

## CANNON, MARTHA MARIA HUGHES (1857 - 1932), doctor and politician

**Name:** Martha Maria Hughes Cannon  
**Date of birth:** 1857  
**Date of death:** 1932  
**Spouse:** Angus Munn Cannon  
**Child:** Elizabeth Rachel Cannon  
**Child:** James Hughes Cannon  
**Child:** Gwendolyn Cannon  
**Parent:** Elizabeth Hughes (née Evans)  
**Parent:** Peter Hughes  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** doctor and politician  
**Area of activity:** Medicine; Politics, Government and Political Movements  
**Author:** Wil Aaron

Martha Hughes Cannon was born in Madoc Street, Llandudno on 1 July 1857, the second of the three daughters of Peter Hughes (c.1825-1861), a carpenter, and his wife Elizabeth (née Evans, c.1833-1923). At the time, there was a small Mormon community flourishing in the old village of Llandudno on the Great Orme, of which Peter and Elizabeth Hughes were probably members. Their last address in Wales, as recorded in the manifest of *'The Underwriter'*, the vessel that took them across the Atlantic in 1860, was Tanygraig, which is up in the old village. Crossing from the Missouri to Salt Lake City by ox-cart in 1861 proved a harrowing experience for the family. Martha's younger sister, Annie, died on the Plains, and her father died three days after arriving in Utah.

When she came of school-leaving age, Martha decided that her career should involve caring for the sick. A maternity hospital was being planned in the city 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. Later, she embarked on a postgraduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania and 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 appeared that a distinguished and rewarding career lay before her, but it was not to be. 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. 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. 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 she would not have a conventional home life. She knew she would only have fleeting visits from her husband. But 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. 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 newborn child with her.

She came to Britain, first staying with her mother's relatives in and around Birmingham. There was a journey to Llanddoged, near Llanrwst in Denbighshire, to search out her father's family. She travelled on to France and Switzerland and Germany, visiting hospitals and nursing schools, 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 - an honest and painful account of a life in polygamy.

There is no suggestion that her husband's first three wives were a problem to her. All three were so much older than her. But a few days before she left for Europe, Angus, in great secrecy, married for the fifth time. He wrote to Martha 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.' Finally, in December 1887, the warrant for Martha's arrest expired and she returned home, but before she arrived, Angus, apparently unbeknown to her and to the other wives, had taken a sixth bride.

On her return, Martha 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 an anti-polygamy lobby in Washington. It was reasoned that if Mormon women were given the vote, they would surely use it to break free from the shackles of polygamy. But the sisters voted en masse for the status quo, insisting that the government had no mandate to intervene. They argued that if a woman was unhappy in her marriage, a divorce was easily obtainable in Utah. Their opponents eventually conceded defeat and, having allowed Utah women the 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.

Throughout the 1880s, 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. 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. But no sooner had she embarked on her new career than she had to abandon it. Once again, she was pregnant. Once again, to protect Angus, she had to abandon her goals and flee, this time to California, taking with her Elizabeth and her new-born son, James (1890-1950). '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 and her polygamous relationship. 'That Martha and Angus loved each other is evident,' wrote one of Angus's grandsons, 'but equally manifest were their disputes. There 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, doubling its size between 1880 and 1890. Diseases such as cholera, TB, whooping cough and measles were rife. There was a need for cleaner water, a better sewage system and an improvement in the working conditions of the labour force. In the first election of the new legislature, Martha put her name forward as one of the Democrats competing for a Salt Lake City seat in the state senate. One of the Republican candidates standing against her was her husband, Angus. When the day of the election came in November 1896, 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 is to be placed in the National Statuary Hall in Washington D.C. Many other honours have come her way, including a commemorative stamp in 1992 and the naming of Utah's Health Department building as 'The Dr. Martha Cannon Building' in 1986.

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 introduced a bill to establish a state public health authority which was instrumental in imposing higher hygiene standards throughout the state, improving the water supply, licensing medical practitioners and attempting to control infectious diseases. 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 and Blind Children'. She also sponsored a bill to establish better hygiene standards in food production. In 1899, there was a move to nominate her for a seat in the United States Congress, but it was not to be.

Once again, as her career took off, her plans were scuppered by another pregnancy. This time it could not be kept secret. Angus was duly arrested and was fined \$100, but Martha paid more dearly. Gwendolyn was born in April 1899 and, though only in her early forties, Martha 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.

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'. Gwendolyn died in 1928, only 29 years old. This broke her heart. Her husband could give her neither the home she craved nor the emotional security she needed. Eventually she left Utah and settled with her son in Los Angeles and there she died on 10 July 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. 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.

## Author

Wil Aaron

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Welsh Mormon History: [Martha Maria Hughes](#)

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