Exposé of Polygamy
DeSimone, Linda, Stenhouse, Fanny

Published by Utah State University Press

DeSimone, Linda and Fanny Stenhouse.
Exposé of Polygamy: A Lady's Life Among the Mormons.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/12760.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/12760

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=381584
Introduction

Reckoning with Fanny Stenhouse

The name Fanny Stenhouse may bring to the mind of someone vaguely familiar with it associations such as Fanny Stenhouse = anti-Mormon, anti-polygamy crusader, lurid exposé author. Her reputation or, in some minds, notoriety is largely based on her massive exposé, “Tell It All,” in which she describes in fascinating detail her experience as a Mormon, the unusual doctrines and practices of Mormonism, and especially the damaging effects of polygamy as she observed and experienced them. Stenhouse and her book became national and even international phenomena. The book went through many editions, and she went on the lecture circuit and testified before Congress as part of the national debate on Mormons and polygamy.

Yet this was not Stenhouse’s original telling of her story. Two years before the 1874 publication of the wildly popular “Tell It All” and soon after her break with Mormonism, she wrote a shorter memoir. This version, titled Exposé of Polygamy in Utah: A Lady’s Life among the Mormons. A Record of Personal Experience as one of the Wives of a Mormon Elder during a Period of more than Twenty Years, reveals a different woman and a different voice from the more highly colored ones of the later, longer book. The first account of Stenhouse’s experience has been sidelined, largely forgotten and subsumed in the image of the later Fanny Stenhouse. But that early version lets us see a sensibility more immediate and honest, experience a forthright and restrained writing style, and make acquaintance with a more human and sympathetic woman.

A detailed description of the book’s contents is unnecessary, since Stenhouse is a compelling storyteller and makes it easy for readers to discover and understand her experiences on their own. Along with Stenhouse’s own personal history we find illuminating pictures of general Mormon life and society; extensive descriptions, comments, and analyses of polygamy in its many forms and ramifications; and a fair amount of Stenhouse’s philosophy regarding life, God, human nature, and love.
Stenhouse’s personal history is simply told. She briefly recounts her early life, conversion to Mormonism, missionary work with her husband in Switzerland, church experiences in England, and life in New York and eventually Salt Lake City. Her description of herself when young as religiously oriented, a seeker and Bible reader, makes it easy to understand why she would find Mormonism—with its stories of angels, apostles, and continuing revelation—attractive and compelling. She goes on to describe her gradual disillusionment with the Latter-day Saints after a long struggle with the doctrine and practice of polygamy and how she and her husband finally left the church.

In giving an account of her own life, Stenhouse provides glimpses into the hierarchal structure and community life of Mormon society. She shows us the workings of the church both in England and Switzerland—the activities of the proselytizing elders and visiting church authorities, including their behaviors and foibles, and how missionary work and emigration was funded and organized. She recalls her favorable impressions, upon reaching Salt Lake City, of Brigham Young and his wives, whom she generally treats fairly. She provides a restrained account of going to the Endowment House—where church leaders administered sacred ordinances, including those concerned with plural marriage—minus the confidential details she later provided in “Tell It All.” In her descriptions of balls, social events, and encounters with church authorities in daily life, Stenhouse shows herself to be a sharp-eyed social observer with keen psychological insight into human behavior. Her portrayal of Mormon society helps to set Stenhouse’s experiences in the wider context in which she lived them.

What by far looms largest throughout her memoir is Fanny’s nemesis—polygamy. The title of her book, *Exposé of Polygamy in Utah*, says it all. Without the practice of polygynous plural marriage in the Mormon church, we would not have this book. Fanny Stenhouse probably would have settled into her life within Utah Mormondom and remained there. Even if, in that alternative, imaginary, monogamous culture, she had become sufficiently disillusioned with Brigham Young’s leadership of the church, it is more likely that she would have exited Mormonism quietly than that she would have felt impelled to write the story of her experiences as a Mormon, and it is even less likely that her story would have found a publisher. It was the institution of religious polygamy that fueled her distress, produced her writings, and made them popular.

The origins of polygamy in the Mormon church are shadowy. Joseph Smith, the founder, spoke of the ancient Israelite practice of polygamy soon after the 1830 organization of his new church, and there were rumors in the first few years of his unseemly conduct toward other women. Fanny Alger, a young servant girl in Smith’s household in Kirtland, Ohio, may have been his first plural wife in the mid-1830s, although the first
official record of such a marriage dates to April 1841, when Smith was sealed to Louisa Beaman. During the three years before his death in 1844, Smith secretly introduced the doctrine to his inner circle and commanded them to take additional wives. He was himself taking them at a furious rate (more than thirty total), among them women already married to other men. It was not until July 12, 1843, that Smith dictated and thus committed to writing the “Revelation on Marriage” (now section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, accepted as scripture by the Utah Mormon church, officially the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), which provided the rationale and justification for plural wives. The revelation lays out the path to reach the highest level of heaven through sealing in a celestial marriage for time and eternity. It explains that all earthly contracts, including marriage covenants, end at death, but those who marry in the “new and everlasting covenant” and are sealed by the priesthood power given to Joseph Smith will be exalted in heaven, have thrones and kingdoms and eternal increase of children, and be gods themselves. Moreover, a man can, with the consent of his wife, take additional wives in order to “multiply and replenish the earth.” The justification rests on God’s apparent approval of Abraham and other Old Testament patriarchs having multiple wives and concubines; the recipients of the revelation are exhorted to go and do likewise. God reassures Smith that his sins are forgiven, his throne is prepared, and he will be exalted, while also strongly warning his wife Emma that she must accept “all those given to Joseph” and cleave to him or be destroyed.

From the early years of the church until the time of Joseph Smith’s death, there were rumors, charges and countercharges within the church membership, about licentiousness, polygamy, adultery, and “spiritual wives.” Official denials alongside the truth known to a few but suspected by many created unstable social tension and resulted in several church members, many of them close associates of Smith, either leaving the church or being excommunicated as apostates. The tension over polygamy was one of the factors that led to Smith’s death and the abandonment of the city of Nauvoo, Illinois, where Mormons had settled, on the banks of the Mississippi River.

Amid the chaos and uncertainty after the death of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, as head of the powerful Council of the Twelve Apostles, successfully fought off other claims to legitimacy and assumed leadership of what eventually became the Utah branch of Mormonism. Young and several other apostles were already secretly engaged in polygamy, allowing the practice to continue surreptitiously during the next year or two while the faithful were busy completing a temple in Nauvoo and looking forward to the new blessings promised once sacred ceremonies could be performed there. However, the Mormons were forced to leave Nauvoo
soon after the temple’s completion, beginning their long trek westward in early 1846 and settling in the area that became Utah in 1847.

By the time of the westward migration, those who had stayed with Brigham Young and the Twelve instead of following any of several splinter groups had generally come to accept the open secret of polygamy, and isolation in the West initially allowed the Utah Mormons to practice plural marriage with a minimum of outside interference. Efforts to achieve statehood quickly were not successful, though, and rumors continued to circulate, both in the United States and abroad, about Mormon marriages. Soon after Fanny Stenhouse converted to Mormonism in England in 1849, she became aware of whispered conversations, rumors of multiple wives, and denials by church elders. Finally Apostle Orson Pratt announced polygamy as the official policy and practice of the church in an August 1852 address.

That announcement offered religious justification for the practice by harkening back to the prophets of the Old Testament and also explicating a theology of polygamy as a means of providing more bodies for pre-existent souls and quickly building up the Kingdom of God on earth. Pratt stressed that polygamy was incumbent on the Saints because it was a revelation to Joseph Smith and claimed it would help prevent social problems such as adultery and prostitution.

Even after the public acknowledgment of polygamy, however, there was less than unanimous support and enthusiasm for the practice among Mormons. What became known as the Mormon Reformation of 1856 and 1857 was the most strident of periodic attempts on the part of church authorities to motivate members to live the law of polygamy more fully. This was done through exhortations, sermons, rebaptisms, and other forms of ecclesiastical and group pressure. Still, though scholars’ estimates vary and have generally increased in recent years, polygamy remained a minority’s practice among Mormons. It was more common among church leaders and the elite in the community than among rank and file members, partly because of greater pressure on prominent members to conform and partly because such men had greater economic ability to support additional wives.

Such a great change in family structure and relationships, without a clear road map for implementing it, left each new polygamous household to work out functional details, at least in the beginning. There was no one-size-fits-all solution, so a variety of patterns were established by families. Fortunately, the inevitable tensions inherent in polygamous families had a safety valve in the surprisingly liberal divorce laws enacted in the territory in 1852. In general, women could more easily procure divorces than men, so the initiative mostly lay with women in cancelling a marriage if it became unworkable.
The world outside of Utah continued to be appalled by polygamy, and within a few years of the 1852 announcement the Republican presidential platform of 1856 labeled polygamy and slavery as the “twin relics of barbarism.” In 1857 President James Buchanan sent federal troops to Utah to curb Mormon resistance to territorial government. Although in that case polygamy was not a direct cause, it no doubt contributed to an atmosphere of mutual distrust. After a period of relative tranquility in the 1860s and early 1870s, virulent hostility toward polygamy increased later in the 1870s (partly due to books like Stenhouse’s), culminating in congressional legislation against it, legal prosecution and disenfranchisement of practitioners and believers, dismantling of the Mormon church’s corporate structure, and the eventual surrender of the church via an 1890 Manifesto of its leader counseling members to henceforth refrain from polygamous marriages.

Stenhouse presents her awareness of polygamy as growing gradually. After overheard whisperings, rumors, and denials, she soon confronts the reality of the doctrine and is instructed to teach it to other women in Switzerland. Later she describes how polygamy is practiced in England, New York, and Salt Lake, and finally, as her husband courts and marries another woman, she adjusts to having to share him. She is adamant, however, that whatever the adjustments, women never do “get used to it.”

As she recounts her struggles to understand and accept polygamy, Stenhouse also takes on the documented source of the doctrine, “The Revelation on Marriage.” She reveals her horror at her first exposure to a written copy, which she throws down without reading it fully. Years later, when her husband’s courtship of an intended third wife has not gone well, she decides to examine Mormon origins more closely, reads the Revelation thoroughly, and experiences her own “revelation” as to its human rather than divine origin. This is the catalyst that sends her belief in the rest of Mormon doctrine crumbling and results in her leaving Mormonism.

She provides her assessment of “The Revelation on Marriage” as well as a complete copy of it in an appendix to her book, “so the reader will be able to form his own judgment from the document itself.” She acknowledges that readers will approach it differently depending on their background. Faithful Mormons will see it as sacred writ, while others will see it as either an outright fake or a “strained effort” by Smith to “justify, under the sanction of a commandment, the leadings of his own passions.” For Stenhouse, “There is no evidence of God in it. From beginning to end, it is man, and weak man only.”

Stenhouse bolsters her belief in the revelation’s earthly origin with several arguments. For one, she slyly notes that “it entirely escaped the notice of ‘the Lord,’ that the Patriarch Isaac was not a Polygamist.”
Second, she quotes Joseph Smith’s son, Alexander H. Smith, who discussed at some length the reasons for his belief that the revelation did not come to his father from God. Rather than accepting his points uncritically, Stenhouse disagrees with some of his analysis but also makes use of his arguments from the text itself that question the claim of divine origin.

Stenhouse herself analyzes the wording of the revelation, noting that claims of heavenly origin are undercut because, as one example, “The subtle way in which the priesthood therein entwines its authority around the woman, threatening her at one moment with damnation and the next attracting her with promises of glory, evinces too much system and calculation for such an origin.” She concludes that the revelation was the result of a battle between Smith and his wife Emma: “The true story is the best—Joseph had himself entered into practical Polygamy, and a revelation was necessary to appease his wife, Emma, and to satisfy his brother, Hyrum, who had some ‘conscientious scruples.’”

With her critique’s techniques, Stenhouse shows that her opposition to the revelation is not based only on emotional repugnance but that she has rational arguments based on textual analysis, logic, a knowledgeable authority, and her own ability to recognize attempts at manipulating women.

In addition to her personal reactions and experiences, Stenhouse contrasts the theory of how polygamy is supposed to be entered into with the broader reality of how additional wives are taken. Having given illustrative accounts in the *Exposé* of what she had observed living in polygamy to be like, Stenhouse provides in her appendix extensive quotations from church authorities showing both the ideal in polygamous households—all peace, harmony, and joy—and the reality of deep dissatisfaction and unhappiness. She thereby buttresses her personal experiences and observations with statements from high-ranking church leaders, increasing the credibility and authenticity of her writing. But then she also includes in her “choice extracts from modern apostles” passages that seem designed mainly to highlight the most exotic elements of Mormon speculative theology—such as God being “first Husband” to Mary in the flesh in order to produce Jesus’s earthly body, and Jesus being married with children, even possibly a polygamist, excerpts which were likely chosen at least partly for their shock value. Here, at the end of *Exposé*, we begin to see the seed of the more flamboyant style and approach that characterized her later revision of the book.

Stenhouse also describes how polygamy functions in practice: where the wives are housed, how households are managed and duties assigned or shared, how the husband distributes his time and attention. Offering insights into how a “woman’s choice” functions in polygamy and how
divorce is handled, she also explains marriage for the dead and marriages for time compared with eternal sealings. More important, Stenhouse recounts in great detail the deleterious effects she perceives polygamy as having on all those involved. Understandably, her primary sympathies are with first wives, who deal with being displaced in their husbands’ affections or at least having to share them with other women. But she also notes the difficulties faced by later wives, who do not have the strong original bond or history with the husband that the first wife usually has, who necessarily feel like intruders into another woman’s home, and who may fall under the thumb of a dominant or even cruel first wife who still is in charge of the household.

And, although she frequently expresses an antipathy toward men bordering on hatred for the entire gender because of polygamy, Stenhouse also shows understanding and sympathy toward the men involved. As much as she is angry at church elders for their deception in hiding and denying the truth about polygamy, she feels their hearts were likely in the right place in trying to make the doctrine, little by little, more easily acceptable to women. It is worth noting that even when pointing out the follies of some of the elders in England she takes pains not to overdo the criticism, attributing much of the silliness she observes to the temper of the times and general fanaticism about end times during that period. She also expresses respect for those men who are sincerely trying to perform what they see as a religious duty as best they can. Stenhouse recognizes the difficult position of a polygamist husband attempting to treat his wives equally and yet always aware they are watching him closely for signs of favoritism.

Such a system leads inevitably to estrangement between husband and wife, Stenhouse contends. The wife hides her true feelings rather than let her jealousy or hurt show and no longer feels she can confide in her husband. Because it is too painful to love him deeply when his affections are divided, she also stifles her own affection for her husband. For his part, the husband increasingly goes through the motions without true feelings, to maintain even treatment among his wives. The result is, in the best cases, calm in the household but, as Stenhouse says, not the calm of sleep but of death, the death of real love.

As Stenhouse tries to understand and cope with the polygamy doctrine, she shares her thoughts about God and religion, human nature, and love. Finding it hard to reconcile her idea of a loving God with a deity who would require such sacrifice of his children, she writes, “I can never believe that the great God created our natures, such as they are, and then gave us laws that would outrage them.” The strength of her own love for her husband turns out to be a thorn in her path to accepting sharing him with another. “Why did the Lord implant this
love in my nature?” she cries. “If it is wrong, He could have created me without it. Or was it for the pleasure of torturing His daughters that this was done?” By the time her husband was courting a potential third wife, Stenhouse felt she had tried and tried to mold her feelings and behavior to the expected standard but nevertheless began to wonder whether this was really God’s intention, as her concern broadened beyond her own pain to encompass the plight of all women living in polygamy: “I had striven hard to do His will; but I had failed in every single instance to see, in what I was called upon to suffer, any indication of a God of justice. ‘How,’ said I, ‘could the humiliation, abasement, and misery of thousands of women contribute to the glory of God?’” In Stenhouse’s view, love cannot thrive in polygamy, and human nature becomes twisted from the deception and emotional withdrawal required to live the principle.

Was Stenhouse’s depiction here of nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy accurate? I think she got it right, for the most part. The various permutations she describes did in fact exist, although it is difficult to assess the extent of any particular form or consequence of polygamy in practice. While her feelings were likely stronger and certainly more openly expressed than those of many Mormon women, her struggle to live her religion and somehow deal with the emotional pain the doctrine of polygamy created was typical. Although Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton say that “for the most part Mormon women saw the anxieties and frustrations of polygamy as no greater than the tensions of the monogamous marriages some of them had known in their younger days,” the wealth of information now available makes it clear that plural marriage brought a very different level and type of heartache and pain to the women involved. Later studies of Mormon women in polygamy indicate that the main justification for polygamy was religious obligation and that “the reality for most women was probably a mixture of faith and frustration,” much as Stenhouse describes.

What Stenhouse has provided is a thorough summation of the ways in which the challenge of sharing a husband changed the dynamic of husband-wife relationships and a troubling accounting of the emotional distress suffered by all parties involved. Probably most women experienced polygamy much as Stenhouse describes it; they just didn’t publicize it as she did. Mormon women supported plural marriage vigorously in comments to visitors (as Stenhouse did), with apparent conviction in marches and meetings, and to varying degrees in their hearts, but it is doubtful that most of them warmly embraced the principle and truly enjoyed living in plurality.

Besides assessing the accuracy of Stenhouse’s depiction, what can we conclude about her motivation? She presents herself as “impartial”
and “truthful” and as telling her story as simply and directly as possible, and what emerges is a picture of a woman honestly attempting to convey the personal truth of her experiences. One must wonder, however, if there was not some calculation in her presentation. If so, what else might she have wanted to accomplish? Clearly, she wanted to tell her story—“What I know about Polygamy” is how she puts it—and rather than writing a book simply to vent her feelings, she anticipated an audience of both the women of Utah and general readers in the outside world who might not be very knowledgeable about Mormonism. She even expresses hope that members of Congress will consider her experience as they deliberate the “Mormon question.”

But Stenhouse had other reasons too for writing at this particular time. She alludes to “Very recent and unforeseen circumstances” that impelled her, without explaining further. These circumstances may have involved encouragement from friends or being snowbound for several weeks, but it is also possible that money was a factor since her family’s economic fortunes had fallen in the wake of their break with the Mormon church. Beyond this, however, the Exposé shows no evidence that Stenhouse had ulterior motives, such as vindictiveness or meanness of spirit, to share her story. Aside from her early personal history and the appendix, the book is for the most part simply episode after episode of what she observed or experienced, usually described in a direct and sympathetic manner.

The Exposé has the feel of having been written in a rush of emotion, and if it was indeed composed in just two or three weeks, as Stenhouse claims, it is a remarkable evidence of her literary skill. The narrative is full of energy, verve, passion, and emotion. She does not shrink from detailing the depth and extent of her emotional experiences, and she gives vivid accounts of the distress of others. While “emotional writing” has at times been criticized from a rationalist, masculinist point of view, I believe such criticism must be rejected here. The emotional tone of Stenhouse’s Exposé is credible, given the circumstances she lived under and recounts. The powerful, genuine emotion she expresses in no way invalidates her story and conclusions but rather contributes to their believability.

While Stenhouse, like any author, would want to be seen in a favorable light, she also lets us see her failings and shortcomings. Admitting to a rebellious nature and to what she calls wicked and disobedient tendencies, she is no stranger to jealousy and doubt. Owning up to stealing letters on more than one occasion, she also shares instances of marital disharmony—for example, that her husband “told me that I was a great clog to him, and more than once he said he could not enjoy the Spirit of God and live with me.” In short, she was no paragon of wifely or womanly virtue and does not pretend to be.
She was, however, a woman of strong spirit—perhaps a positive way of viewing what she describes as “rebelliousness” and most likely how she would really want to be perceived. She stands up to church authorities who try to push her into emigrating while she and her child are experiencing serious health problems. She has a strong sense of self and self-worth, clearly believing that women deserve equal respect with men, which is why her first impression of the polygamy doctrine is that it is “a degradation to womankind.”

At the time Stenhouse broke with her Mormon past, she and her family had been in Utah eleven years. When they arrived in 1859 they were well known to the leadership of the Mormon church. Her husband, Thomas Brown Holmes (known generally as T. B. H.) Stenhouse, had been a dynamic missionary in England and Italy, and she had accompanied
him in his missionary work in Switzerland for more than three years. They had also served for three and a half years in New York, where T. B. H. had worked on the church newspaper *The Mormon* and been in charge of the Eastern States Mission. With such prominence and record of service, they were readily welcomed into Mormon society in Salt Lake City.

Fanny Stenhouse, however, arrived too late in Utah to hold a position in the higher echelons of the Mormon women’s organizations, nor did her husband hold any notable ecclesiastical offices. He was, however, publisher of the *Salt Lake Telegraph*, the city’s first daily newspaper, and as the Stenhouses were among the most educated, intellectual, and socially adept of the Mormon flock, they were quickly involved in the social circle of Brigham Young and other leaders. T. B. H. was often called upon to escort visitors around the town, so many of them met his wife Fanny as well and commented about her in their writings.

The descriptions of visitors validate the impression of Fanny Stenhouse as among the more highly educated and cultured of Utah’s residents. Sir Richard Francis Burton, the well-traveled English gentleman and explorer, visited Salt Lake City in September of 1860, about a year after the Stenhouses’ arrival. Upon meeting Fanny, he noted that she “spoke excellent French, talked English without nasalisation or cantalenation, and showed a highly cultivated mind.” She was also, he said, the first woman he heard provide a strong defense of polygamy on religious grounds. William Hepworth Dixon, visiting in 1868, described her as “a clever, handsome woman,” and a famous French feminist, Olympe de Joaaral Audouard, said Stenhouse was “a sociable, kindly, charming woman, very well-educated, a good musician . . .” (which we assume is more accurate than her report that she was a Catholic and had thirteen children). Among her many talents, Stenhouse occasionally performed in dramatic productions at the Salt Lake Theatre, such as her role as the Duchess of York in *Richard III*. She also is said to have acted as a midwife, delivering at least a few babies in her time.

Along with the picture of daily life that Stenhouse paints and the images captured by visitors who met her, it is helpful to keep in mind that much of her time and attention would have been taken up with her ten children, born over a period of eighteen years from 1850 through 1868. In other words, throughout almost the whole of her married life until just a few years before she published her *Exposé*, Stenhouse was bearing children at a slightly faster rate than one every two years. The children are rarely mentioned in her book, and although she had the help of a young girl the family brought with them from Switzerland, the care and well-being of the children must have been a daily concern and responsibility for her. By the time her book was published, the eldest two were married, which still left eight children at home, the youngest not yet four years old.
(Clara had married Joseph A. Young, a son of Brigham Young in 1867, and Lorenzo had married Flora J. Young in 1869.)

Stenhouse’s account of her life essentially ends in 1870, after she and her husband had asked that their names be removed from church membership rolls. But her life between then and publication of her book in 1872 was far from quiet. Fanny and T. B. H. had become part of the New Movement, which is commonly called the Godbeites after one of its leaders, as they began to question Brigham Young’s infallibility, especially his counsel and control regarding economic and commercial matters. Stenhouse served as president of the Women’s Mutual Improvement Society of the New Movement and worked for women’s suffrage. In July 1871 national suffrage leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton visited Utah and spoke at one of the Society’s meetings, over which Stenhouse presided. Susan B. Anthony commented as follows: “On Wednesday p.m., after the fourth, we met with the Women’s Mutual Improvement Society, in the new Hall. Some three hundred were present. Over one hundred joined the Society and paid their admission fee. Mrs. Stenhouse is President. She is a noble woman, and has been through the fires of persecution for leaving the Mormon church.”

In early 1872, when it appeared that church leaders seemed willing to disavow polygamy to obtain statehood, Stenhouse wrote a fierce letter to the Salt Lake Daily Tribune pointing out the hypocrisy of giving up for political gain what had been presented as a divine law:

How dare they vote away polygamy if it is, as they have always told us women, a divine law of heaven without which no man or woman can enter the celestial kingdom? . . . Women of Utah, rise up in the dignity of your womanhood and tell Brigham Young that he has been deceiving you all these years, or that he meditates to deceive the nation now, either of which is an abomination. I would have respected Brigham Young, had he said it is a divine law and, State or no State, we dare not lay it aside. Then I should have said he is honest; . . .

This letter was written just as Exposé of Polygamy was being published. On the same date her letter was published in the Tribune, March 20, an advertisement appeared noting that her book would be available “about the first of March.” The publisher, American News, enthused:
In presenting this volume to the trade, it is perhaps almost unnecessary to observe that, at the present moment, a book of this description is urgently called for, and is particularly calculated to “take” with the public. “The Mormon Question” is laid before the world by countless daily papers, magazines, &c.; but after all, the subject is very little understood outside of the Mormon homes, while at the same time reliable information is eagerly sought for. This work is a record of facts.14

The price was $1.50. By the end of March the book was available in Salt Lake City, and notices throughout the first half of April indicated a second supply was available. By mid-April Stenhouse’s book was heading into its third edition. The first had sold out in ten days, and the third was expected to be gone within thirty.15

Interestingly, at the same time Stenhouse’s book came on the market, an announcement appeared of a forthcoming new publication for women—the Woman’s Exponent, due out the beginning of May (although its appearance was delayed until early in June). The Exponent—“the first magazine published by and for women west of the Mississippi” (with one short-lived exception)—became, for over forty years, the premier voice for Mormon women and, for a time, essentially the voice of the church’s Relief Society organization, although it was not an official church publication.16

Even as her first book was being introduced, Stenhouse’s husband announced that her second book was already planned, its title being “Tell It All.”17 This news may have occasioned a small note in the Deseret News: “‘Tell It All’: The old adage says, ‘A fool tells all he knows.’”18 Within three months, Harriet Beecher Stowe had not only agreed to provide a preface for the upcoming book but had already written it.19 A great-granddaughter of both Fanny Stenhouse and Brigham Young has suggested that Harriet Beecher Stowe actually pushed Stenhouse in the beginning to write her first book as well as insisting that she expand it into a more complete story.20

Predictably, the reception of the Exposé differed between the Mormon community and the “outer world.” The Mormon-oriented newspapers largely ignored the book, apparently deciding not to give it further publicity. On the national scene, a penny pamphlet’s description is perhaps typical:

This book is replete with Incidents of the Inner Workings of domestic life in Utah, showing the unhappiness engendered by the practice of Polygamy. The heartburnings, the jealousies,
and the grievances of the wives, when another is added to
the household, are depicted in terse and very forcible lan-
guage. . . . On the whole, this book, coming authoritatively
as it does, from one who has been a Mormon wife for twenty
years, gives a better insight into the inner life of that sinful
sect than anything ever before published. It can but enlist the
sympathy of every honest man and woman for the suffering,
down-trodden Polygamic wives of Utah.”

A book review in Harper’s of “Tell It All” when it was published two years
later provides some analysis that just as easily applies to the earlier Éposé
and that Stenhouse would have likely agreed with:

To the psychological student, to whom Mormonism is a men-
tal problem insoluble, and the seemingly stolid acquiescence
of woman in her own shame an inexplicable mystery, not the
least interesting feature of this volume will be the fact that it
traces so clearly the process by which superstition gained, first
an influence, then an absolute control, over a mind originally
intelligent and over a will originally independent.

The popularity of Fanny’s first book, the Exposé, launched her on
a lecture tour that began in the fall of 1872 in Corinne, Utah, and pro-
ceeded to other cities in the West. She spent the winter in the East, from
which she returned to Utah a year after the Exposé’s first publication. She
lectured in several large cities, including Washington, D.C., and Boston.
Her lecture in Boston at the Tremont Temple was praised by no less a
luminary than Lucy Stone, founder and editor of the Woman’s Journal and
a prominent suffragist and reformer.

In the summer of 1873 a laudatory article appeared in Harper’s Bazar
reviewing the Exposé and mentioning the “more than ordinary interest”
that had been “excited” by her lecture in the eastern states. The article
gave a physical description of Stenhouse as being “of medium height,
inclining to embonpoint, ladylike, modest, and unpretending, attractive
rather from her quietness of manner than from any special characteris-
tics. She evidently possesses in a remarkable degree a reserve of latent
power which qualifies her to do any thing which she believes it is her duty
to undertake.” The review pointed out, referring to Stenhouse, that, “The
usual troubles of the first wife under the ‘plurality’ system were intensi-
ified and rendered more acute, as might be expected, to a lady of refine-
ment and cultivation than perhaps they might have been to one of a cold
or unthinking disposition.”
Stenhouse spent the latter part of 1873 and early 1874 in Hartford, Connecticut, working on her second book, returning to Utah in April. “Tell It All” was published later in 1874 and sold briskly in Salt Lake City. A November newspaper notice mentioned that it had sold five hundred copies in the past three weeks and a third edition was being issued.27

Over the next two or three years Stenhouse lectured in Utah on multiple occasions, her subjects being “Polygamy” and “Brigham Young.”28 She also lectured in Nevada, the Pacific states, and even Australia. Her lecture tours were so financially successful that she focused on them and eventually moved away from Utah.29

One particularly powerful effect of Stenhouse’s original book, the Exposé, was the impact it had on Ann Eliza Webb Young, who married Brigham Young in 1868 but by 1873 chafed under the privations she was experiencing. She read Stenhouse’s Exposé and was deeply moved. As she told audiences later, the book “showed me things in a clearer light than I had seen them before. I knew every word was true from my own sad experience, and it encouraged me to leave the hateful polygamic life.” Later that same year, Ann Eliza left her marriage (she eventually won a divorce in 1876) and gave her first lecture against polygamy and Brigham Young. She soon became a sensation on the lecture circuit as well. The books and lectures of Fanny Stenhouse and Ann Eliza Webb Young contributed greatly to the growth of anti-Mormon sentiment in the country in the 1870s.30

Ann Eliza Webb Young may also have provided a glimpse into Brigham Young’s response to Stenhouse’s Exposé.

I remember once going into his office, and finding him examining the advertising circular of a book on Mormonism, written by a lady who had for a time been a resident of Utah. He commenced reading it aloud to me in a whining voice, imitating the tone of a crying woman. Yet, notwithstanding this attempt to make a jest of it, I knew that the publication of this book annoyed him excessively, and that he was both curious and anxious concerning the contents, and the effect they would produce.31

The sculptor Mahonri Young is said to have also recalled his grandfather Brigham Young’s concern about Stenhouse’s writings, telling his niece: “Winifred, do you know that your great-grandmother Stenhouse was the only person of whom Brigham Young was ever afraid? You have probably heard that when he saw this book [“Tell It All,” a copy of which Winifred was showing Mahonri during his 1946 visit] Brigham ordered the plates
destroyed in Connecticut and every copy that could be found, burned.”

If true, it appears that Young’s orders fell short of their objective.

Since Stenhouse’s revised book continued to be published in additional editions until 1890, there was clearly an audience for her story for many years after its original appearance. Although she continued to tour and lecture, she had moved out of Utah by 1875. She lectured in Nevada in February of that year, joining her husband T. B. H., who was writing a series of letters about the mine fields, and by June they were residing in San Francisco. By then she also had completed a new project—a play called *Saints and Sinners*, co-written by G. B. Densmore, who had dramatized Mark Twain’s *The Gilded Age* with great success. The hero was to be General P. E. Connor, formerly in charge of Salt Lake’s Fort Douglas. Brigham Young would be the villain, and Apostle George Q. Cannon the “low comedy man.” Although plans were announced to produce the new play not only in San Francisco and New York but London and Australia, it apparently never reached the stage.

Stenhouse undertook an extensive lecture tour in Australia, beginning her first lectures there in September 1875 and returning to San Francisco in July of the following year. Upon her arrival in Australia, one of the Sydney newspapers reported that Stenhouse’s motive was to “forewarn, and thus forearm, the public of Australia against the preachings and machinations of the six Mormon elders who were sent as missionaries from Utah some months ago, by Brigham Young, to make converts in these colonies, and who we believe have actually arrived in our midst.” It went on to point out that she had a slight head start on the missionaries and wished her much success.

By this time Stenhouse’s books were estimated to have sold over fifty thousand copies, and she was likely at the height of her lecturing abilities. It was noted that she was “the first lady lecturer who has appeared in Sydney,” and her platform appearance and demeanor were described in complimentary terms: “She has bright, expressive eyes, a well moulded figure and a ringing voice, exquisitely modulated to the exigencies of the lecture whether it be for imitation, drollery, denunciation or declamation, in all of which she excels.” Another report also had nothing but praise for her performance and her person:

Every statement made by Mrs. Stenhouse has the genuine ring of truthfulness; the only thing which we perceive at all calculated to throw doubt upon her story of woman’s degradation at Salt Lake is the lecturer herself. Can polygamy, after all, be so bad a thing, when it can turn out such a graceful, self-possessed, intelligent, accomplished, sympathetic, and able a lady lecturer as Mrs. Stenhouse?
The year following her return from Australia, we get a glimpse of Stenhouse’s situation in San Francisco through the eyes of the well-known Salt Lake photographer, Charles R. Savage. Savage had been converted to Mormonism in England by T. B. H. at the age of fifteen and had known the Stenhouses well. On a trip to California in 1877 he visited Fanny, finding her in a “lowly abode” in San Francisco. She appeared to him “very matronly, hair turned grey.” They spoke about family matters, Stenhouse noting that her daughter Ida was doing well in school and developing a good operatic voice. She explained that although she was no longer a believer in religion, she was allowing her daughters to attend an Episcopal church as a way of introducing them into good society, but that she took pains to let them know that religion was “all humbug.”

She hinted that her husband, Thomas, was “given up to drinking” since leaving the Mormon church and that she was supporting the family. Although she had made $7,000 from the sale of her book, she complained that her publisher “had robbed her of $1,000,” and noted that she was currently considering “brilliant offers” to go on the lecture circuit once again.

Upon learning that Savage had another wife, she “gave me a short venomous harangue against Everything Mormon, and Polygamy in particular,” yet she said she thought highly of the people of Utah and would even like to live there. Savage was impressed that she “spoke of my wife in the most endearing manner how much she loved her &c &c—I discovered for the first time her intense love for my wife.” He reflected afterward that “whatever success she had had in pulling down the Mormon faith it had not been a source of comfort to her,” and that it was best he not continue the friendship.

However, the following year found him visiting her again, this time finding her “more agreable [sic] and less vinager [sic] in her talk” and noting that he “should rejoice to see her back among her old friends, she told me that, she cared more for her old friends than for any new ones she had made.” Savage seems to have maintained his attachment to Stenhouse in some form, since even as late as 1895 he made a note in his diary of her address in Los Angeles.

By 1895 Stenhouse had suffered many difficult losses. T. B. H. had died in 1882, only four years after Savage had last visited. Fanny Stenhouse was still lecturing in the early 1880s, having “delivered to a large audience an intensely ‘anti-Mormon’ lecture which was reported in the papers” in San Francisco shortly before her husband’s death. We know this because the Mormon church’s historian still kept track of her, including the notice of her appearance in the clipping file the church maintained as a historical record.
Her oldest daughter Clara had died in 1893 from typhoid fever at the young age of forty-two and had left seven children from ages eight to twenty-five. Then in 1894 while living in San Francisco, Fanny Stenhouse was “bumped” by a street car at a turnaround, which caused her to lose part (or all, it is not known for sure) of her sight. Family memories indicate that she also had glaucoma and had undergone a “keyhole” operation whereby a piece of the iris had been removed to alleviate pressure on the optic nerve.
Soon after this incident Stenhouse moved to Los Angeles, where she lived with her daughter Fanny Maud; she also spent time in Ensenada, Mexico, with another daughter, Minnie (Emelia Eliza) Godbe. Minnie had married in 1873 Anthony Godbe, the younger brother of William Godbe, leader of the Godbeite reform movement in which the Stenhouses had been involved.\(^4\) Stenhouse apparently still traveled, as her great-grand-daughter Winifred Young recounts how much she enjoyed Stenhouse’s stories when Stenhouse visited Young’s family in Montclair, New Jersey, saying that Stenhouse and Aunt Susa Young Gates were “real storytellers and out to please.”

In 1901 Stenhouse stayed with Winifred Young’s family just before embarking on a trip around the world. She was heading first to England and then to revisit the place of her childhood on the Isle of Jersey. She also planned to go to France and Switzerland before sailing back to California by way of the South Seas. Six-year-old Winifred had not been told that her great-grandmother could not see, only that she should be very nice to her, so she “submitted quite generously if a bit impatiently to great-grandmother’s various pats, smoothings, and caresses,” and soon realized that “she sees with her fingers!” She was impressed with Stenhouse’s determination to travel: “But if her sight was gone, her spirit was not, and the incongruity of traveling to see the world without eyes to see with seems now, as then, only a natural demonstration of tremendous eagerness to know at first hand what was going on.” Winifred also shares this picture of Stenhouse, now in her seventies:

I did not know her until 1901 after she had been blinded in an accident, but young as I was [six years old], a serenity of face and manner impressed me almost as much as her stories. Could she have had a change of heart since writing the book “Tell It All” even though tragedy struck time and again through the intervening years? This we shall never know.\(^4\)\(^5\)

Winifred’s family received a letter postmarked France from Stenhouse. Her handwriting was “large but quite clear, as usual.” She reported having a wonderful time in England, where she had been met by Flora Bella Stenhouse Arnold (daughter of Fanny’s “sister-wife,” Belinda Pratt) and her husband, Gus Arnold. She also spent time with other family members, most likely her daughter Ida and her family, who lived in London. (Walter Stenhouse Young also spent “a few weekends at his Aunt Flora’s charming estate just outside of London” during a trip to England the following year.) In France Stenhouse was staying with the family of “Madame Odouard” (Olympe de Joaral Audouard), who had
This photograph of Fanny Stenhouse was probably taken after she had lost her eyesight.

met and written about Stenhouse more than thirty years before, and she mentioned that they had been urging her to look up members of the De Bosque family (her former fiancé) as well. Stenhouse went on to describe her special experience of what it was like to revisit the sites of her early life without the faculty of sight:

You know it is a very strange thing, Walter, but perhaps because I can’t see at all, every detail of my life has passed through my mind clearly, from the moment of reaching St. Heliers until now. Except for the fact that it is very nice to be with old friends again, I might better have stayed in California where at least there is so much activity that no one can think of herself or indulge in recapitulation. One would have a right to say that my past was over and done with long ago, but apparently the years of one’s youth make the most profound impression on the mechanism of the memory, and strangely, are not embedded deeply but emerge at the top in old age.\textsuperscript{44}
Not long after completing her trip around the world, Stenhouse died April 18, 1904, in Los Angeles, with several of her children (Lorenzo, Minnie, Fanny Maud, and Blanche) surrounding her. The other five surviving children were scattered—Serge in Salt Lake City, Ida in London, T. B. H. Jr. in Philadelphia, George in Canada, and Walter in Arizona. She was praised by the Salt Lake Tribune, which noted that although she was known to the general public by the book she had authored, to those who remembered her personally, “she is best known for her kindness of heart, her brilliant social qualities, her unfailing independence of character, and her openness of mind.” Her grave in the Angelus-Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles has a “modest polished red granite marker, simply inscribed with the word ‘Mother’, but no other name, two very simple floral designs, and the date of her death.”

Over the years of living within Mormonism, Stenhouse’s faith would waver—over polygamy or the behavior of church leaders—but again and again she describes pulling herself back to her strong faith in God and her desire to do His will. Take her at her word that she was in earlier years a strong believer in the message of the Mormon gospel, as she learned it and helped teach it in her missionary work. It does not seem credible that she was at heart a disbeliever through all those years of struggle, even though she came to express growing doubts about the wisdom of what she heard from church leaders. Her early profession of faith and dedication to the Mormon church can reasonably be accepted at face value, as can her later, evolving viewpoints about religion.

That she eventually came to a different interpretation of God than she previously believed does not invalidate her faith or belief at any stage of her life. The reader of Stenhouse’s “little pamphlet” can note that sometimes warm and active faith turns cold and distant, as hers did, without demeaning the worth of the writer or denying the validity of her experience. Stenhouse’s Exposé stands on its own, still revealing her as a woman to be reckoned with on her own terms.
His New Wife.—The “Wallflowers.”