

The Remembering and Forgetting of Utah County's Landmarks

Jared Farmer. *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008. 455 pp. Cloth: \$29.95; ISBN: 13: 978-0-674-02767-1; 10: 0-674-02767-1

Reviewed by Ethan Yorgason

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, critics regularly bemoaned what they regarded as the New Mormon History's exceptionalist viewpoint. Jared Farmer's *On Zion's Mount* may finally shatter that perception. Or, alternatively, it may finally convince observers that a paradigm superseding the New Mormon History now exists.

In my opinion, exceptionalism has not been as profound a flaw of the New Mormon History as some commentators would suggest. It may be true that a majority of authors have, and still do, provide little sense of how events within Mormonism's past compare to events outside of Mormonism. But this situation is probably unavoidable when, as for Mormonism, historical claims remain so emotionally controversial. In any case, I believe, important works have always existed within the New Mormon History that looked beyond Mormonism as a singular and unique object of study. Authors from the social sciences are especially notable in this regard, although they have produced relatively few books.

Still, since perhaps 1990, a non-exceptionalist trend marks a new phase within New Mormon History, or perhaps something different altogether. A growing preponderance of (especially scholarly) books shows how topics relating to Mormonism give insight into historiographical and theoretical questions far beyond Mormonism itself. Philip L. Barlow, Terryl L. Givens, Sarah Barringer Gordon, Kathleen Flake, W. Paul Reeve, and others look beyond the questions that have long preoccupied Mormonism's historians. The best of the New Mormon History has, to be sure, always tied itself to questions and methods important to scholars outside of Mormon history. But now these authors more fully formulate their projects from their inception in relation to

those broader scholarly questions. As a result, we are learning that Mormonism is important to the American (and broader) experience in ways we had never imagined. Its significance goes beyond its supposed embodiment of quintessential American religion. It can interest scholars for reasons beyond its prophetic origins, troubled relationship with neighbors, frontier settlement, polygamous and theocratic society, or rapid growth.

On Zion's Mount may be a decisive work within this trend. It has the potential to be so, in part, precisely because its central theme appears so parochial. What could be of less interest outside Utah Mormonism than the story of Mount Timpanogos's progression to the status of a local landmark, especially since non-Indian, non-Mormon Utahns played a relatively small role in either the story or the change itself. The narrative is indeed, as the subtitle suggests, most centrally about Mormons, Indians, and the landscape. Yet despite surface appearances, *On Zion's Mount* is anything but parochial. As a work in cultural history, it shows, better than almost any book I have read, Mormon culture's participation in broader trends. Mormon culture has its own interesting inflections, of course. But Farmer's book demonstrates why any attempt to understand (especially Utah) Mormon culture must also center American culture. American culture cannot be taken for granted as it is in so many books; it needs to be "made strange" through analysis as much as Mormon culture must be. So, while Farmer tells stories of Utah County and the Wasatch Front, he constantly points out how these relate to similar experiences elsewhere.

On Zion's Mount may also prove to be a decisive contribution because of its quality. I do not recall any Harvard University Press books on Mormonism since Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* half a century ago and Leone's *Roots of Modern Mormonism* nearly thirty years ago. *On Zion's Mount* is a worthy addition. It may not transform the intellectual landscape as *Great Basin Kingdom* did; too much recent high quality scholarship on Mormonism prevents it from being wholly pathbreaking. Nor does *On Zion's Mount* have the topical centrality that makes *Roots of Modern Mormonism* so important. Yet as a surprisingly illuminating history, *On Zion's Mount* has few peers. One almost has to go outside Mormon history altogether—to books like Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A*

Midwife's Tale—to see other examples of how important and fascinating a seemingly small and insignificant topic can be.

Farmer's book has three parts. He calls the first "Bioregional History," the second "Local History," and the third "Extralocal History." Those are broad and misleading categories at best, since each of these types of history, and many others besides, inhabits each part. Part 1 shows how Mormons came to disregard Utah Lake and the Indians who depended on it. Prior to the Latter-day Saints' arrival, the peoples we now generically call Utes divided themselves by subsistence habits. Those in Utah Valley were the Fish-Eaters. Relying on and participating in the ecosystem of the Wasatch Front's only significant freshwater lake, they remained largely pedestrian even when many of their neighbors took up equestrian nomadism following trade with the Spanish.

Once Mormons arrived, tension, goodwill, warfare, friendship, and eventual Indian removal quickly followed. An 1850 Church-leader-supported Valentine's Day massacre of many Indians turned the tide for Mormon settlement. Yet popular local and LDS history has almost completely erased the episode. Brigham Young's philosophy to feed rather than fight the Indians, which developed in the aftermath of the massacre, promoted forgetfulness. So, too, did the Mormon myth that the Wasatch Front was an empty desert when the Saints arrived. Though Mormons fished Utah Lake productively for some years, overfishing, changing cultural tastes (for river fish rather than lake fish), and eventual pollution destroyed the lake's productivity. Thus, Mormons largely forgot the Utah Lake natives and the larger ecosystem upon which those Indians depended.

Mount Timpanogos replaced Utah Lake as Utah County's premier landmark. In Part 2, we learn that the early Utah Saints hardly regarded the peak as a feature separate from the rest of the Wasatch range. But in the early twentieth century, the mountain benefitted from being mistakenly known as the highest along the Wasatch Front. LDS religious symbolism associated with mountains and the secular ideals of mountain climbing, hiking, and recreation also combined at Brigham Young University during the early-to-mid-twentieth century to produce one of the nation's strongest hiking traditions. By the time environmental degradation ended the mass hikes, new secular and religio-suburban ideals

(such as those reflected in Robert Redford's Sundance and the Mount Timpanogos [American Fork] Temple) directed new forms of reverence toward the mountain.

Part 3 explores how larger American trends of Indianist names and invented legends about Native Americans produced additional meaning for Timpanogos. Mormons adapted Lover's Leap, a common narrative form about Native Americans, to Timpanogos. This legend accomplished such cultural functions as wrestling with changing American gender norms by projecting them onto natives and justifying/obscuring the violent takeover of native lands. Mormons strongly wanted to tie their landscape into Native American history—to have a usable Indian past. These historical memories made sure to preserve, by obscuring much real history, the Saints' sense of occupying a moral high ground. But this story is not simply a victimization tale. Farmer ends the book on a note of ambiguity. Native Americans in various instances have refused or agreed for a variety of complex reasons to participate in remembering/performing this highly fashioned past (in plays, operas, commemorations, etc.).

On Zion's Mount is a historian's history in almost all the best ways. Highly detailed and thoroughly researched, the book lays out bold and coherently stated large themes. The narrative teems with insights on smaller issues as well, such as the current relationship between the international Church and the Wasatch Front core, and the lack of an effective environmental ethic to accompany the strong LDS sense of place. Farmer is a wonderful writer. He generates richly complex and nuanced arguments, as well as superb narrative flow, through simple, straightforward sentences. He uses concepts insightfully but without jargon. Metaphors (particularly environmental/geologic) appear sparingly, but always to great effect.

The book has a few flaws. A couple of interpretations relating to the Book of Mormon were stated perhaps too strongly—post-Jesus Nephites as fair skinned (p. 56), and “Deseret” as a Reformed Egyptian term (p. 259), for example. But even there, Farmer is on solid ground to the extent that some Mormons have used these interpretations. My biggest complaint is with the occasional paragraphs in which many facts (obscure enough to need reference) are stated without clear citations. In all, however, I greatly admire