

Martha Hughes Cannon

Wil Aaron

Of all the Welsh who crossed the plains to Utah in 1861, no one distinguished herself more in her later life in Utah than Martha Maria Hughes. Few in Wales know of her today, but in Salt Lake City she is warmly remembered. Just off Temple Square, in the centre of Salt Lake City, a plaque commemorates her achievements with the words, 'In memory of Doctor Martha Hughes Cannon. Pioneer doctor. First woman state senator in the U.S. Author of Utah sanitation Laws. Member of the first state Board of Health.' The main building of the Utah Health Department is named after her, 'The Dr Martha Hughes Cannon Building'. In the centre court of the Utah State Capitol Building, an eight foot statue of her celebrates her trail-blazing service to the state, and soon a greater honour is to befall her. The Utah Senate has voted that a statue of her should be unveiled in the National Statuary Hall in Washington D.C. To this hall, every state in the Union sends statues of two of its most famous citizens. Representing Virginia for example are George Washington and Robert E. Lee. Sam Houston is there from Texas, Thomas Edison from Ohio, Andrew Jackson from Tennessee and so on. And from August 2020, the people of Utah are to be represented by Brigham Young and Martha Hughes Cannon. And yet in her home town, Llandudno, few have ever heard of her.

She was born there in 1857, the daughter of a carpenter. Her parents, Peter and Elizabeth Hughes were members of a small community of Mormons that met in the old village on the Great Orme, high above the town. Thomas Williams in his description of life in the old village, *Atgofion am Llandudno*, (*Memories of Llandudno*) describes their weekly meetings in the gardens of the old Tŷ Coch farmhouse to which non-believers from the village often came to argue and heckle in friendly banter. When Edward Parry, the leader of the Mormons claimed he could speak with tongues, they brought him a Greek Testament and told him to read, and when he failed to do so they said he could no more speak in foreign tongues than old George Williams' cow could knit socks. But when Edward Parry spoke of the importance of being in Salt Lake City to meet the Returned Christ, there were some who listened, amongst them Peter and Elizabeth. The family set off for the Great Salt Lake in 1860 when Martha was just four years old. It proved a harrowing experience. Her elder sister, Annie, died on the Plains. Her father died three days after arriving in Utah. When she came of school-leaving age, Martha had decided that her career should involve caring for the sick. Out on the Plains, the only methods of treating the sick had been folk remedies and the power of the holy oil, but Brigham Young's ideas about medicine had undergone radical change and new, modern, scientific ways were being introduced into Utah. A maternity hospital was being planned and it was thought proper that women's ailments should be treated by women practitioners. Martha was called by the Church to follow a course in medicine, one of the first three women in Utah to be so chosen.

In 1878, she entered the University of Michigan to study for an MD degree. She paid her way, working as a maid in the student dormitory and offering her services as a secretary to

wealthier members of the university. In addition to the basic curriculum, she took optional courses in bacteriology and electrotherapeutics, a new science which taught the use of electricity in medical treatments. She embarked on a postgraduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania, completing a thesis on Rocky Mountain Fever, the scourge of the early settlers. She showed it was a form of malaria which could be relieved by quinine. At the same time, she was taking a course in pharmacology and, as a cherry on this impressive cornucopia of qualifications, she finished her education with a course in public speaking, receiving a Bachelor of Oratory degree from the National School of Elocution and Oratory in Philadelphia. It was as if she foresaw, even at this early date, that, one day, public speaking would be important to her. On her return to Utah she was duly appointed to the staff of the first maternity hospital in the state and it appeared that an useful and distinguished career lay before her.

But it was not to be. After four successful years at the hospital, she suddenly abandoned her career, turned her back on Salt Lake City and fled to Europe, taking with her a seven month old baby daughter, Lizzie, and leaving behind a husband whom she had secretly married eighteen months previously. Life was never going to be easy for Martha Hughes. She was a complicated, driven woman, torn this way and that by her deeply conservative faith and her fiery radical politics. This is what makes her so interesting and modern a figure.

The husband she had left behind, Angus Munn Cannon, was one of the directors of the hospital, a prominent Mormon citizen and the brother of one of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He was Martha's senior by twenty three years and the father of seventeen children. Martha was his fourth wife. It would be a mistake to believe that Martha was pushed into a polygamous marriage by an oppressive, patriarchal society. She was an intelligent, enlightened and spirited woman whose determination to educate herself and whose subsequent career reflects a resolutely feminist and independent spirit. She knew what lay ahead. She knew would not have a conventional home life. She knew she would only have fleeting visits from her husband. But they were in love. 'You have been loved as much as a woman has been, is, and yet will be loved,' he wrote. 'I am thankful to our Heavenly Father that I have you for my husband,' she declared. 'I would rather spend one hour in your society than a whole lifetime with any other man I know of.' But, more importantly, she believed with all her heart in the teachings of her Church and the holiness of plural marriage. 'Plural marriage,' she wrote 'would be unendurable without a thorough knowledge from God that the principle for which we are battling and striving to maintain in its purity upon the earth is ordained by Him.'

She could not have entered into a polygamous marriage at a more unfortunate time. A wave of anti-Mormon sentiment was sweeping through the United States. The federal government in Washington was determined to rid the nation of a practice it considered barbaric. Although a federal law banning plural marriages had been in existence for over twenty years, there had been few convictions, partly because, in Utah, the control of the courts and the right to pick juries had been left in Mormon hands and partly because the Civil War had intervened. But now that the war was over, the government hardened its attitude. Civil and criminal cases

were put into the hands of federal courts and were argued before juries often chosen for their anti-polygamous opinions. Detectives were set to watch some of the more influential citizens and one of the first to be arrested was Angus. Martha was subpoenaed to give evidence against him and against other men whose wives had been in her care at the maternity hospital. Lest she incriminate them, she fled abroad, taking her new born child with her. 'I would rather be a stranger in a strange land,' she wrote, 'and be able to hold my head up among my fellow human beings than be a sneaking captive at home.'

With her sickly child in tow, her 'little pale-faced baby, greatly in need of home comforts', she came to Britain, first staying with her mother's relatives in and around Birmingham. She felt unable to reveal to them that she was in a polygamous relationship and they in turn regarded her, a single mother, with deep suspicion. There was a journey to Llanddaged, near Llanrwst in Denbighshire, to search out her father's family. She travelled on to France and Switzerland and Germany, increasingly miserable and lonely, always longing for home and for Angus. She wrote to him with revealing candour. Angus kept all her letters and at his death they found their way into the Church Archive in Salt Lake City, where they may be read today. In them is to be found an unique and painful record of the life of a Welsh woman in polygamy.

There is no suggestion that her husband's first three wives were a problem to her. She expresses no jealousy towards them. All three were so much older than she. Angus had married his first wife when Martha was only one year old. He had been given permission to do so by Brigham Young, on condition that he also married her sister who was much older and had failed to find a husband. His third wife, Clarissa, was a widow, with two children of her own to support and two adopted children. There is reason to believe therefore that Angus married two of his first three wives more from a sense of duty than love, something that was not uncommon in polygamous marriages. Martha appeared to be friendly with all three.

But a few days before she left for Europe, Angus, in great secrecy, married for the fifth time. This marriage proved more difficulty for Martha to accept because Maria Bennion was six months younger than her. Angus wrote that 'he had put his devotion to the Church above everything'. Martha replied, 'I wish we could look at the divine part of these things only, but with so much earthiness in our nature this is not always easily accomplished.' For the first time, flashes of jealousy punctuate the letters. 'How I despise the name Maria – but I never did admire it [even] before I had any occasion to be jealous.' Angus continued to declare his undying love. 'You may doubt it with your own soul, but you are loved by the man you have gone through everything for and sacrificed everything on earth for.' But she was finding her exile increasingly difficult. 'Were it not for Lizzie and the religion of our God, I should never want to see Salt Lake again but seek some other spot and strive to forget what a failure my life has been.' Angus, apparently unbeknown to her and to the other wives, then took a sixth bride. Joanna was thirty eight years old, and perhaps another example of the 'humanitarianism of polygamy'. Finally, in December 1887, the warrant for Martha's arrest expired and she returned home.

At this time, she became active in the women's rights movement. She had absorbed the spirit and the beliefs of the movement at an early age. In her teens she had worked as a typesetter in the printing shop of the 'Woman's Exponent', a magazine for Mormon women which enthusiastically advocated both plural marriage and women's suffrage. The women of Utah were in a peculiar situation. For seventeen years, from 1870 to 1887, they had been allowed the vote, an entitlement largely won through the efforts of their enemies. Anti-polygamy lobbyists in Washington had reasoned that if Mormon women were given the vote, they would surely use it to break free from the shackles of polygamy. But this is not what happened. The sisters voted 'en masse' for the 'status quo'. To be seen standing shoulder to shoulder with their men in defence of their faith was more important to them than overthrowing polygamy. They argued that if a woman was unhappy in her marriage, a divorce was easily obtainable in Utah. They pointed out that only about 25% of the women of the Church were in polygamous relationships and that it was of their own choice. And they insisted that it was a religious matter and that the government had no mandate to intervene. Their opponents eventually conceded defeat and consequently, having allowed Mormon women to vote for eighteen years, summarily dis-enfranchised them. This sparked a fierce reaction and a vigorous campaign to win back the vote into which Martha threw herself enthusiastically. Two campaigns were being fought simultaneously, intractably bound together, yet no two causes could have been more different. The Women's Suffrage Campaign was a modern, fashionable, progressive movement that was fast making great headway in the nation at large, whilst the campaign in support of polygamous marriages appeared, from outside Utah, to be a step back into darkness, restricting the freedom and the rights of women. Yet Martha was passionately involved in both.

Throughout the eighties, the Federal Government tightened its grip on the polygamous Saints, squeezing them mercilessly. Many hundreds were jailed, hundreds more were heavily fined. More and more Church property was confiscated. Eventually, in 1890, thirteen years after Brigham Young's death, the Church capitulated and Wilford Woodruff, the incumbent Prophet, declared that God had instructed him there was to be one wife only for every Saint from now on. The Mormons promised that they would not sanction further polygamous marriages and that, although men in plural marriages were expected to support all their wives and children, no man should continue to co-habit with more than one wife. Legally therefore, Angus and Martha's relationship should have ended but it was soon evident that it had not.

On her return to Salt Lake City in 1888, Martha had embarked on a new career. She had established a training college for nurses, the first in Utah, an adventurous, ambitious project. But no sooner had she embarked on her new career than, once again, it came crashing down about her. Once again, she was pregnant. Once again, to protect Angus, she had to abandon her goals and flee the territory, this time to California, where she gave birth secretly to a baby boy. 'Oh for a home, for a husband of my own and a father for my children', she wrote, 'and all the little auxiliaries that make life worth the living. Will they ever be enjoyed by this storm-tossed exile?'

After two years, she returned quietly to Salt Lake City and resumed her private practice. In the grand scheme of things, she was still unshakable in her conviction that ‘a plural marriage would enable her to associate with the elect in eternity.’ But in the here and now, the road ahead often seemed rocky and wearying. ‘Dear One, do not think that I am dissatisfied with my lot. On the contrary, I am thankful that God so ordained my destiny to embrace the celestial principle of marriage when I did, and now in it, my energies shall be bent towards its continuance, but I greatly feel my weakness at times and know not how long I shall hold out in the great cause.’ ‘That Martha and Angus loved each other is evident,’ wrote one of Angus’ grandsons, ‘but equally manifest were their disputes. Theirs was a bittersweet relationship. Love letters and valentines interspersed with complaints about neglect and threats of divorce.’

She became a prominent member of the Utah Women’s Suffrage Association and made a name for herself as an orator, not only in Utah, but in the country at large. She was invited to speak in the 1893 World Fair in Chicago and the *Chicago Record* noted that ‘Mrs Dr. Martha Hughes Cannon...is considered one of the brightest exponents of the women’s cause in the United States’. Utah at this time had yet to be made a state but it had been promised statehood if it formally abandoned polygamy. In 1896, the promise was kept and in the constitution of the new state a clause was included that sanctioned the re-enfranchisement of women. It would be another twenty-five years before women’s suffrage became general throughout the United States. Having won this battle, Martha looked around for another fight.

She had been aware throughout her career that medical standards in Utah were not high. Salt Lake City was growing fast, perhaps too fast, doubling its size between 1880 and 1890. It became one of the dirtiest towns in the West. Diseases such as cholera, TB, whooping cough and measles were rife. There was a need for cleaner water, cleaner streets, better sewage systems and an improvement in the working conditions of the labour force. In the first election of the new legislature, Martha was one of the five Democrats campaigning for one of the five Salt Lake City seats in the state senate. Standing against them were five Republicans, one of whom was Angus. As might be expected, much was made in the press of the duel between husband and wife. Angus was offered reams of advice on how to rein in a frisky mare or how to clip a queen bee’s wings. But Martha also had her supporters. *The Salt Lake Herald* declared, ‘Send Mrs. Cannon to the State Senate and let Mr. Cannon remain at home to manage home industry. Mrs. Mattie Hughes is the better man of the two.’ When the day of the election came, it was Martha and the Democrats that swept the board. She was the first woman to be elected to the state senate of Utah, which is why her statue stands today in the court of the Utah Capitol Building. But she was also the first woman to be elected to any senate in the nation, state or federal, which is why another statue of her of is soon to grace The National Statuary Hall in Washington D.C.

She proved a great success as a senator. As might be expected, her best work was done in the field of public health. In her first month in office, she successfully introduced a bill to establish a public health authority which was instrumental in improving the water supply throughout the state, controlling infectious diseases and imposing higher hygiene standards.

Martha was voted to the board of the new authority. At the same time she guided an 'Act to Protect the Health of Women and Girl Employees' on to the statute books and an 'Act Providing for Compulsory Education of Deaf and Dumb Children'. She sponsored a bill to establish better hygiene standards in food production and another to establish a fact finding agency to gather statistics and undertake research on behalf of the government. In 1899, there was a move to nominate her for a seat in the United States Congress. It was said that, had she stood, she would have stood a good chance of winning, but it was not to be.

Once again, when her career was about to take off, she was dragged back down to earth again, her plans scuppered by another pregnancy. Ten years after the Manifesto that had made plural marriages illegal, here was a prominent public figure brazenly flouting the law. This time it could not be kept secret. It became a national scandal. Martha must have realised what the consequences would be, but she chose the child before her career. Gwendolyn was born in April, 1899. Angus was duly arrested and was fined \$100, but Martha paid more dearly. Her political career came to an end. She had to give up her seat in the senate and although she was yet only in her early forties, she retired from public life. She continued in private practice and made a study of nervous diseases, becoming an authority on narcotic addiction, but more and more of her time was spent with her children. Her relationship with Angus withered to little more than demands for money and petty quarrels. 'Dear Angus, Please send remittance. Children must be fed and clothed.' 'Dear Angus, The Building Society wants us to move out of the house because there are \$255 due.' 'Dear Angus, I feel disgraced to be obliged to ask for butter.'

The evidence of the letters suggests a growing despondency. Despite her confident public image, in private she suffered pangs of self-doubt. 'People have said I had no feeling when in reality my pent up feeling like a cankerous worm was gnawing me internally'. Her husband could give her neither the home she craved for nor the emotional security she needed. She was often tired and depressed. One senses her last years were unhappy. Eventually she left Utah and settled with her son in Los Angeles and there she died in 1932. One of her last wishes was that her diaries and all her personal papers be burnt.

For many years, her name and her career were more or less forgotten, but her star rose again when she was seen to have been fighting many of the battles that young Mormon women, and women everywhere, are fighting today. Her cause was championed by various feminist groups seeking to remind the people of Utah of what she had achieved, how she had fought for better opportunities for women at work and in the home, 'Give me a woman who thinks about something besides cook stoves and wash tubs and baby flannels, and I'll show you, nine times out of ten, a successful mother'; how she had fought for the right of women to pursue the career of their choice, 'There are many scientific truths to be discovered, many arts to be perfected, which require the hearts and minds of women'; and how she had fought for gender equality. 'All men and women are born free and equal.' Throughout her life, she fought for the right of women to lead more enriching, rewarding and fulfilling lives. Yet for her, it was a fight made all the more difficult by her belief in plural marriage and her faith in the Mormon way.

