Introduction

Mention the term “mail-order bride,” and you are likely to conjure up two very different, very contradictory images. One is a sad and gritty portrait of an abused and desperate woman, probably very young, and almost certainly foreign, while the other is the rosy image of a strong and brave pioneer bride, possibly older, and quintessentially American.¹ *Buying a Bride* attempts to reconcile these two images. Looking at the history of mail-order brides from the early years of the Jamestown colony to the present, this book examines how we arrived at these conflicting depictions and why the perception of mail-order marriages as formerly good but now bad is both simplistic and inaccurate.

Mail-order marriage has always contained competing elements of risk and reward. These marriages offer women an opportunity to improve their lives, yet they must abandon the security of their homes and families and marry a stranger. Today, women willing to take this chance are considered desperate and helpless, but this was not always true. Historically, mail-order brides were regarded as courageous due to their willingness to embrace the risks and uncertainties of mail-order marriage. The 1934 short story “Object, Matrimony” exemplifies this view.²

“Object, Matrimony” was written by Rose Wilder Lane, the daughter of the iconic American author Laura Ingalls Wilder,³ and depicts the twenty-year mystery surrounding the marriage of Jed Masters and his mail-order bride, Clarinda. The story opens in the late 1870s, in Sioux County, South Dakota, in a half-built town at the “end of the line.”⁴ A young woman, clearly a lady, but also a stranger, emerges from one of the passenger cars of an arriving train. She is described as pale and seemingly frightened, but it soon becomes clear that she is also brave
and determined. As Clarinda exits the train, she turns to the crowd of gawking townspeople and brazenly asks where she can obtain a marriage license. The crowd is stunned. One of the townswomen declares she has never “heard of a woman so bold and brash.”

After receiving her answer, Clarinda rounds up a justice of the peace and a carriage and sets out for Jed Masters’s house. Upon meeting Jed, Clarinda informs him that she is accepting his offer of marriage and insists on marrying him right away. Jed reluctantly agrees and the two are married. Then, immediately after the ceremony, Jed demands an explanation. He wants to know why Clarinda was in such a rush to marry and accuses her of being pregnant. She denies it, but refuses to explain herself. Instead, she simply states, “It’s a fair bargain. You advertised for a wife because you wanted a woman, any woman. I married you because I wanted a husband.” When Jed continues to insist, she tells him, “You can kill me, but I’ll never tell.”

“Object, Matrimony” illustrates both the risks of mail-order marriage as well as the strength and determination regularly ascribed to early mail-order brides. Initially, Clarinda’s secrecy and Jed’s displeasure seem to indicate helplessness and vulnerability. However, at the end, her secret is revealed and it becomes clear that Clarinda is not a victim. Clarinda tells Jed that she had once been engaged to another man, but when she discovered his plan to elope with her friend she left him and came west to marry. She then triumphantly informs Jed that her former fiancé recently lost his fortune and that she has just purchased his farm and evicted him and his wife. Mail-order marriage gave Clarinda the opportunity to reassert control over her life, avoid victimization, and even extract revenge. Nevertheless, the story concludes by suggesting that the most significant benefit Clarinda gained from her mail-order marriage was happiness. After Clarinda’s revelation, a stunned Jed asks his wife if she would still have her fiancé if given the option. She lovingly replies, “Goodness no, . . . I wouldn’t have anybody but you.”

Lane’s story portrays mail-order brides as strong and resilient and shows how women could use mail-order marriage to cope with their
powerlessness in a male-dominated society. At the same time, Lane’s story also hints at the connection between mail-order marriage and broader national interests. The location of the town in the story is significant. Its setting at the “end of the line” signifies both the end of the railroad and the edge of U.S. control. Lane’s town is reminiscent of the thousands of real towns that were created to secure U.S. control over Indian lands. In all of these border towns, the presence of women was considered crucial to national expansion. Consequently, both the territorial and federal governments routinely offered legal and financial incentives to spur female immigration. These incentives significantly benefited mail-order brides, but they were not costless. The arrival of mail-order brides frequently coincided with the displacement of native women. Unfortunately, this history is rarely acknowledged. Most favorable accounts of mail-order marriage tend to focus on the experiences of white, American women. When men and women of color used this form of marriage, the positive perception of these unions evaporated. Moreover, this shameful history continues to influence modern views regarding the practice.

*Buying a Bride* demonstrates that many of the widespread concerns regarding mail-order marriage have questionable origins. This book also emphasizes the similarities between historic mail-order marriage and its modern counterparts and demonstrates that the benefits offered by these marriages remain significant. Nevertheless, I think it is important to acknowledge that a focus on the advantages of mail-order marriage was not the original intention of this book. In fact, it was my own negative reaction to a magazine article on mail-order marriage that initially inspired this project. The article described the mail-order experience of a successful fashion photographer named Steven Baillie, who had tired of the American models and actresses he usually dated and decided it was time to “settle down.” Baillie wanted a “traditional wife,” meaning a woman who would prioritize her husband and family, and he turned to mail-order marriage because he believed foreign women made better wives. When asked to explain his specific concerns with
American women, Baillie stated, “They have entitlement issues. . . . I want to be the entitled one now.” After presenting this explanation, the article described how Baillie chose a mail-order bride company, how he selected his fiancée from the hundreds of women available on the company’s website, and how he believed he had finally found “the one.” The article then revealed that he had been horribly wrong.

The second half of the article detailed the transformation of Baillie’s fairytale romance into a nightmare. The smart, beautiful woman he had selected, who liked to cook and clean and dote on him, also had an unexpected temper. She became jealous of his friendships with other women, including the daughter of a female friend, and Baillie quickly realized the relationship was not going to work. By this point, the woman was pregnant, but Baillie didn’t care. When her visa expired, he chose not to marry her, and sent her home. The article then ended with Baillie’s glib reflection that there are worse problems than dating American models. He stated:

Look at my life before I had this freaking bitch here. What was the problem? I’m freakin’ hangin’ out with all these models and strippers. And yeah, it’s empty, but like, what’s the problem? Why was I willing to give this up? So now . . . I’m just going to enjoy everything that comes my way. My outlook is like, “I’m just going to bone as many of these chicks as I can.” I just wanna not worry about anything. My life is pretty fucking awesome.10

This article horrified me. It seemed to confirm my worst suspicions regarding mail-order marriage. Here was a man routinely dating beautiful, desirable women yet turning to mail-order marriage because he believed his previous girlfriends had not been sufficiently grateful. Instead of examining his own behavior, Baillie looked to an Internet “catalogue” to solve his relationship problems. When he became displeased with the “product” he received, he “returned” her like an ill-fitting pair of pants. *Buying a Bride* began with this article in mind.
As I started my research, I expected to find that modern mail-order marriages are fundamentally harmful and that these problems are long-standing. I was surprised that this is not what I found. Despite significant risks, mail-order marriages are typically beneficial and even liberating for women. Consequently, after reaching this conclusion, the object of the book changed. *Buying a Bride* no longer aimed to demonstrate the inherent problems with mail-order marriage. Instead, the book examines the changing perceptions surrounding these marriages and seeks to understand why we continue to venerate the mail-order marriages of the colonial and frontier days while simultaneously fearing their modern-day counterparts.

*Buying a Bride* addresses this puzzle by examining the history of mail-order marriage from the Jamestown Colony to the present. It shows how the laws and policies pertaining to mail-order brides varied drastically over time and how changes in the racial makeup of the brides, the fulfillment of America’s manifest destiny, and evolving beliefs regarding love, marriage, and gender in American society all played a part in transforming mail-order marriage from a lauded institution into one that was, and continues to be, vilified. Accordingly, the book is arranged in two parts. The first half examines the importance and respect afforded pre–Civil War mail-order brides. The second half details the continuing benefits as well as the increasing skepticism and criticism directed at mail-order marriage in the post–Civil War period until the present.

Specifically, the first half of the book looks at the role of early mail-order brides with regard to the successful colonization of North America. Chapter 1 focuses on the mail-order brides of the Virginia colony. The Virginia government considered marriage vital to the success of the entire colonial enterprise, and this belief translated into significant social, economic, and legal benefits for the mail-order brides of Jamestown. Chapters 2 and 3 continue the examination of colonial mail-order brides by contrasting the successful mail-order bride program of New France with its disastrous counterpart in the Louisiana colony. Both
chapters show how French bridal programs were influenced by concerns regarding population instability as well as fears of Indian/white miscegenation. However, chapter 2 documents the successful filles du roi program and the ways it benefited both the brides and the colony, while chapter 3 examines the failure of Louisiana’s bridal program and how it harmed the colony and the women. In addition, chapter 3 highlights the stark difference between mail-order marriage and trafficking while also revealing why these two concepts are so often linked. Chapter 4 then turns to the mail-order brides of California and the Pacific Northwest. This chapter analyzes the immigration incentives offered to eastern women and the legal and social benefits they received after arrival. It further shows how the U.S. and Canadian governments used female immigration to secure their respective control over North America and how this was achieved, in part, by displacing and harming native wives.

Part II of the book considers the circumstances that led to the increasingly negative perception of mail-order marriage. Although concerns regarding mail-order marriage are long-standing, they have intensified significantly over time. Initially, criticisms focused on the possibility of fraud and manipulation. However, once foreign women began using mail-order marriage to circumvent racially restrictive immigration policies, the unease regarding the practice became widespread. Chapter 5 begins with an examination of the first matrimonial advertisements. Matrimonial ads gave women greater control over their marriage prospects. However, because this increased marital choice came at the expense of parental control, these ads were almost immediately considered problematic. This chapter documents the reservations surrounding early matrimonial advertisements and why they became popular despite such concerns. Chapter 6 focuses on the post–Civil War period and demonstrates that the devastation of the war and the continuing need for women on the frontier kept mail-order marriage popular throughout the nineteenth century. This chapter also shows that the negative associations regarding mail-order
marriage continued to grow during the postwar period and quickly became widespread once the racial demographics of the brides changed. Chapter 7 explores how “undesirable” groups, such as Asians and Eastern and Southern Europeans, used mail-order marriage to circumvent America’s restrictive immigration policies. It demonstrates that the use of mail-order marriage for this purpose created a substantial backlash and cemented the general perception of mail-order marriages as harmful. Chapter 8 then concludes with an examination of modern mail-order marriages. This final chapter addresses the common criticisms of mail-order marriage, particularly the accusation that large numbers of these women are abused and exploited. This chapter also evaluates the equally common claim that such a marriage undermines the purpose of matrimony and perpetuates gender inequality. Finally, after examining these criticisms, the chapter ends by asserting that the harms associated with mail-order marriage have been exaggerated and that the benefits have been underappreciated.

Before proceeding further, I would like to offer an explanation regarding terminology. Mail-order marriage is a highly contentious topic and even the term “mail-order bride” is divisive. In fact, after reviewing early drafts of this book, a number of my colleagues encouraged me to find a substitute expression. These men and women were uncomfortable with the phrase “mail-order bride” and its explicit reference to purchasing women. I share these concerns and do not dispute that the term has these implications. Nevertheless, rather than shying away from the association with female commodification, I decided to confront it. The potential commodification of women is one of the biggest criticisms of modern mail-order marriage. By referring to the women in this book as “mail-order brides,” I signal my intention to address these criticisms and explicitly challenge the assumption that such women are exploited.

I would also like to clarify my definition of “mail-order marriage.” In this book, mail-order marriage is defined as a marriage resulting from some form of advertisement or other public request, soliciting women
to enter into a marriage with a previously unknown man and typically travel a significant distance to complete this union. Pursuant to this definition, I do not consider any arrangement in which a woman is transported against her will or most arranged marriages (meaning marriages between strangers intentionally organized by a common friend or family member) to be mail-order marriages. Nevertheless, I do include marriages arranged by a third party at the request of the couple, particularly when these marriages were arranged to accommodate the immigration desires of the potential bride. In addition, my definition of mail-order marriage also includes marriages that resulted from general calls for brides, and is not limited to marriages created in response to one man's specific solicitation.

Last, I include female-initiated correspondence in my definition of mail-order marriage, but only where the woman traveled to marry the man. I do not include any examples of mail-order husbands in this history. Although there are some modern examples of American women placing matrimonial advertisements in order to attract a foreign husband, typically to find someone of a similar religious or cultural background, the numbers are extremely small. In general, few American women are interested in finding a mail-order husband. However, homosexual men are increasingly turning to this form of introduction. Now that same-sex marriage is recognized nationwide, the number of foreign mail-order husbands is likely to increase, and it will be interesting to see how the experiences of these men resemble those of mail-order brides. Nevertheless, because same-sex mail-order marriages are still exceedingly rare, this book does not include an examination of these relationships.