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A House for the Most High: The Story of the Original Nauvoo Temple. by Matthew S. McBride

Stanley J. Thayne

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Matthew S. McBride. *A House for the Most High:
The Story of the Original Nauvoo Temple.*

Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007

Reviewed by Stanley J. Thayne

This work,” states the author, “is an attempt to provide a glimpse—to paint a picture in broad strokes—of the Nauvoo Temple experience using primarily the words of the Nauvoo Saints” (xiii). As far as telling the story in the participants’ own words is concerned, McBride’s attempt is an objective achieved. It is achieved not only with “broad strokes,” however; McBride’s descriptions often provide a rather detailed and intimate portrait of the temple builders and the Saints whose sacrifices funded the building. In other ways the “broad strokes” analogy is fitting. McBride does not provide a detailed analysis of temple symbolism or architecture—the narrative is generally more descriptive than analytical—and he gives only the barest outline of temple ceremony itself (quite intentionally, of course, due to the sacredness of the subject). But McBride covers his ground. What the book may lack in depth is made up for in breadth. McBride has basically taken every imaginable contemporary textual source related to the Nauvoo Temple and has linked them together chronologically with an easily flowing narrative. *A House for the Most High* is a treasure trove of primary source material and is an enjoyable read at the same time.

Though not primarily analytical, the narrative is not purely descriptive either. McBride does provide some analysis of his sources by identifying in his introduction seven “recurring themes that encapsulate the Nauvoo Temple’s importance, both in its effects during the Nauvoo period and in its lasting impact on the Church” (xv). These themes, ranging from the economic to the spiritual to the symbolic, are summarized basically as follows: (1) the impact the temple and Nauvoo House, as building projects, had on the Nauvoo economy; (2) the role the temple played in promoting Nauvoo’s prominence in national media; (3) the temple’s influence in the formation of key elements in Latter-day Saint doctrine and theology; (4) the role temple custodianship played in the succession crisis after Joseph Smith’s death; (5) the function of the temple as a “sieve” to separate

the “faithful” from those who came to view Joseph as a fallen prophet; (6) the influence of the temple on Church organization, particularly on the creation of the ward unit and on the formation of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo; and, finally, (7) the temple’s symbolic significance as a monument to the Saints’ tremendous sacrifice for and dedication to their faith (xv–xvi).

In laying out these themes, McBride seeks to tell the story of not only the construction of the visible temple—the actual building itself—but also the development of what President Boyd K. Packer calls the “invisible temple”—the “doctrines, covenants, and ordinances associated with Latter-day Saint temple worship” (xiii–xiv). It is this ideological aspect of the temple that McBride sees as the motivating force behind the temple’s construction. Because the invisible temple is the vital center of Latter-day Saint worship, McBride argues, an understanding of its development is requisite to any real understanding of the building itself. Thus, along with descriptions of quarrying, lumbering, stonework, and interior decoration, McBride also describes the development of such doctrines as baptisms for the dead, celestial marriage, and the second anointing, which were established in Nauvoo in connection with the temple. He recreates both the body and the spirit of Mormon temple worship.

The book is organized chronologically rather than thematically. McBride moves through periods of temple construction and related issues, with chapter titles such as “The Walls Rise,” “The Death of Joseph,” “The Ascendancy of the Twelve,” “Setting the Capstone,” “Endowed with Power,” and “Monument to a People.” After a final chapter, “The Temple’s Fate,” he concludes with an epilogue titled “The Temple Resurrected,” documenting efforts involved in the purchase, reclamation, and the beginning phases of the rebuilding of the Nauvoo Temple (though he leaves the bulk of that story for another telling). The chapters are divided with subheadings that make for easy browsing and facilitate quick tracking of information. Though the author occasionally identifies some of the aforementioned themes throughout, they are more often left implicit for readers to identify and interpret on their own. The sources are often left free to speak for themselves, as McBride quotes liberally with large text blocks appearing on nearly every page. What McBride offers is an organizational structure and ordering of texts that would take years, perhaps decades to assemble. His work is the culmination of much searching, gathering, and organizing, and it reflects a great love for the subject.

McBride demonstrates a broad awareness of the archaeological data that has been gathered on the temple, as well as an understanding of the scholarship that has been done relevant to temple building and the Saints’

experience with the temple. He makes ample use of footnotes to cite such works, though his footnotes are dominated by primary sources and supplementary quotations. What sources he is not able to fit into the text or the notes are provided in an appendix of eyewitness descriptions of the temple, taken primarily from contemporary newspapers and other travelers' accounts. A useful bibliography of all primary and secondary sources is also provided.

To those familiar with Church history, much of McBride's narrative will be familiar. Certain events such as the "Bogus Brigham" incident (279–84) and efforts such as the Sisters' Penny Subscription Fund for the Nauvoo Temple are well known to many. But there is much in the narrative that will be new to most readers, such as the French Icarians' efforts to purchase and restore the temple after the Saints left and after it had been gutted by fire (a group of Icarian workers was nearly killed inside the temple when the walls were toppled by a tornado) or the secondhand accounts given by the supposed temple arsonist just before his death, along with several refutations of that admission (353–64).

Most readers will find the book to be a nice overview of a story of which they know only the basics, now fleshed out in great detail and told primarily in the authentic voices of the Nauvoo Saints themselves. It is a fine achievement of a dedicated researcher and one that has already been adorned with honors, being awarded Best Book for 2007 by the John Whitmer Historical Association. I recommend it to anyone who wishes to better understand Nauvoo and its temple as it was experienced and described by the Saints who lived there and who sacrificed to build it.

Stanley J. Thayne (stanleythayne@gmail.com) is a graduate student in U.S. history at Brigham Young University. He was awarded the Juanita Brooks Best Undergraduate Paper at the Mormon History Association conference in 2006, and his recent publications include "In Harmony? Perceptions of Mormonism in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania," *Journal of Mormon History* 33, no. 3 (2007): 114–51.