

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2009

Review of *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915* By Sarah Carter

Jean Friesen
University of Manitoba

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Friesen, Jean, "Review of *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915* By Sarah Carter" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1246.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1246>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915. By Sarah Carter. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press; Athabasca, AB: AU Press, 2008. xv + 383 pp. Photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 paper.

Sarah Carter's *The Importance of Being Monogamous* is a timely study of Canada's efforts at the turn of the twentieth century to impose monogamy on its western frontier in communities long used to fur trade marriage by the custom of the country. Today the status of plural marriages is a contentious issue facing some jurisdictions in North America, including British Columbia. Some European societies have also struggled with the legal issues stemming from migration from regions where polygamy is firmly grounded in both faith and law. Carter's new book offers a rich, well-documented historical context for those involved in such challenging areas of public policy.

The study's main argument is that Canada made concerted efforts after Confederation to establish in the West a new "gendered space" for a "white manly world," largely by insisting on a nineteenth-century Christian definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman for life, thus limiting the public place of women. The book is remarkable for its extensive use of such primary sources as court and mission records, government documents, newspapers, and private papers. The analysis pays attention not only to policy intent but also to the complexities of administering such newly intrusive policies in communities of both new settlers and Aboriginal people.

Most scholars of Canada's Aboriginal policies have recognized the role of church and state in attempting to eliminate polygamy. What Sarah Carter has done that is new and significant is, first, to embed this broad narrative of Aboriginal policy in a more widely conceived study of state efforts to shape as well the nonconforming marriage practices of newcomers. And although Ottawa's efforts to alter the lives of Indians was "more deliberate, concerted and invasive," Carter's comparison of official responses to plural marriages amongst Mormons and Blackfoot, for example, is fresh and illuminating.

Second, she links the creation of this "gendered space" to Ottawa's formal policy of nation building. Successive governments were not merely providing support for their standing army of missionaries, but were actively seeking, for reasons of state, to shape a particular kind of West, a policy which was to have harsh consequences for many families. If Frederick Jackson Turner found his America in the exuberance of the Cumberland Gap, Sarah Carter's West can be found in the precise, proscriptive memorandums on marriage produced by Ottawa's emerging mandarin class.

Some Mormons challenged Canada's vision, and Carter includes a particularly engaging portrait of Zina Card, daughter of Brigham Young, a plural wife who became the public face of proponents of polygamy. Indians, not unexpectedly, ignored as long as possible the new directives. Some, particularly those with long exposure to church and boarding school, made adaptations. And though Carter places less emphasis on this, the Canadian state also adapted, exercising a sporadic, inconsistent, and reluctant restraint in dealing with some Aboriginal communities.

Sarah Carter's writing is accessible, her judgments are balanced and restrained, although the apparent dismissal of the "slavery" of second and third wives is a little unnerving. The questions confronted here, such as the meaning of marriage, changing gender roles, the defining of race and the power of the state, are, of course, those that will resonate with the current generation of

college and university students. This book will be *used*, and its substantial research base will ensure it a long life.

JEAN FRIESEN
Department of History
University of Manitoba