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On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape

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Jared Farmer. *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape.*

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008

Reviewed by Jill Terry Rudy

On *Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* tells the tale of a beloved mountainous landmark and a disregarded lake. Jared Farmer's penetrating and sweeping gaze invites readers to view connections between land, landscape, and peoples that have remained, like Poe's purloined letter, hidden in plain sight. Farmer's story of "Timp" relates directly to the story of Indians native to the land and Mormon settlers who became "neonatives," in part by creating a significant landmark in Timpanogos and seeing imagined Indians while forgetting and displacing Utah Lake and real Indians. By illuminating these interwoven narratives with interdisciplinary research involving history, folklore, popular culture, and studies of place, Farmer cannily crafts a plea for recognizing homes and landmarks as signs of society and indicators of forgetfulness. He admits that his story of a lake and a mountain in Utah involves unique features but is not an anomaly in the colonization of the United States, where landmarks are created, imagined, and venerated with little awareness or consideration of historic events and displacements. As much a book about usable pasts as about American landscapes, *On Zion's Mount* argues that this story and these landscapes matter because "what we see affects what we do" (16). The unspoken plea in Farmer's closing call to move the love of the mountain down to the lake is for greater environmental and cultural awareness through more attuned historical understanding—with a hope to connect what we do, perhaps, more fittingly with what we believe.

In addition to presenting thought-provoking awareness of landmarks as a combination of natural, historical, and cross-cultural features and processes, Farmer writes with fine craftsmanship and abundant care in structure and style. The book is divided into three major sections, capturing the author's commitment to regional, local, and extralocal history and storytelling. An informative introduction establishes the juxtaposition of the lake and the mountain within the time frame of "the nineteenth century,

and for untold ages before” (1), while also engaging the scholarly discourse of landmarks, space, place, and the geographic practices of colonization.

The “Liquid Antecedents” section establishes the lake and the mountain in regional history, noting the primary significance of the lake to the Timpanogos people, or the “fish eaters,” and Mormon settlers who could not resist the bounteous land. Playful interactions and deadly confrontations at the mouth of the Timpanogos (Provo) River eventually escalated until Mormon and US government officials created an unsuccessful Indian farming reservation and disrupted the migration and harvesting patterns of the fish-eating peoples. Acknowledging some involvement of women and children, Farmer focuses on male leaders from the LDS Church and leaders of various Ute bands. With ample discussion of warm springs, lakeside resorts, overfishing, and irrigation projects, Farmer attributes two main causes to the foundational shift of focus from waterways to the mountains: the “desertification” of the area—the story and belief that Mormon settlers arrived in a barren desert—and collective forgetting of the peoples and aquatic life that had been sustained by Utah Lake.

The middle section of the book, “Making a Mountain: Alpine Play,” focuses on local history, centering on Utah Valley, BYU, and Mount Timpanogos, also connecting Timp with wider trends in Mormon culture, European alpinist tradition, and geographical surveys and mapping. Farmer persuasively argues that for the Timpanogos fish eaters as well as the early Mormon settlers, the prominent landscape feature of Utah Valley was the lake, and the mountain that would be known as “Timpanogos” was an undistinguished element of the mountain range. This changed as the lake was degraded, the Indians were no longer the most visible inhabitants of the valley, and other traditions for seeing the landscape took precedence. Distinguishing an earlier millenarian strain of Mormonism with its mountain retreats from a more acculturated and modern post-Manifesto version of mountains as recreational sites, Farmer finds the visualization and attachment to Timpanogos stemming first from a measurement fluke of the King Survey that seemed to place it at a higher elevation than its more distinctive neighbor to the south, Mount Nebo. Erroneously seen as the highest point along the Wasatch, the mountain drew interest and hikers, spurred by the early-twentieth-century popularity in America of alpinist activities that had enchanted Europeans for many decades. Timpanogos offered recreationists the highest mountain in the area. It also attracted visitors with its glacier, a cave, and a manageable climb uniting the best of mountaineering and hiking. Combined with the boosterism of the Provo Chamber of Commerce, the support of Brigham Young University, and the guidance of Eugene Roberts, then BYU athletic

director, the hike to the top of Timp became a decades-long annual tradition. By the 1940s, when another survey posited the elevation of Timp as several feet below Nebo, the attachment to the mountain had already been forged. Farmer traces how this attachment was not attenuated during economic transformations that brought Geneva Steel to (and from) the valley and shifted the agrarian lifestyle toward suburbanization with a continuing need for accessible wilderness.

In the final section of extralocal history, "Making a Mountain: Indian Play," Farmer explicates how place names, lover's leap legends, and various forms of "playing Indian" authenticate the American landscape. Returning to aspects of forgetting, Farmer notes that Indian names on the American landscape do not assure that native associations and cultural values have also inhered to the use of space and awareness of place. Timpanogos itself is a prime example because the name is now only associated with the mountain and does "little to remind Utahns of the days when Yutas fished from Timpanogó" (280). Calling the mountain Timpanogos creates a sense of longevity, and this feature of settlement is enhanced for neonatives when they know an Indian legend associated with a notable promontory. Farmer identifies Maiden Rock in Wisconsin as the foundation for Indian lover's leap stories and provides many other examples, including stories associated with Timpanogos Cave and Bridal Veil Falls in Provo Canyon. He persuasively demonstrates that Eugene Roberts made up the story of Utahna and Red Eagle but shows how it was embraced by boosters, hikers, schoolchildren, cave visitors, and others to become an orally transmitted legend that endears the mountain to many. Combined with pageantry associated with the annual Timpanogos hike, ballets, operas, and other forms of cultural performance, the legend of Timpanogos seems to honor native inhabitants and the landmark while aiding forgetfulness about Utah Lake and the more complex historical relationships of Indians and non-Indians over the land itself. This section is extralocal because the story is still centered on Utah Valley, but Farmer connects the legends and performances with other colonizing trends and similar forgetfulness about displacements across the United States.

Farmer's book won the 2009 Francis Parkman Prize awarded by the Society of American Historians. In accepting the award, Farmer admitted how intentionally he chose Timpanogos and Utah Lake because of their intense local associations. As an "Earth-based humanist," he wanted to show how much cultural history was associated with a seemingly "natural" feature. Rather than choosing a more nationally known landmark, however, he also challenged himself to show a wider audience how these local features mattered in and beyond the local landscape and history: "Since

no one outside of Utah really cared about this invented landmark, I had an obvious benchmark for success. If I could convince my colleagues in U.S. history that Mount Timpanogos mattered—that it was the Martha Ballard of mountains—I would have met my goal.²¹ The award demonstrates he reached his benchmark, and the reference to Martha Ballard demonstrates his alignment with prominent LDS historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and her book *A Midwife's Tale*. Thatcher has also reached a wide audience through attending to the local and mundane in broader spheres.

Farmer clearly makes astute choices to convince his colleagues that his story of the beloved mountain and disregarded lake resonates with many people and parallels many places. Calling himself an “expatriate Utahn,” Farmer not only writes for historians but also for himself, his family, and his Mormon progenitors and neighbors (15). He acknowledges two Utah State University folklorists, Barre Toelken and Steve Siporin, for providing the roots of the project. Appropriately, then, the conception and reception of the work also involve the regional, local, and extralocal associations forged into the structure of the book. Returning to the local foundation, Farmer gave a Charles Redd Center for Western Studies lecture at BYU in spring 2009. This is where I first learned of the book and immediately wanted to read it to fill gaps in my understanding of Indian and Mormon relations and a mountain I learned to love while growing up in the Draper corner of Salt Lake Valley. As a neonative a decade older than Farmer, I found resonance in his lament over the suburbanization of the Wasatch Front. He accomplishes the difficult task of indexing relevant scholarly conversations about place and time, of history and change, without miring the work in theoretical jargon. Yet Farmer surely sees in the rise of Timp the shadows of a cankerous modernity falling over the land. Fittingly, my large office window in BYU's Joseph F. Smith Building frames a view of Timp so stunning that sometimes students must consciously draw their attention from the view to converse with me. Affirming Farmer's point, I have never heard of this happening with colleagues who have a lake view.

Although the book merits its successes, it is not without glitches. As a folklorist, I find Farmer a little too quick to conclude that Mormon millenarianism and Zionism have all but disappeared when I see the sentiments remaining in contemporary traditional and popular expression, from oratory and song to rumor and visual images. After hearing Farmer's lecture, I included the book in my American Folklore course in fall 2009. While many of my students appreciated Farmer's frank assessment of Mormon and Indian relationships in the settling of Utah Valley, not surprisingly, some were uncomfortable and defensive about the current outcomes of that history. Most students took some exception to how Farmer presented

the Mormon aspects of the book. For example, writing of the succession of Brigham Young, Farmer states, “Brother Brigham portrayed himself not as the new Joseph Smith but as the Prophet’s right-hand man. Smith had been uniquely fey, as he had to be. Creating a religion—a new order—takes magic and disorder. Managing a large church requires a different set of skills. Stern and pragmatic, Brigham Young proved to be ideal for the job” (38). Some may think my students were uncomfortable with seeing revered prophets associated with such qualities of pragmatism, skills, magic, and accomplishment; indeed, one was concerned enough to request another book to read (easily available because of Farmer’s acknowledgment of resonant works). However, intense class conversation across the spectrum of acceptance to rejection of Farmer’s representation centered more on tone than on content. His voice can become rather imperious and occasionally glib. I believe my students recognized that in these sections, Farmer presents himself as the informed tour guide to Mormon ways, with insufficient acknowledgment of other ways of telling these parts of his story. My students correctly surmised that they were not the first intended audience for this book. Although written for and serving many audiences, the book seems to aim primarily at the extralocal level. But as the passage I have quoted also shows, the Church history is not misrepresented, and the writing itself is lively, compelling, engaging, and bright. The final conjecture of love returning for the lake reads as from the neonative son speaking to his own country. *On Zion’s Mount* is a thought-provoking invocation to anyone interested in and concerned about the American landscape, native and settler relations, Mormons and Indians, history, and home.

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1. “Extralocal History,” *The American Scholar* (Spring 2009), accessed at <http://www.theamericanscholar.org/extralocal-history> (accessed May 20, 2010).