

Book Review

Prescott, Cynthia Culver. *Pioneer Mother Monuments: Constructing Cultural Memory*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. 389 pp.

The utility of analysis undertaken at the intersection of gendered representation and public history is firmly demonstrated in Cynthia Culver Prescott's *Pioneer Mother Monuments*. Prescott, Professor of History at the University of North Dakota (Associate Professor at the time the book was published), offers a significant intervention in several literatures, including gender history, historical memory, public history, art history, and settler-colonial studies. Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United States became dotted with monuments dedicated to pioneer mothers, asserting the pioneer's centrality to American history as well as claiming the moral superiority of white Christian culture. While dialogue about Confederate monuments has been a regular feature of American society for decades, pioneer monuments have generated significantly less controversy despite their troubling association with Manifest Destiny ideology and their justification (implicit and explicit) of the numerous injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples. *Pioneer Mother Monuments*'s thoroughly argued and theoretically engaged critical history is one which historians from various sub-fields would do well to engage with.

Prescott creates a periodization in which to situate the production of these monu-

ments. With white-settler Americans having fewer anxieties about their supplanting Indigenous authority across the United States, by the 1920s, gender and sexual norms came to the fore in terms of these monuments' content. The depiction of the pioneer mother thus became a means of celebrating what white settlers saw as "traditional values." During the 1920s and 1930s, statues depicting white pioneer women, generally in sunbonnets (indeed, one of the amusing things one takes from the book is the adjective "sunbonneted"), were extraordinarily popular, and portrayals that deviated from this imagery became objects of ridicule, and in some instances, a cause of public protest. This early period was one in which pioneer mothers were the main settler-colonial symbol that was celebrated across the American West.

However, after the Second World War, the pioneer family—particularly the masculine white father—was the primary subject of the monuments erected during this period. While the traditional images of sunbonnet-wearing pioneer women and rugged, strong pioneer men were well-established in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, some change occurred post-World War II in terms of the portrayals of these subjects; there



were a few monuments which, for example, used fibreglass or copper rather than stone, or crafted their monuments in a more avant-garde manner. Particularly unusual, Richard Bergen's 1976 sculpture *Heritage Woman* is a nude representation of the pioneer woman in a mixed classical-contemporary sculptural style. However, as Prescott emphasizes, "Experimentation in pioneer commemoration remained a fringe movement. Traditional representations still predominated, particularly in more conservative rural areas." Prescott argues that a growing emphasis on the idealized nuclear family is notable in the mid-century, including a greater focus on the pioneer father (99–101).

Subsequently, however, most pioneer monuments were "forgotten" (Prescott's language) until more recently when they began to generate public controversy once again, though for very different reasons. The culture wars of the 1970s to 1990s proved a critical moment for these forms of pioneer commemoration. Prescott argues that the increased rural-urban divide during these years prompted a greater degree of protest to pioneer monuments in cities, while for rural communities, this caused a conservative reaction that led to a rejuvenation of pioneer monument production. Prescott nimbly handles countervailing forces during this period. While the pioneer monument's celebration of colonialism led to social opposition by the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the

tourist gaze was, by this time, also an important feature of how municipalities approached local history; pioneer stories regularly found a prominent place in these efforts.

A chapter that will be of particular interest to historians of religion concerns the historical memory of Mormons vis-à-vis the pioneer monument. The analysis in this chapter carefully handles the dynamics of historical memory, religion, and gender, showing how Mormon communities utilized the figure of the pioneer to assert their Americanness while simultaneously downplaying their earlier historical persecution. While foregrounding culturally distinctive narratives (particularly through monuments dedicated to figures such as Brigham Young), Mormons accepted the symbol of the pioneer family as a subject through which their history could be told and integrated into an American narrative.¹

Prescott identifies 185 pioneer monuments across the United States, many of which prominently featured a pioneer mother. A theme Prescott returns to is the fact that this imagery, which fits perfectly within Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, stands in stark contrast with the "New Western history", which has largely disposed of the Turnerian view of the American past. Public condemnation of New Western history is often done on the basis that it is "so much political correctness" (6). Prescott's utilization of a settler-colonial theoretical framework allows for an in-

1. This parallels findings in the Canadian context that the pioneer served as a figure for minority groups to assert their Canadian-ness, and to situate their history as being part of a shared, generic "pioneer story." See Crystal Lee Bieber Willie, "The Pioneer, Ethnicity and Alberta's Community Museum" (Master's thesis, University of Alberta, 2004), <https://n2t.net/ark:/13960/s2cxhxxns5m>, and Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010).

depth investigation of the ways in which the pioneer remains an acceptable figure of commemoration, while Confederate statues have generated long-standing and increasing public controversy. Over the entirety of these pioneer mother monuments' existence, Prescott notes that "pioneer monuments used gendered imagery to enshrine white settlers on the landscape" (5). A continuing feature of such practices, which requires greater examination in the mid-to-late twentieth century, is the fact that "[p]ioneer commemoration ignores the conquest of indigenous peoples, the meeting of diverse cultures in the region, and women as agents rather than just symbols of white civilization" (10). The pioneer mother monument thus helped occlude the violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples which facilitated the settler presence in the West. Prescott's study reveals the ways in which the peacefulness of the pioneer mother monument, and the simple nobility typical of such portrayals, stifles critique.

One potential criticism of Prescott's book is to ask how much we can really generalize across this type of data without further comparison to other monuments, plaques, and forms of public history. How do we assess pioneer mother monuments vis-à-vis competing public history imagery? For example, while the pioneer mother may have been a common form of monument, what was this figure's place relative to other forms of public history and social celebration? Do we see a displace-

ment of the pioneer mother from public history more broadly during the Cold War-era celebration of American technological prowess? That being said, I find Prescott's focus on these monuments perfectly logical given the centrality of many of these 185 monuments to their respective communities: this centrality—spatial, social, ideological—makes it impossible to dismiss their importance. As the tone of public discussion rightly grows more critical of who or what is commemorated through public history, *Pioneer Mother Monuments* helps us think through some of the more fraught issues that nonetheless seem perfectly innocuous to many Americans.

Moreover, the book itself is excellently produced given its subject, including numerous colour and black-and-white photographs featured throughout. It is also an eminently "practical" volume in terms of its quantitative analysis and inclusion of maps. A particularly innovative feature of Prescott's work is its accompanying website (pioneermonuments.net), which not only publishes to a general audience a great deal of the research in the book but also offers a blog, interactive maps, lesson plans, video presentations, and walking/driving tours. This book is an important contribution to the study of American historical memory and public history literature. It would be an excellent text for a graduate course or undergraduate honours seminar.

Connor J. Thompson
University of Alberta