish North America, culminating in the Gaule Rebellion of 1597 in colonial Florida and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 in colonial New Mexico. Echoing the anathema against polygamy issued by the Council of Trent in 1563, and backed by the Spanish Inquisition, Franciscan missionaries pressed local tribal leaders to give up their multiple wives in favor of sacramental monogamous marriage. Enforcing new Spanish anti-polygamy laws of 1530 and 1551, colonial rulers called for the criminal prosecution of all polygamists. But most of the indigenous tribal leaders, even when they accepted Christianity, retained their multiple wives, following ancient customs and privileges. Plural marriages not only provided them with more opportunities for sex, status, and productive and reproductive labor and wealth. They also created valuable kin-based alliances across familial and tribal boundaries, strong networks of mutual caring and sharing of food, resources, child care, education, welfare, and elder care, and vital cooperatives in trade, hunting, military protection, and collective responses to natural disasters, droughts, and disease. For a time, a tenuous “colonial bargain” (37) contemplated a more gradual transition to monogamy over a generation or two. But as colonial authorities pressed for monogamy, and as indigenous communities faced growing enslavement and sexual exploitation of their wives and daughters, they rose up in violent rebellion. Ironically, these revolts sometimes led to the expansion of polygamy. Community leaders, like Pueblo leader Po’pay, had traditionally been the only ones to practice polygamy. But as wars broke, these leaders offered plural marital options to any man who had shown military prowess. The “democratization” of polygamy that resulted provided “domestic, sexual, and financial benefits of plural marriage to men who endured the humiliation of control by the Spanish” (43–44). It also

provided striking new opportunities and protections for single, widowed, and abandoned women and children. While colonial leaders thought “polygamy symbolized anarchic rebellion” alone and bred hordes of “angry indigenous warriors attacking missionaries among landscapes shot through with blood, fire, and slavery,” polygamy in fact allowed Native Americans to create “new worlds” of family, kinship, and politics out of old forms and norms (47–49).

The same kinds of vivid and shifting dialectics appear in the next chapters. Chapter 2 recounts the clashes between sixteenth-century Jesuit missionaries and various Algonquian Indian tribes on the St. Lawrence River. Pearsall uses Father Paul Le Jeune’s detailed diaries to document his frustrating and futile efforts to bring Native converts to monogamy, particularly Makheabichtichiou, the featured charismatic leader of a village of new Christian converts. Algonquian sources reveal that these leaders practiced polygamy for many of the same reasons as the indigenous communities in Spanish territories. But these sources also portray a strong ethic of love, sex, and fidelity within these Algonquian polygamous homes, and firm restrictions on adultery. And they reveal a carefully choreographed set of labor, welfare, and child care relationships among the wives and children, often built around the “most loved . . . senior wife” (57).

Chapter 3 presents the clash between Bible Commonwealth Puritans like John Cotton and the Wampanoag, Narragansett, Pocasset, and other indigenous communities in New England whose elites practiced polygamy. These Native polygamous households were far less hierarchical and less patriarchal. Here “secondary wives”—like Weetamoo, the female leader of the misnamed “King Philip’s War” (1675–76) -- sometimes played critical domestic, economic, military, and diplomatic roles, especially when the husband was dead or long absent. The chapter further shows that Native Americans in New England who did convert eventually charged colonial leaders with “Christian hypocrisy” (111) for commanding monogamy on the strength of a Bible that was filled with stories of polygamous patriarchs but devoid of prohibitions on polygamy. Unconvinced by the Puritans’ counter-textual sermons favoring monogamy, these Native converts “cast that Bible out” (111).

Chapter 4 digs—quite literally, given its use of archeological data -- into the occasional polygamous households of African American chattel slaves in eighteenth-century Virginia. In the slaves’ ancestral homes in West Africa, the polygamous households of the Igbo and other tribal elderly elites were the “bricks of political authority” (125), economic production, property transmission, diplomatic alliance, commercial trade, and sometimes female enhancement. Little of this system survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade. On Virginia’s plantations, de facto polygamy may have been a “haven[] in a heartless world” (143) of chattel slavery that formally prohibited slaves from marrying and allowed masters to separate and sell off fathers, mothers, and children. Younger and stronger men sometimes did practice a form of polygamy to provide modest measures of support and protection for women and children against the cruelty of their white masters. Moreover, masters like Robert “King” Carter, who owned 829 slaves, sometimes rewarded black “foremen” on his plantation with more food,

bigger slave cabins, and multiple “wives,” making de facto polygamy “a statement of power among those stuck in a system actively trying to render them powerless” (141). But for most white slave masters in the day, polygamy “functioned as a European trope for the capriciousness, violence, and untrustworthiness of African men” (121), whose purportedly indiscriminate lust had to be carefully watched, especially around white females—an ancient prejudice that still infects modern American racist rhetoric. Even so, white masters sometimes practiced de facto polygamy. They remarried, sometimes repeatedly, after their wives died while birthing their legitimate heirs. And they kept black concubines—think of Thomas Jefferson with Sally Hemmings— and raped their female slaves with virtual legal impunity, producing children destined for further enslavement.

Chapter 7 introduces two more case studies in this same vein. The first study presents the “zealous” Franciscan Father Junípero Serra, who had “dreams and schemes” and the backing of soldiers to establish Catholicism in Alta California in the 1770s (218). Local Native Americans, led by Baltasar and others, eventually resisted, particularly when the colonists inflicted slavery and sexual violence on Native people, even the converts, and the missionaries banned the “sororal polygamy” (marriage to two or more sisters) of their leaders. Many Native communities, men and women alike, revolted and returned to their tribal customs and polygamous traditions. “For men like Baltasar, polygamy, like scarlet clothing, sent a clear signal: he was a man of status who had asserted his power against other men, Native and Spanish” (226).

The second case study pits nineteenth-century, “American imperialist” policies of monogamy against the Cherokee. Cherokees, too, practiced sororal polygamy but now in a “matrilocal” setting where the husband moved into the wives’ home; lineage and inheritance followed mothers not fathers; and “Cherokee women had rights to their own property and to their own children” (232–33) as well as rights to divorce and to organize women’s political councils. This was a far more egalitarian form of family life than anything on offer in the Anglo-American common law of that day. Even so, federal laws, beginning in 1825, mandated monogamy for the Cherokee, and the military joined in to orchestrate a rapid and brutal enforcement of this law as part of a broader “civilizing” effort that eventually left Cherokee and other indigenous cultures and matrilocal family traditions largely broken on distant reservations.

These five chapters give us a vivid and empathetic account of the antiquity, diversity, tenacity, and utility of polygamy in selected communities on both sides of the Atlantic. Pearsall states clearly that her book is “not a polemic for polygamy” (293) and that she has “no personal investment in polygamy” (11). She says many times that historically and today polygamy can be “uniquely patriarchal” and “profoundly inegalitarian,” featuring “grotesque exploitation of women” and “smoldering resentments and jealousies” among competing wives and their children (12). But such domestic pathos has long obtained in monogamous families, too, she writes. That reality led historical feminists like Sarah Grimké (255–58) to call for the abolition of marriage, much as critical family scholars increasingly do today.

Pearsall is no such abolitionist advocate. Her call is for modern historians to tell “an alternative tale of marriage” (293) that gets beyond easy caricatures and modernist judgments about polygamy. Historians, she says, need to present polygamy from the inside as a living family and social system. They need to appreciate that “polygamists could be modern, with newfangled visions of the necessity of happiness and love in marriage, satisfying mutuality in sexual relations, affections to children paramount” (293). They need to understand polygamy’s multifaceted role in many earlier and insular communities that had no omnipresent church, state, or even feudal systems of care, education, and welfare to back them up and no autonomous markets or trading systems to count on. For these communities, polygamy was “as much about economics as about sex” (40), and about politics, diplomacy, welfare, trade, labor, children, education, and inheritance, too. Polygamy was a cornerstone of these civilizations, just as much as monogamy was a cornerstone of Western civilizations. Small wonder then, that American colonization and expansion onto the western frontier brought an inevitable “clash of civilizations”—with fights over the form and the function of the family as a central battleground.

Pearsall’s nuanced account of American polygamy among these selected micro communities over several centuries adds delicious complexity to American family history. Her arduous look-under-every-rock efforts to find and present written and unwritten evidence for her compelling case studies is a model of interdisciplinary social history. And her exposure of the grim anti-polygamy animus that helped shape some of the harsh and brutal policies of European and American authorities against Native Americans and African Americans alike adds another low octave to the historiography of colonization, slavery, diaspora, indigenous studies, and frontier studies.

Pearsall’s sharp biographical, sociological, and anthropological focus on polygamy does leave the law and theology of this topic rather blurry, even distorted at points. She mentions a few European and American statutes in passing, but they become mostly cudgels in her account of the Euro-American battles against Native Americans and African Americans. Readers get little sense from these elegant and erudite pages that the Western legal tradition called polygamy a form of domestic “tyranny” already in the fifth century BCE and made polygamy a crime of *infamia* in the mid-third century and a capital crime from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries. Readers don’t learn about the many hundreds of cases in the Old Bailey and in colonial and American state criminal courts against white men who abandoned their wives and children to grinding poverty, debt, and abuse so they could take up with another wife or two down the road. They don’t learn about all the cases of arranged, coerced, and underage marriages of young girls to older patriarchs; of the commodification of females collected and traded like trophies by the political elites; of social and educational deprivation and competition of women and children in polygamous households; of the abuse and ostracism of young boys and poorer men who had to compete for fewer brides. And they do not learn about the complex natural law and natural justice theories of “pair bonding” reproduction that have been a staple of Western jurisprudence for a millennium and today have further amplification by social scientists, primatologists, and biological anthropologists.

The accompanying theology of monogamy also stays mostly out of focus in this work. Especially the Catholic missionaries in New Spain and New France come off mostly as brutal, “zealous” (218), and “sanctimonious” (220) agents of “church repression,” “obliteration,” and “eradication” (21, 48, 70) of Native religions and polygamous cultures. Missionaries traded in “slave labor, including sex work” by Native people (46) while offering “smug Jesuit pontifications” about sexual morality (81). “It is time to still the ever-wagging tongues and quills of men” like this, Pearsall writes at one point (81). But nowhere do readers learn about the rich millennium-long theology of sacramental monogamous marriage and kin networks that those “tongues and quills” were teaching. Nor do they hear much about the massive programs of education, charity, poor relief, health care, orphan care, and much more that the missionaries also brought to these Native communities or the intense abolitionist activism of Catholics and other religious communities on both sides of the Atlantic. I am no apologist for colonialism, slavery, or genocide, and I am as outraged as anyone by the church’s excesses and abuses historically and today. But Pearsall’s book offers a surprisingly flat and unnuanced picture of Catholic monogamists compared to her subtle and sympathetic depiction of Native American and African American polygamy.

The New England Puritans fare a bit better in this account. Puritan preachers like John Cotton do get a couple of pages to try to explain away the irony that polygamy was common in the Bible but still prohibited in the colony’s new Bible-based criminal law codes (83–93). But here again readers get only a hint of the century-deep Calvinist covenant theology of monogamous marriage that had led the Puritans to echo Western prohibitions on polygamy and to adopt England’s 1604 Act that made polygamy a capital crime throughout the colonies. Readers do not even get to hear more simply why the Puritans, who were so “obsessed with God’s laws” (85) and eager to establish their “beloved Old Testament” (84), nonetheless rejected the polygamous examples of the Old Testament patriarchs. They argued that even the polygamous households of the most God-fearing patriarchs—Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon—suffered bitter rivalry between the wives, bitter disputes among their children over inheritance and political succession, deadly competition among half-siblings that ultimately escalated to incest, adultery, kidnapping, enslavement, banishment, and more. King David lustfully murdered Bathsheba’s husband to add Bathsheba to his already ample harem. King Solomon with his thousand wives and concubines was led into idolatry, and his children ended up raping, abducting, and killing each other, precipitating civil war in ancient Israel. If even the holy men of the Bible could not make polygamy work for them, the Puritans concluded in concurrence with 1500 years of exegetical history, polygamy is too risky to condone. The law must teach “two in one flesh” not three or four.

This is not to cast aspersions on what Sarah Pearsall has accomplished in this brilliant new book. As another leading historian, Sarah Barringer Gordon, writes in her jacket blurb: “Pearsall’s work is stunningly original, riveting, shocking . . . and upend[s] comforting platitudes about ‘traditional’ marriage in early America.”

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