

“No Continuing City”: Reading a Local History

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Provo: A Story of People in Motion. By Marilyn McMeen Miller and John Clifton Moffitt. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974. 106 pp., \$4.95.

(*The Reviewer Gets Down to Business . . .*)

In its almost-square format, in its design and layout, its good-sized type and sepia-toned pictures on stiff, just about grocery-bag-brown paper, Miller and Moffitt's *Provo* is easily the most attractive and readable work of local history I have come across. (A grand assertion, but true: I've read, at most, three other local histories in my life.) It is a book that, seen, invites opening, thumbing; opened, thumbed, read, it tells its story of Provo in ninety-seven pages of text and pictures, divided into eight brief chapters: "A Choice Valley"; "Moving in on the Indians"; "The Settlers Are Tried"; "Here Comes the World"; "Booming and Low Times"; "Controversy and Division"; "World Influences: War and Depression"; and "Progress as a Modern Community."

As they were meant to, the pictures engage our nostalgia for old times; as pictures, most of them are less interesting than, say, the work of George Edward Anderson reproduced in the September 1973 *Ensign* (one picture, by the way, that of the boat crew on p. 45, is identified as Anderson's). Capital exceptions: the fishermen and boats on p. 40; the horse fair on p. 55; the political confrontation on p. 56 (its many faces turned to the camera, apparently forgetting the angry placards in the pleasure of being photographed for "history"); the two family group portraits by Thomas C. Larson on pp. 70 and 72. All together, the pictures, again as I suspect was intended, have the effect of an old family album brought out at a reunion.

The text of what acknowledges itself as "primarily a pictorial account" (p. v) gives us, I assume (since I have not read them), less detail, less information, less explicit interpretation than the earlier local histories it cites most heavily as sources—J. Marinus Jensen's *History of Provo* (1924) and the WPA Writers' Program compilation, *Provo: Pioneer Mormon City* (1942). I recall the first few chapters as most richly anecdotal, the human interest thinning out in the last ones, those "People in Motion" blurring into the rapidly accumulating facts and figures of civic and economic enterprise as Provo gets on with "the business of becoming a city."

As I understand it, the text represents the collaboration of a compiler, Mr. Moffitt, and a writer-editor, Mrs. Miller; so to Marilyn Miller must go mixed credit and discredit for the book's uneven style, which betrays some haste and carelessness unfortunate in a writer with her gifts. Sentences and phrases like the following should have been early detected and corrected: "They would in turn trade these slaves to miners on their way to California for a good price" (p. 2); "It was in these daily and weekly meetings that issues were discussed relating to the" etc. (egregiously wordy, p. 9); "Wagons loaded with goods, cattle, and women

with children in their arms were all trudging" (ambiguous syntax, p. 19); "raised the educational atmosphere to a higher level" (and left students gasping? p. 24). (Yes, I do read like a freshman English teacher, which among other things I am; but reviewers can put away childish things when writers do.)

That representative sampling of stylistic flaws would of course be matched, perhaps multiplied many times over, in most local histories; and the flaws, numerous as they are, don't keep *Provo: A Story* from being, as I said, a most attractive and (with occasional bumps, jerks, and sideslips) readable book. For native Provoans still at home or scattered wide, for us who made Provo a second hometown for four or more years, it makes a fine souvenir; for other communities, other compilers, writers, and publishers of local lore, it may stand as an example.

(. . . and then Gets Up on a Soap Box)

Which leads to some slightly more abstract reflections on *Provo: A Story* as a Mormon local history. Local histories are usually gestures of civic piety enacted by City Fathers or Chambers of Commerce, acts of collective ancestor-worship and dismissal, of homage to the city's vanished shapes followed by Babbittish self-congratulation and celebration of the city's shining present and shimmering future. We do not expect, in local histories, the painstaking research and the hard and complex interpretive judgments of "serious" history. On the surface, *Provo* appears a fairly straightforward and typical member of its genre, but occasionally its selection of detail and its structure suggest interpretive judgment.

The title of the second chapter, most obviously, is not exactly adulatory toward the pioneer ancestors—"Moving in on the Indians." And indeed the chapter casts the Mormon settlers rather clearly as invaders uprooting a tribal culture they don't understand. The root meaning of "pioneer," we recall, is "foot soldier": not quite meaning to, the Mormon emigrants became, in part, the foot-soldiers of the expansionist, materialistic America they were leaving behind. In the settlement of Provo, Brigham Young may have "hoped that if the whites lived peaceably among the Indian nations, they might teach the braves to cultivate the land and become a civilized people" (p. 6); but it seems that the Indians did not perceive the whites as coming to live "among" or "with" them, but rather had to see them, rightly, as indeed threatening to "drive away the Indians, or take away their rights" (p. 7). Behind the regrettable series of incidents recorded in the chapter one suspects unavoidable cultural misperceptions on both sides. As Jack Crabbe, the narrator of Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man*, says of one intertribal skirmish in that novel, "It would have been ridiculous except it was mortal." So exactly with the Provo settlement: how could anyone have hoped that changing the fort's location would "curb the Indian problem" (p. 10)? How could Captain Stansbury's attitude that "his surveying would not go as he planned unless the Indians were taken care of" (p. 10) lead to anything but more trouble? By its selection and structure, the chapter invites the reader to ask such questions and to make, at least tentatively, and bearing in mind the limited evidence, the historical judgments the questions imply.

The Mormon pioneers, of course, were more than invaders, more than refugees from 19th-century America who yet dreamed and enacted part of its dream of Manifest Destiny by dispossessing a native culture and reclaiming a wilderness in the names of Civilization and Progress; they saw as well a vision—the City of