



2018

Saints at Devil's Gate: Landscapes along the Mormon Trail

Herman du Toit

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

du Toit, Herman (2018) "Saints at Devil's Gate: Landscapes along the Mormon Trail," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 57 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol57/iss3/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Laura Allred Hurtado and Bryon C. Andreasen.
Saints at Devil's Gate: Landscapes along the Mormon Trail.
Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Herman du Toit

This sumptuously produced exhibition catalog was published by the Church Historian's Press, an imprint of the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The book reproduces and interprets paintings that appeared in an exhibition of the same title, *Saints at Devil's Gate*, at the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City in November 2016. The exhibition showcased landscape paintings of sites along the Mormon Trail, the 1,300-mile route that was used from 1846 to 1868 by thousands of Mormons, many of whom were fleeing religious persecution. The artworks were created by John Burton, Josh Clare, and Bryan Mark Taylor—three talented landscape painters who themselves traversed the Mormon Trail from east to west, scouting specific locations along the trail to document in their paintings. Josh Clare successfully presented the idea for the ambitious project to the Church History Museum in September 2013. Approval was granted, and the undertaking culminated in the exhibition of fifty-two oil paintings on canvas at the Church History Museum.

Previously the Church Historian's Press has focused on more scholarly publications. However, according to Eric Smith, editorial manager of the press, this latest publication is intended for a more general audience. He noted that this book "is an opportunity to provide art with bits of history."¹

The catalog features the paintings in sequential geographical order, following the trail from east to west, starting with an icy depiction of the

1. R. Scott Lloyd, "Saints at Devil's Gate: New Exhibit Showcases Landscapes along Mormon Trail," *Church News*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/saints-at-devils-gate-new-exhibit-showcases-landscapes-along-mormon-trail?lang=eng>.

Mississippi River at Nauvoo, Illinois, and ending with a soulful portrayal of a moonlit Salt Lake Valley—both by John Burton. Excerpts from journals that were recorded by pioneers on the Mormon Trail accompany each of the artworks. These poignant writings refer to the locations depicted in the paintings and give a human touch to the landscapes the Mormon pioneers passed through. These passages are a valuable contribution to the catalog and came from research headed by Church History Museum historian Bryon C. Andreasen after the list of the paintings was finalized. According to Burton, “Linking each painting with journal entries and reminiscences helped ground the paintings in the stories of the trail” (128).

Laura Allred Hurtado, curator of the exhibition and global acquisitions art curator for the Church History Museum, provided additional insights and commentary, which appear in “Curator’s Response” sidebars scattered throughout the pages of the catalog. These observations contextualize the locations depicted and give welcome additional historical information. The catalog also features the transcript of an insightful interview with the three painters, conducted by Hurtado.

All three painters were eminently qualified for the plein air paintings that this project demanded. According to Jean Stern, executive director of the Irvine Museum and author of the foreword to the catalog, “These artists are noted for their remarkable ability to paint beautiful and elegant works, filled with natural light and brilliant color” (xiii).

Artist John Burton graduated from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco and has traveled and painted around the world. He is noted for the reverent tone of his award-winning landscapes and his love of the American West (142). For Burton this project was a rite of passage: as a recent convert to the Church, he wished his paintings to bear testimony to his Mormon forebears who traveled this trail and stand as a witness to his faith. He said that his original idea for the project was “born out of a sense of a spiritual calling” (2). Burton’s conversion was prompted specifically by his reading of the experiences of his pioneer ancestor Robert Taylor Burton, which in turn prompted him to read the Book of Mormon.

Josh Clare graduated with a BFA in illustration from BYU–Idaho, and he too has earned numerous awards for his landscape paintings. Bryan Mark Taylor received a BA degree from Brigham Young University and an MFA degree from the Academy of Art University. He has won numerous awards, and his work can be found in private, corporate, and museum collections around the world (142). Both Clare and Taylor have

Mormon ancestors who were in the Martin handcart company and experienced the privations and suffering of pioneer travel (4). Hurtado, the curator of the exhibition, also has a deeply rooted Mormon connection to the project, with an ancestor who participated in the rescue of the Willie handcart company (136 n. 18). As noted by Hurtado, “For the artists, such sites transcended neutral locations of geographical interest or simply beautiful landscapes and were endowed with the memory of those who traversed there, made personal through the blood of ancestry” (4).

While many of these pioneers left homes in the eastern United States to travel west, others had never ventured beyond the confines of their smoggy, industrialized hometowns in England before they were cast upon the expansive plains and breathtaking vistas of the American West—often after a harrowing ocean passage. Not all their experiences, however, were difficult and tragic. Many converts who ventured along this trail found the experience exhilarating and were filled with wonder at the mythical landscapes they encountered. Bryon C. Andreasen notes in his essay, “Through hardship and beauty, suffering and wonderment, the trail landscape tested character, stretched minds, and expanded understandings” (13). This perspective explains the apparent paradox inherent in the title *Saints at Devil's Gate*. Andreasen goes on to explain that “the religious nature of their enterprise distinctively shaped and tempered their frontier pioneering experience and set them apart from most other American pioneers” (104).

Hurtado goes to some length to relate these artists' contemporary plein air landscapes, which were completed in their studios, to the tradition of landscape painting and the historical treatment of landscape as subject matter. Commenting on the three artists' relationship to the project, she notes, “The project is a tribute to their ancestors and a bearing witness to the physical locations through eyes of modern-day Mormons” (52). Referencing Edmund Burke's classic eighteenth-century work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-revolutionary Writings*, she notes that “landscape paintings have a long history of being linked to the sublime in the way that they capture the power, danger, and even terror of nature while also evoking a sense of God's grandeur” (7).

Earlier European painters such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857) had already established landscape as a vehicle for conveying Romantic notions of the sublime. This nineteenth-century concept of awe and wonder found in nature informed the experience of the early Mormon pioneers in their

appreciation of the picturesque. They were deeply moved by the sheer mythological proportions and beauty of the vistas they encountered that bore witness to the hand of God in what they saw. Many journal entries reflected this Romantic perspective of the land. One entry by Sarah Maria Mousley, a twenty-nine-year-old member of the Jacob Hofheins company, declared, "The wild flowers beautiful to behold, the air redolent with their odor, the calm still waters of the beautiful lakes all serving alike to awake an adoration to that God at whose word we have left the happy scenes of childhood years to repair to the mountains with the Saints of light" (50). Such observations attest to the empathic engagement with which these pioneers viewed their surroundings and to the transformative power such experiences had for many.

This catalog is well designed and well written. It is rich in providing context and background to the locations depicted in the fine landscape paintings. The only item of concern about the production of the publication is that it fails to provide the dimensions of the paintings that are central to the project and which have been so carefully reproduced. There is no listing of the works with their respective sizes, and the reader is left to guess at the scale of the works. Nevertheless, the publication is a fitting culmination for such an ambitious project, bringing together the refined skills and expertise of historical research, curatorship, and artistic talent that complements and interprets this suite of paintings admirably.

Herman du Toit is the former head of audience education and research at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art in Provo, Utah. He has enjoyed an extensive career as an art educator, curator, administrator, critic, and author, both locally and abroad. He was director (dean) of the school of fine arts at the former Durban Technical Institute in South Africa and holds postgraduate degrees in art history, studio art, and sociology of education from the former University of Natal. While at BYU, he was awarded a J. Paul Getty Fellowship for his PhD study of the finest interpretive practices at some of America's leading art museums.