

Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory

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Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory, by Cynthia Culver Prescott. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. xvi, 389 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Daniel R. Maher is associate professor of anthropology and sociology at the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith. The author of *Mythic Frontiers: Remembering, Forgetting and Profiting with Cultural Heritage Tourism* (2016), he is working on a book tentatively titled *Mythic Pioneers: From Wilderness to Wilder and Back*.

Pioneer Mother Monuments is a sweeping analysis of 200 monuments erected in the United States over the span of 125 years. Cynthia Culver Prescott adroitly exploits an exhaustive number of sources to construct not only a story of each individual monument, but also an overall analysis of the collective narrative that these monuments convey. She does so by closely examining multiple perspectives on monuments: from artistic perspective to newspaper accounts; from widespread acceptance of the monuments to full-out rejection and defacement of others. Culver Prescott demonstrates that while these monuments have some overarching common narratives, they were not monolithically received by the American public at the time of their erection nor over the course of decades as public opinion, demographics, and political ideologies changed.

Pioneer Mother Monuments contextualizes early pioneer monuments within the Turnerian frontier narrative that motivated their creation and erection. Culver Prescott shows “how popular memory that was formed by Turner’s valorization of the frontier shaped pioneer commemoration throughout the twentieth century, and how late twentieth-century challenges to Turner’s framework influenced public memory of westward expansion and its place in American national identity” (6).

Overall, the book is organized by thematic time frames. Monuments erected from 1890 to 1920 had a narrative decidedly bent toward reinforcing the benefits of white civilization brought with the felt completion of Manifest Destiny. From 1920 to 1940 pioneer motherhood was emphasized with iconic imagery of bibles, rifles, and sunbonnets to combat gender anxieties fueled by Jazz Age indiscretions and woman suffrage. The period from 1940 to 1975 saw imagery in pioneer monuments transform to reflect modernity and nuclear family imagery. A separate chapter on Mormon monuments examines their transformation between 1890 and 1980, showing that “commemorating the Mormon migration has been one way for Latter-day Saints to negotiate the competing demands for exceptionalism and assimilation that have helped shape Mormon culture for the last 150 years” (134).

The bicentennial of the United States and the 1992 commemoration of the Columbian Exchange served as flash points for pioneer commemorations. The period between 1970 and 1999 saw 54 pioneer monuments

erected, with half of those in the five interior states of Utah, Kansas, Montana, Wyoming, and Oklahoma (ten were concentrated in north central Oklahoma). Between 1975 and 1995 monuments took on a more overt politicized nature by articulating various perspectives within the “culture wars.” Rural towns such as Ponca City and Enid, Oklahoma, responded quite differently than Portland, Oregon, for example.

The last few chapters take a broader view of what these monuments mean today. Culver Prescott examines the role these monuments played in cultural heritage tourism from 1980 to 2005 as suburbs took the lead in fabricating pioneer history out of thin air in order to give the otherwise contrived suburban atmosphere a historically authentic ethos with the hope of drawing tourist dollars. The final chapter focuses on the limits of inclusivity contained in these pioneer memories. The author pointedly notes, “Considering who *cannot* cast their ancestors as iconic American pioneers reveals the limits of inclusivity in the new millennium” (268).

Throughout *Pioneer Mother Monuments*, Culver Prescott shows how the trajectory from Turner’s frontier thesis to a combination of New Western history within academia and the multiculturalism of the 1990s shaped and transformed how communities perceived and received these pioneer monuments. The pioneer space, the pioneer imagery, has been and continues to be a rich playground from which local communities project ideas of their pasts and their futures while ransacking history with impunity.

The book features 16 color plates, with an additional 50 illustrations and 7 maps. A web page (pioneermonuments.net) complements the book, providing photographs, maps, and additional information for each monument. The web-page map allows users to scroll through time and watch where and when each of the monuments populated the American cultural landscape, notably including Karl Gerhardt’s pioneer statuary group located on the grounds of the Iowa State Capitol in Des Moines. The pioneer monument project also has an informative presence on Facebook at www.facebook.com/PioneerMonument.

Pioneer Mother Monuments makes an important contribution to the fields of cultural heritage tourism, memory, museums, and representation. The story of pioneer monuments is ultimately the story of race, of gender, of power, and the intersection of the three. Culver Prescott navigates the intertwined variables adeptly and astutely. Scholars interested in frontier and pioneer narratives will want to secure this thoughtful book for their research, and casual readers curious about contemporary monument controversies will find the careful explanation of these monuments enlightening.