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Intruding into the Bedrooms of the Nation

*The Importance of Being Monogamous* is one of those books that make you wonder why its subject has not been the focus of a major study until now since monogamous marriage has been such an intricate part of social organization. Using missionary publications, newspapers, travelers’ accounts, government circulars and correspondence, and legal decisions, Sarah Carter explores how Christian, monogamous, heterosexual marriage was imposed on Aboriginals and Mormons in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Western Canada as part of the federal government’s nation-building agenda. The Prairies offer a particularly rich setting for a study challenging the “naturalness” of monogamous marriage because of the diversity of domestic arrangements found among First Nations and newcomers. An exercise in the history of public policy, law, colonialism and gender, this book focuses on state intervention in the personal lives of individuals who did not conform to this hegemonic definition of marriage. This is a very timely book given the recent and ongoing debate over same-sex unions, which are sometimes presented as a threat to the sanctity of marriage. Carter sets out to show “that the monogamous model is not ancient and universal” (p. 16) and that the flexibility of present-day unions actually existed in the past.

Indeed, before the late nineteenth-century monogamous marriage was not a foregone conclusion; it was a deliberate choice on the part of white, Christian, middle-class politicians, government officials, and reformers to make it the foundation for a new nation. This imposition of a particularly rigid definition of marriage was contested by couples who had previously enjoyed flexibility in their domestic situations and individuals, especially women, who had benefited from alternatives to monogamy that offered more egalitarian relationships. In other words, less choice also meant less equality because the monogamous model also shaped gender relations within the home and beyond. The lifelong union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others until death was often tied to the ideal of the husband as undisputed head of the family and the dependent and submissive wife. As proponents of monogamy complained, divorce and other forms of union gave women too much power in their relationship with men.

As Carter shows in the first two chapters of her book, the anxiety over divorce, cohabitation, bigamy, and polygamy in the Northwest took place within a much larger context and was the combination of three main concerns: marriage breakdown and sexual immorality; interracial unions and the future of the Anglo-Saxon “race”; and the successful development of this newly acquired territory.

In the late nineteenth century, it was believed that industrialization and urbanization had created such social chaos that the fortress of marriage was under siege and, by extension, so was the nuclear family, the basic building block of the nation. In the name of stability and order,
middle-class reformers called on the state to defend “the white life for two”[1] and to punish individuals who deviated from this ideal. It was also an attempt to prevent the “loose morals” observed in the United States, where divorce could be more easily obtained, from spreading north of the border.

This anxiety over marriage was exacerbated when divorce and alternate forms of unions were encountered in Western Canada among Aboriginals and newcomers due to different customs. For instance, Mormons emigrating from the United States caused great consternation with their belief in plural marriage. As white immigrants and experienced dry-land farmers, they were welcomed to the area, provided they gave up polygamy, which opponents viewed as a form of women’s enslavement. They also feared non-Mormon men would be tempted to adopt this domestic arrangement and then lure young women into immorality. Legislation was quickly introduced in the Northwest to make monogamy the only option by prohibiting and punishing deviance.

The political, religious, and legal establishments were eager to promote “white” domesticity on the frontier by imposing a specific definition of marriage based on Christian doctrine and English common law. They also made divorce practically impossible to obtain as one had to apply to the Canadian parliament, which made it a costly and very public procedure. Virtually indissoluble monogamous marriage was promoted in the press, in sermons, and in the courts as the norm in a “civilized” society and a way to liberate and elevate women as opposed to the state of barbarism and slavery that was assumed to exist in “primitive” Aboriginal societies. Women’s freedom and equality under Aboriginal customs made for a gender order that had disturbed Europeans since contact.[2] But as Carter shows, this arrangement had particular implications for prairie farmwomen as well. It led to the abolition of married women’s dower rights and was at the center of the government’s land grant legislation that made it almost impossible for women to turn to homesteading as an alternative to marriage.

In this “age of light, soap, and water” when moral reformers were concerned with sexual health and racial purity, interracial unions were also increasingly frowned upon.[3] This attitude made its way to Western Canada, where the Metis were a vivid reminder that mixed-race relationships had played an integral role in the development of the Northwest until its acquisition by the Canadian government shortly after confederation. The lack of church sanction in many of these “country marriages” was also denounced. What reformers were promoting was very much a class- and race-specific model of marriage.

In the eyes of politicians and government officials, the Northwest was a region with potential, but also much instability because of the diversity in gender roles and domestic arrangements. During a period of intensive colonization, the bolstering of the Christian, monogamous, intra-racial model was of particular importance in bringing order and stability to a vast and mostly unoccupied territory where the Aboriginal population still greatly outnumbered that of Euro-Canadian settlers. There was no place for Aboriginals and their “primitive” customs in the colonizers’ plan for prosperity, which they would rather be accomplished through privately owned family farms. They believed that the future of the nation rested on the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon “race” and heritage.

In chapter 4, Carter explores in more detail Plains Aboriginals’ marriage customs as well the imposition of the monogamous model and its implications for women. Pointing to a persistent bias among scholars and legal experts, she argues convincingly that the term “marriage” should also apply to the diverse forms of unions found in Aboriginal societies in Western Canada. They had laws regulating marriage and divorce, and while they were complex and flexible, they were laws nonetheless. However, because few non-Aboriginals understood these laws and most simply dismissed them, they have often assumed women were being exploited under such arrangements. Using this misinterpretation as justification for imperialist intrusion into private lives, missionaries, politicians, and reformers embarked on a crusade to “save” Aboriginal women. Carter also aims to destroy a few myths, including that of the prevalence and solely economic function of purchasing brides. Euro-Canadian outsiders simplified Aboriginal marriage as an exchange of property between men, insisting that it enslaved women and made them a commodity. She also demonstrates that while polygamy was condemned and often exaggerated in terms of its frequency and negative impact on women, it existed for practical reasons: it eased the burden of work by sharing it among wives and ensured that everyone had a spouse in a society where there were more women than men. Carter also notes that same-sex unions were also permitted because “there was no insistence on conformity to binaries of masculinity and femininity” in behavior or appearance (p. 122). What these unions also show, but should have been made more explicit, is that marriage in these particular soci-
ties was not necessarily for procreation. Yet, it was central to the Christian definition of marriage and may have played a role in labeling certain Aboriginal unions as “deviant” and “invalid.”

Indeed, as Carter explains in chapter 5, the Canadian state eventually recognized the validity of monogamous marriages contracted according to Aboriginal customs, although it continued to consider Aboriginal divorce invalid, because from a legal standpoint, in order to prosecute individual Aboriginals for bigamy and polygamy, the first marriage had to be considered legitimate. The Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) hoped the practice would disappear by prosecuting individuals who engaged in plural marriages, and government officials clearly demonstrates it was not so. Doubts remained as to what constituted a legitimate marriage and various conflicting court decisions and departmental regulations were cited as evidence without providing a definitive answer. This uncertainty limited the Indian agent’s ability to impose monogamous marriage. As an enforcer of the DIA’s marriage policy, he gave advice to couples, tried to keep wives from running away, engaged in matchmaking between “suitable” residents, and government officials clearly demonstrates it was not so. Doubts remained as to what constituted a legitimate marriage and various conflicting court decisions and departmental regulations were cited as evidence without providing a definitive answer. This uncertainty limited the Indian agent’s ability to impose monogamous marriage. As an enforcer of the DIA’s marriage policy, he gave advice to couples, tried to keep wives from running away, engaged in matchmaking between “suitable” residents, and had the authority to decide which marriages were valid and which children were legitimate for the purposes of annuity payments. However, the policy he was supposed to uphold had some unforeseen and inauspicious consequences. According to Carter, they “actually worked against the goal of instilling a sense of the sanctity of marriage. Those who were divorced according to Aboriginal law and had remarried were told that these were not valid legal unions, that they risked prosecution as bigamists, and that their children were illegitimate. People could then feel free to desert or abandon second marriages, and DIA officials encouraged them to do so” (p. 235). Meanwhile, missionary circles in Canada and around the world were divided on the question of polygamy—they discouraged it, but disagreed on how to deal with the “victims” of this custom. They warned that converting to the Christian monogamous model should not lead to the breakup of families, thus leaving wives and children destitute. In this context, Indian agents, who had little training or expertise to deal with domestic issues, showed ambivalence about applying the rules, much as Carter observed in her earlier study of Aboriginal agricultural policy. [4]
Carter concludes that despite the government’s concerted effort to impose monogamous marriage on Aboriginals, its success was incomplete. Aboriginal marriages persisted as a form of protest but also because divorce was only obtainable through an act of Parliament. Although it would not be recognized, if Aboriginals did not marry following Christian rule, they could still divorce according to their own law. Also, they were aware of the authorities’ inability to enforce the DIA’s policy and the confusion it created among missionaries, Indian agents, and other government officials, and used this to their advantage. Enforcers of the policy had to limit themselves to threats because prosecution could actually fail and leave the government with even less control over Aboriginals’ conjugal arrangements. Although it is clear that the government had few qualms about intruding into the bedrooms of the nation, its approach to marriage was often unenforceable; thus, “the state had the capacity to disrupt, but not utterly transform, Aboriginal marriage and domestic life” (p. 277).

That said, Carter acknowledges that by 1915 (the year she chooses to end her study), only individual dissenters remained in Western Canada as laws, court decisions, churches, community pressure, and the press had succeeded in making monogamous marriage and its appending gender order appear “natural.” Also, in an appendix providing a brief overview of the administration of Aboriginal marriage and divorce until 1951, she calls attention to various clauses in the Indian Act regarding marriage and the loss of Indian status for a number of Aboriginal women.

Although it does not diminish the value of this book, the surprisingly high number of formatting errors was quite distracting: typos, misplaced hyphens, and an overly compressed line as a result of justification. The lack of space to separate the conclusion in each chapter also created an impression of redundancy. Finally, one crucial aspect of the monogamous model of marriage is missing from Carter’s analysis: procreation. To produce descendants may not have been part of any legal definition of marriage, but until recently, it was certainly a religious, cultural, and social expectation. To not conform to this “norm” also had consequences, which, admittedly, could be the subject of another book.

Despite these shortcomings, The Importance of Being Monogamous is a fine contribution to the study of British imperialism and colonialism and its reproduction in the Canadian context. Carter makes enlightening parallels and contrasts with the intrusion of colonizers in domestic arrangements in India and Africa. Like Ann Laura Stoler, she analyzes their efforts to impose a new gender order and attempts to integrate the ruled while distinguishing them from the rulers.[5] Although similar to Nancy Cott’s Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation (2000) in its premise, this book is not a mere Canadian version. By focusing on Aboriginals and immigrants in the Prairies, Carter reminds us of Canada’s not-so-distant colonialist past. She should be commended for making another invaluable contribution to the history of Aboriginals, Indian policy, and gender.

Notes

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