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# Thomas Carter, *Building Zion: The Material World of Mormon Settlement*

Reviewed by Paul G. Monson

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graphic material seldom seen publicly before, but the result is definitely worth it.

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MORMON CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES has recently become more inescapable than ever for non-Mormons, including the Catholic author of this review. Whether it be the crass satire of a Broadway musical, the presidential candidacy of an LDS member, or the acquaintance of a neighboring family, Americans confront Mormonism with both caricatures and curiosity. Through non-Mormon eyes, Mormon practice and culture are distinctly different and oddly familiar, yet the articulation of this paradox often escapes the observer. Carter, a non-Mormon scholar with an LDS family history, creatively offers a grammar for articulating and understanding this paradox, employing that which is most basic to the fabric of human society: material culture.

The subdiscipline of material culture found its voice in the 1990s, and in this sense the book advances a conversation that began two decades ago with the work of Colleen McDannell on Christianity in

general<sup>1</sup> and C. Mark Hamilton on Mormonism in particular.<sup>2</sup> Carter's work also complements renewed interest in the application of the genre to Mormon studies, as two recent dissertations by Eileen Ringnalda Barron (2009) and Rachel Gianni Abbott (2013) attest. However, Carter's research predates all of these studies. The fruit of diligent archival research and fieldwork conducted in the Sanpete Valley of central Utah as far back as the 1970s, his book reflects the gradual digestion of these original discoveries. For his analysis, Carter adopts Dell Upton's insight into a society's "constructing and construing" of its material existence (p. xxiv). Carter applies this template to the emergence of a distinctly Mormon landscape in the Sanpete Valley between 1850 and 1890. His twin lenses for viewing this landscape are its social and cultural planes (p. xxv), locating not only what Mormons built (or constructed) but also how they interpreted (or construed) their faith through these creations.

In this latter dimension of cultural construal, however, Carter does something distinctly different. The book goes beyond the physicality of material culture to wrestle with the development of a theological worldview behind the facade of homes, storefronts, meetinghouses, and temples. In this sense, Carter bridges the worlds of history and religious studies, adding theological insight to the world of material culture. He pinpoints three cultural "stories," or "myths," undergirding the Mormon project to build a biblical City of Zion in the unforgiving climate of Utah: "millennialism, continuing revelation, and agency," the latter of which he also terms the "Gospel of Works" (pp. xxviii, 277). He identifies the evolution of Mormon Zion-making as one gravitating from an undifferentiated arrangement (i.e., the unity of sacred and secular) to a differentiated reality (i.e., the separation of sacred and secular). From this realization, Carter charts Mormon development from its nascent "theoretical" zeal in the Midwest (1830–1841) to an "experiential" or experimental phase among pioneers in Utah (1847–1870) to a final

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1. Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

2. C. Mark Hamilton, *Nineteenth-Century Mormon Architecture and City Planning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

“enduring” or permanent phase that definitely removed the temple from the secular axis of city life (1870–1890), culminating with the Mormon abolition of polygamy (pp. 11–17). The result is an intriguing thesis: the first sixty years of Mormon material culture manifest a gradual separation of the sacred and secular spheres, such that temples came to occupy the fringes of Utah cities and gradually signify Mormon “otherness,” while the homes, businesses, meetinghouses, and social halls of the city came to symbolize the Mormon assimilation of American orthodoxy and its republican ethos of individualistic capitalism (pp. xii, xxviii–xxix). In essence, Carter claims that Mormons became “reluctant revolutionaries” (p. xxx) and “moderate millenarians” (p. 276), creating a world that “was as much an invention as a restoration” (p. 278). With this argument, Carter sets out to disrupt narratives that delay Mormon assimilation of American values to 1870, showing rather how Mormon material culture embraced secular social patterns from the faith’s inception.

Carter employs eight chapters to support this thesis, and the book’s impressive attention to detail is both its greatest strength and weakness. The author begins with a primer chapter on the Mormon understanding of faith in relation to works, with the conclusion that nineteenth-century Mormons were not egalitarian communalists, as some stubborn narratives maintain. Encouraged by their faith’s principle of “works righteousness” (p. 19), Mormons rather manifested American materialism in their pursuit of private property and individual wealth (p. 22). The following two chapters on patterns of Mormon settlement and wealth distribution demonstrate this point through a stunning array of illustrations, maps, photos, diagrams, and stories. One of Carter’s most fascinating points is how early Mormon city planning borrowed William Penn’s layout of Philadelphia before it adopted a less centralized model (pp. 27–36). Likewise, the third chapter’s discussion of plot and water distribution supports the author’s primary point. But in the end, the point fades into the background as a wealth of information overwhelms the reader. What do the problems of corner lots (pp. 81–85), the choice of picket fence styles (pp. 86–87), or the mode of

barn construction (pp. 88–91) have to do with the author’s thesis? The point seems to be that Mormons mirrored American individualism and materialism in the variety of styles and forms that they embraced. If so, the point is interesting but overstated. A similar claim of “unmistakable worldliness” in home design and fashion among Mormons emerges in the next chapter, insisting that Mormons were “good consumers” long before the arrival of “Gentiles” and the railroad in 1870 (p. 133). Here again, however, the reader tends to get lost in a thicket of details, names, and dates, and once he or she finds the clearing at the end of the chapter, the conclusion lacks profundity. Again, the fifth chapter on the housing patterns of polygamous families would seem at first glance to be one of the more intriguing studies of the book. To be sure, Carter deftly remains fair and sympathetic to this controversial chapter of Mormon history, while nevertheless asserting with a critical eye that, in the end, “Zion was a man’s world” (p. 164). Yet the final verdict is that polygamous architecture and the halls of women’s Relief Societies were, well, normal. The point is certainly salient for non-Mormons who might presume that all polygamous pioneers built miniature “beehives” modeled after that of Brigham Young. However, the reader is so exhausted by the details that the point does not impress. This problem persists in the final three chapters, which examine civic and commercial spaces, meetinghouses, and temples, respectively. Once again, Carter provides ample evidence that Mormon form and style changed with the times, reflecting American values and taste as much as Mormon theology. These final chapters are the book’s best, and the last chapter’s exposition of how the development of Mormon theology and ritual informed the development of LDS temple building is particularly enlightening. In the end, the author certainly demonstrates his thesis with an abundance of examples and details. Nevertheless, the book simultaneously struggles to walk the reader through its evidence, underestimating that a wealth of empirical data may potentially test the patience of the reader. The risk is one of ostensible overgeneralization.

Despite these shortcomings, the work stands as an unparalleled investigation into Mormon material culture and its development. Carter

articulates a compelling argument and substantiates it with remarkable research and erudition. Scholars in history and religious studies will find in it an essential guide to the development of the Mormon worldview, and both Saint and Gentile will appreciate Carter's ability to craft a study that is respectful of Mormon culture while maintaining objectivity in its criticism. However, the book is one for the specialist or eager graduate student. Although several portions of the book explain some basics of Mormon history and theology, other sections presume a more initiated audience. Moreover, Catholics will question the book's simplistic correlation between their tradition and postmillennialism (p. 3), and Protestants may find the thread between Puritan values and Mormon "works righteousness" to be woefully thin (pp. 18–19). Nevertheless, the book also presents an opportunity for further dialogue between faith traditions. For instance, the work invites future scholars to place Carter's assessment of the Mormon experience in nineteenth-century Utah in conversation with those of other religious traditions in the rest of the nation. American Catholics, for instance, have a long history of navigating the tension between the "otherness" of their faith and its perennial accommodation to secular culture and values. The same could be said for many other religions in the nineteenth century and today, especially Islam. Overall, this element of dialogue confirms Carter's central thesis. Mormonism is both different and familiar, and its material culture remains an integral part of this reality.

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