

## Historic Sites Holy Envy

Sara M. Patterson. *Pioneers in the Attic: Place and Memory Along the Mormon Trail*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 300 pp. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780190933869.

*Reviewed by John G. Turner*

When it comes to sacred places, I feel considerable holy envy toward the Latter-day Saints. Their sacred sites stretch across the continent, from Vermont to California. Mormons can visit their founding prophet's birthplace, the grove in which God the Father and Jesus Christ visited him, and the jail in which he was martyred. Where am I supposed to go as a Presbyterian? I can't afford to tour Geneva. Should I just stay home and read Calvin's *Institutes* for the twentieth time?

Instead, I give in to my holy envy and visit Latter-day Saint sites whenever possible. I grew up not far from Palmyra and Manchester, so I went there long before developing an academic interest in Mormon history. I even took my wife to the Hill Cumorah Pageant a month after our wedding. As our desktop computer background, we have a charming photograph of my daughter at Joseph Smith's birthplace in Royalton, Vermont. Granted, this sort of thing hasn't always worked out perfectly. My family bailed on an extended discourse on the history of the Church delivered by a senior missionary prior to a tour of the Brigham Young Winter Home in St. George. I toured that one by myself. Still, I love visiting these places. Whether I'm standing in the Sacred Grove or on Ensign Peak, I *feel* that I'm standing on sacred ground.

I understand those feelings much better after reading Sara Patterson's *Pioneers in the Attic: Place and Memory along the Mormon Trail*. The title riffs on Tony Horwitz's *Confederates in the Attic*. Unlike the latter-day rebels in Horwitz's book, Latter-day Saint reenactors don't oxidize buttons by soaking them overnight in urine. That is to say,

Patterson's book isn't as lively as Horwitz's, but it's just as searching, not to mention well researched, smart, and humane.

Patterson begins in Independence, Missouri, which Joseph Smith's revelations identified as Zion, the New Jerusalem in which Church members should take refuge prior to the imminent return of Jesus Christ. It's not exactly a symbol of Christian unity today. Three groups own parts of land purchased in the early 1830s in response to those revelations. "Each church believes it has the correct map of the world," Patterson observes (4). The Community of Christ owns the most land, including the site of its only temple. The Church of Christ, formerly known as Church of Christ (Temple Lot), owns the least land but—as its name suggests—asserts that "they own the exact spot where Smith wanted the temple built" (9). Most of the people who make spiritual pilgrimages to Independence, however, belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which maintains a visitors' center. In modern times, a film informs visitors (as of 2014), "Zion is more about a people than a place" (16). Tell that to the Temple Lot folks!

Independence is an effective introduction to one of the central themes of *Pioneers in the Attic*. Patterson reminds us that the meaning of sacred spaces is never stable and is usually contested. "Space and the interpretation of it," she observes, "are often, if not always, sites of contest and disagreement, struggles over ownership, and analysis" (18). This is certainly true of Mormon sacred spaces, as demonstrated in recent books by David Howlett (*Kirtland Temple*) and Scott Esplin (*Return to the City of Joseph*).

Although Patterson takes her readers to Nauvoo, her focus is on the vast space and many historic sites between the "City of Joseph" and Salt Lake City. She anchors many of her chapters on a monument within This Is the Place Heritage Park, where a twelve-foot-tall bronze Brigham Young stands near the mouth of Emigration Canyon, flanked by Heber C. Kimball and Wilford Woodruff. As the story goes, on July 24, 1847, an ailing Brigham Young propped himself up within

Woodruff's wagon, looked out on the valley, and declared, "This is the place!" Where exactly did Young say this? And what exactly did he say? As Patterson notes, Woodruff's journal doesn't contain the key phrase. Several decades later, Woodruff reminisced that Young had said, "This is the right place. Drive on" (41). As the years passed, Church members fixed the words and identified a precise spot and built monuments to commemorate it.

There are many other artifacts of memory at This Is the Place Heritage Park: a sculpture of seagulls saving Mormon crops from ruin; a relief of the Donner Party; a statue of the Shoshone Chief Washakie, who cultivated friendly relations with Latter-day Saint settlers; a reconstructed Native village; figures of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith together looking westward; a statue representing Bodil Mortensen, a ten-year-old member of the Willie handcart company who emigrated in advance of her parents, who had remained in Denmark; and Angels Are Near Us, a boulder and plaques commemorating not the original pioneers but the sesquicentennial reenactment of the pioneer trek.<sup>1</sup>

Patterson uses these statues to probe the memories they construct, commemorate, and make meaningful for Latter-day Saints around the world today. The legacy of Bodil Mortensen is a striking example. As Patterson notes, Mortensen "lay buried at Rock Creek Hollow, Wyoming, for many decades without anyone remembering her name" (136). Then, members of the Riverton Wyoming Stake discovered her bones and those of other handcart pioneers. They also discovered her story. As the Willie company made its too-late, ill-fated journey west, Bodil cared for younger children. One night, she went out to search for kindling. Her frozen body was found the next day, leaning against a handcart wheel. Her parents did not learn of her death until they reached Salt Lake City the next year.

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1. Photographs of many of the statues are viewable at [www.thisistheplace.org/todays-fun/statuary-walk](http://www.thisistheplace.org/todays-fun/statuary-walk).

By the late twentieth century, Bodil Mortensen's once-forgotten death became an oft-told tale of faith and martyrdom. Stake leaders, however, were rebuffed when they attempted to buy the land on which she and others had died. In response, the stake presidency shifted course. Instead of purchasing the gravesite, Church members should do temple work for their pioneer predecessors, ritual actions that became known as the "Second Rescue." "From a distance of over 130 years," writes Patterson, "they could metaphorically help the pioneers reach their destination" (152). In this sort of memory work, Zion remained "both a historical, literal fact . . . and a future principle toward which church members in the twenty-first century could strive" (159).

If twentieth- and twenty-first-century Latter-day Saints recovered some memories, they also ignored and obscured others, namely the conquest and displacement of Native peoples during the Mormon colonization of the Great Basin. W. W. Riter, instrumental in marking the spot where Brigham Young had allegedly made his famous declaration, compared an obelisk erected on it to Plymouth Rock. "This monument here," he observed, "is the marker of a civilization that has subdued this entire country between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean" (52).

Subdued, indeed. Brigham Young famously commented that it was "cheaper to feed and clothe the Indians than to fight them." Young made the comment, however, after his soldiers had defeated Utes who had resisted the Mormon settlement of Utah Valley. When gazing at the statue of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young standing with "Eyes Westward," the message is that God gave this land to white Latter-day Saints, making it easy to forget that they had to take it from peoples already living on it. That is the central conundrum surrounding both *This Is the Place* and Plymouth Rock, monuments that celebrate the faith and sacrifices of certain people while ignoring the even greater tragedies that befell others.

Patterson's book is a landmark in the study of collective memory and sacred spaces. Particularly noteworthy is the author's graciousness

and sensitivity toward all of the many peoples and religious groups that appear within its pages. If the Latter-day Saints don't get everything right about their nineteenth century, they at least don't neglect their history, as do very nearly all other American Christians.

Brigham Young, by the way, did say something very similar to what Church members later attributed to him. After the 1847 pioneers made their way into the valley, not everyone wanted to stop there. Some wanted to push on. At a July 28 meeting, Young commented that he had recognized the correct spot for a settlement when he first saw the valley. "This is the place," he stated. When the company affirmed the decision, he chose a lot for a new temple, another sort of sacred space.

I ended *Pioneers in the Attic* with my holy envy still intact. One of my long-term academic goals is to get permission to organize a summer field course that starts in Nauvoo and ends in Salt Lake City. I've made a note to leave in June rather than August.

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“water with jean juvenet,”  
48” x 66”, oil on canvas,  
by Ron Richmond

RON RICHMOND received M.F.A. and B.F.A. degrees from Brigham Young University. He has worked as a professional artist for 20 years. He was born in Denver, Colorado and currently lives in a small town in central Utah.

*Artist Statement:* The actual layer of paint on canvas or board is the surface, which fact can never be ignored. The mere marks, lines, brushstrokes that make up the surface are also symbols. They may, if only purely abstract and formal in presentation, still symbolize to the eye, mind, or heart ideas and meanings only realized by our subconscious yearnings for archetypes. Archetypes begin as personal and reveal themselves to the collective—the individual to the common.

If those marks begin to represent something recognizable, regardless of subject, they still symbolize the object, never actually becoming it. A paradox lies in the fact that no matter how exact an object is represented, it is still an illusionistic symbol of something else.

A good work should encompass surface and symbol, the cognitive and the spiritual, freedom and restraint.