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**Anna R. Igra, *Wives Without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, & Welfare in New York, 1900-1935***

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and intellectual life and produced a book that should be read, despite its length, by academics of all disciplines.

**Ron Harris**

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Anna R. Igra, *Wives without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, and Welfare in New York, 1900–1935*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. Pp. 175. \$49.95 cloth (ISBN 978-0-8078-3070-3); \$19.95 paper (ISBN 978-0-8078-5779-3).

*Wives without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, and Welfare in New York, 1900–1935* is a richly told tale of Jewish anti-desertion reform in the early twentieth century. Anna Igra succeeds in more than simply capturing this fascinating slice of history, however. Through her analysis of the complex legal and social movement designed to coerce Jewish husbands back to the families they had deserted, Igra identifies an early example of our nation's longstanding efforts to spare the public fisc by encouraging private dependencies. Then, as now, marriage played a central role in both the rhetoric and law of poverty.

The centerpiece of Igra's research is the original records of the National Desertion Bureau (NDB), the most significant anti-desertion agency of the early twentieth century. Using a stratified sample, she analyzes 300 case files, some hundreds of pages long following cases for decades. Through content analysis, and insights from a variety of other sources, Igra chronicles an ultimately unsuccessful anti-desertion movement that sought to enforce norms of male breadwinning in order to aid impoverished families.

The anti-desertion movement in New York grew in part from attempts to assimilate eastern European Jewish immigrants into the norm of male breadwinning, portrayed as an essential part of American manhood. Jews also prided themselves on community independence, a commitment to self-sufficiency that was embodied in the centuries-old Peter Stuyvesant Pledge. Concerns about divorced women with no ghet, the high divorce rate among eastern European Jews, and the potential for non-Jews to view the Jewish community as a public burden combined to fuel efforts to stop husbands from impoverishing their wives and children through desertion. ("Desertion" occurred not only when a husband abandoned his wife, but also when he did not earn enough for the family's support or spent his wages elsewhere.)

Founded in 1911, the NDB became the cornerstone of the anti-desertion efforts. It was funded by Jewish charities and philanthropists and functioned as a legal aid agency for Jewish deserted women. The agency's efforts on behalf of its clients were both practical and rhetorical. It used the *Jewish Daily Forward*, for example, to publish a regular column entitled "The Gallery of Missing Men," as well as letters from deserted women pleading for information about their runaway husbands. In addition to assisting in the location of individual men, these publications sent a powerful message to the community about the responsibility of husbands to support their families, and the consequences for failing to do so.

Deserted women fell into a unique legal and social category—wives without husbands—in a society that structured roles, rights, and obligations around marital status. The case files give voice to these women, whose own contributions to family support were ignored by the reformers' rhetoric and who tended to seek assistance only when their wage-earning efforts fell short. And when deserted women did finally turn to the government for help, they often discovered that while the system for enforcing support obligations and providing welfare assistance had been designed expressly to meet their needs, it seldom produced the desired results. The system was expressly designed to restore family life and to save public funds; ultimately, it often did neither. While the NDB had a very good "husband-finding" rate, the deserters seldom returned home voluntarily. Many women did not pursue support orders because the domestic relations courts and welfare agencies were difficult to navigate and relied heavily on the woman's own efforts to carry out the process. Aid was also conditioned on a woman's willingness to cooperate in the location and prosecution of her husband. The cost of pursuing the claim in terms of lost wages, transportation, and child care often far exceeded the benefits collected or deterred pursuit of the claim at all. Despite the rhetoric of male breadwinning, both courts and charities expected women, relatives, and older children to work to support the family before granting them assistance. And when support was ordered, it was often not paid. Only 3 percent of the women in Igra's sample received support for at least six months.

Though Igra's book ends with the New Deal government's replacing religious and ethnic charities as the major provider of support to the poor, the anti-desertion reformers' focus on marriage and private "breadwinning" is a legacy that persists even today. "Marriage-promotion" is an official governmental policy, welfare is conditioned on attempts at wage-earning, parent-locating is among the most central government services provided on behalf of poor children. As Igra notes in her conclusion, we continue to treat marriage as a panacea for poverty, but her history of the anti-desertion reform movement provides an important cautionary tale.

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Kathleen A. Cairns, *The Enigma Woman: The Death Sentence of Nellie May Madison*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. Pp. 312. \$25.00 (ISBN 978-0-8032-1141-4).

In 1934, Montanan-turned-Californian Nellie Madison nearly became the first woman to be put to death by the state of California. The extraordinary tale of how Madison came to be arrested, tried, convicted, condemned, reprieved and set free is the subject of this painstakingly researched work. Who Madison was and what her life and her crime meant is another story, and one that this book struggles to bring into being.

"Enigma Woman" was the moniker bestowed on Madison by one of the Los Angeles dailies that covered her June 1934 trial for the shooting death of her husband. Historian and former journalist Kathleen Cairns draws from the newspaper