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Review of *Mount Rushmore: An Icon Reconsidered* By Jesse Lamer & *Great White Fathers: The Story of the Obsessive Quest to Create Mt. Rushmore* By John Taliaferro

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REVIEW ESSAY



Mt. Rushmore, by Howard Kaye, 2004. Watercolor, 27 x 35 in. By permission of the artist.

Mount Rushmore: An Icon Reconsidered. By Jesse Lerner. New York: Thunder's Mouth/Nation Books, 2002. 390 pp. Photograph, notes, references. \$24.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

Great White Fathers: The Story of the Obsessive Quest to Create Mt. Rushmore. By John Taliaferro. New York: Public Affairs, 2002. 453 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$27.50 cloth, \$16.00 paper.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF VIEWING A MONUMENT

Wandering through Keystone an evening not long ago and looking above the trees, I could see Mt. Rushmore in the distance. Apparently the lighting ceremony had just ended, and as I looked at those faces of Washington, Jefferson, T. R., and Lincoln, I felt a tinge of excitement. But why? I had seen them many times before. In fact, I spent a summer work-

ing for the concessionaire at the monument, serving food in the old Buffalo Dining Room. Every day I stared at those faces as I asked people if they wanted fried chicken or beef and gravy. In recent years, I have lived in the vicinity of the mountain. By now that carving should be old news. But obviously, those faces say something to me, and until I read these

books by John Taliaferro and Jesse Lerner, I never considered exactly why Mt. Rushmore moves me or exactly what the monument means, or should mean, to the millions of people who visit it each year.

Like the nearly three million others who gaze at Rushmore annually, Taliaferro and Lerner made their own pilgrimages to the mountain, each shaping a personal narrative as part of his story. But looking at the same mountain, they come away with entirely different experiences. In general, Taliaferro liked what he saw, and his book praises not only the quality of the sculpture, but the meaning behind it. His history covers all aspects of Rushmore's past, from inspiration to consternation. On the other hand, Lerner virtually ignores the monument itself, dwelling instead on the sins it seemingly hides. To him, Mt. Rushmore represents an American ideology of conquest, and he wants to debunk the myths he sees embodied in it.

Recounting his visit, Taliaferro explains that the carving aroused in him such basic questions as who were these four men whose faces stare out at the landscape, why were they chosen, and who was the person who carved the mountain? He builds his account around these questions. But this is not just a story about Mt. Rushmore, for Taliaferro realizes that any telling requires examining the life and times of its contentious sculptor, Gutzon Borglum. Indeed, Taliaferro has combined two books in one: a biography of Borglum, and the actual history of the project, in which, of course, Borglum plays a major role. Taliaferro hints at this dual function in his title: "Great White Fathers" naturally refers to the presidents; "The Story of the Obsessive Quest to Create Mt. Rushmore" most clearly points to Borglum. But there is overlap. Since Borglum saw himself as a "great man" and fully believed in the role of great men in history, he too can be seen as a "Great White Father."

While the first half of Taliaferro's book offers a brief history of the Black Hills and touches on the early thoughts behind Mt. Rushmore, most of it deals with Borglum, from

his early life to his rise to prominence. Three themes run through this section. The first deals with Borglum's career: how he moved from painting to sculpting, and how success made him arrogant to the point of his denouncing art schools and refusing to enter public art competitions. Taliaferro calls this "righteous superiority" (112), but at the same time Borglum expressed "bitter disdain for Americans spoiled by wealth and privilege" (133), a disdain reflected in this section's second theme, Borglum's ventures into politics. Borglum was a founding member of the National Progressive Party, he joined the Nonpartisan League, and he became involved with the Ku Klux Klan. In each instance he hoped to reshape the nation's political map and help common Americans. The third theme is Borglum's belief in the greatness of the nation and his growing desire to represent it in a colossal national monument. His first venture in mountain carving came at Stone Mountain, Georgia; but when invited to South Dakota, he jumped at the chance to create "'a great Northern National Memorial in the center of the nation'" (199).

Much of the information Taliaferro covers in the first half of his book has either been ignored or shortchanged by other authors, but his story of Mt. Rushmore in the second part is much more familiar. Here Taliaferro talks about the selection of the four presidents, the various dedications, the pointing system that Borglum designed, and the struggle for funding. Despite its familiarity, Taliaferro brings new insight to the story, reminding us as well how the monument could never have been completed without the efforts of such people as John Boland and Peter Norbeck. The most amazing part of the whole accomplishment is how these men continued to work for the memorial while Borglum constantly insulted and berated them. As Taliaferro says, Gutzon Borglum had an "irascible temperament and uncontrollable ego" (259).

Instead of concluding with the monument's completion, Taliaferro goes on to discuss how its image has been used since, as in movies like

North by Northwest. He also covers the modern Indian movement and the protests that occurred at the monument in the 1970s. From Borglum's past to Mt. Rushmore's present, Taliaferro tells a tangled story; but the monument, he says, teaches us "that the best American stories are not simple; they are complex and contradictory, brilliant and murky, at times uplifting, at other times ironic, even tragic" (4).

The ironic and tragic are what primarily concern Jesse Lerner, who wishes to give a new meaning to Mt. Rushmore, believing as he does that the National Park Service and other interpreters who claim the monument represents American history are not telling the whole truth. He wants a "true national history" (359) associated with the monument. When people look at Rushmore, he thinks, they should know that it represents the conquest of occupied land under the name of Manifest Destiny, that it sits in land stolen from the Lakota, that its sculptor had racist ideas, and that the four presidents tried to wipe out Native Americans.

Lerner picks his Mt. Rushmore topics to demonstrate associated evils. For instance, he discusses Manifest Destiny at some length, using extensive quotes from one of its most outspoken proponents, William Gilpin. While Borglum celebrated the uniting of the country and its achievements, he probably did not know much about Gilpin. Lerner mentions he could find no direct connection between the two but is sure one must have existed. Lerner also discusses the Hearst family connection to the Black Hills. Indeed, George Hearst's investments in the Homestake gold mine added to the family fortune, allowing William to buy his newspapers. Lerner argues that the Hearst newspapers started the Spanish-American War, catapulting Theodore Roosevelt to the White House, and then onto Mt. Rushmore. It sounds something like a capitalist conspiracy.

Lerner spends some time on Borglum, believing the monument cannot be understood without understanding its sculptor. He focuses

primarily on Borglum's parentage and his connection with the Ku Klux Klan, however, topics he believes have been intentionally ignored by most authors in order to manage the message at Rushmore. Borglum was born into a polygamous marriage that fell apart, with his mother leaving the family. Lerner states this may have "contributed to an evident paranoid streak in his character" (97). With regard to the Klan, Lerner makes much of Borglum's association, arguing that Borglum "had a leadership role" (188) and that he "seems to have enthusiastically embraced the Klan's white supremacy" (232). Yet this seems to contradict his admission that "it is hard to tell, from this distance, just what Borglum thought he was doing with the Klan" (190).

As Lerner's argument advances, his criticism of the wrongs he sees grows. Towards the end of the book, he states that "Rushmore as a symbol has taken on an almost religious sheen over the years," an "air of religiosity" (316). He makes this point to discuss the problems Indians have had in practicing their religion at Devils Tower and elsewhere in the Black Hills. While he calls Mt. Rushmore a "semi-religious shrine," he says that "Indians will continue to have to beg, ask, demonstrate, and sue for reasonable access to their own religious areas—on their own land, ceded to them by treaty" (333).

In the end, Lerner comments that he wants Mt. Rushmore to become "bereft of ideology," like Stone Mountain, Georgia (361). At Stone Mountain, where Borglum started a Confederate memorial, an amusement park has replaced any apparent reverence for the Confederacy. Angry at what he believes Mt. Rushmore stands for, Lerner seems to wish the monument would simply disappear.

Lerner's conclusion stands in stark contrast to Taliaferro's sentiments. Taliaferro sees a marvelous carving that conveys positive meaning, though he also acknowledges its shortcomings. He would certainly be dismayed at the prospect of a Mt. Rushmore amusement park. In recent years the Park Service has constructed a new visitors center and concession

building, and Taliaferro seems to agree with critics who see these additions as challenging the monument's preeminence and diminishing "the jewel of Rushmore" (19).

Taliaferro and Lerner view Mt. Rushmore in radically different ways. For Lerner, it conjures up negative images of a greedy, racist nation. For Taliaferro it has greater complexity, becoming a "mirror of our culture" (4). Taliaferro also recognizes that beyond the political sentiments it may arouse, Mt. Rushmore is foremost a work of art, and to his eyes a brilliant one. Such an understanding provokes interpretation, which should be wide open. Taliaferro accepts that idea, and lets his readers draw their own conclusions. Lerner insists on a more restrictive construction, an insistence that can grow tiring.

When it comes to Borglum himself, Taliaferro and Lerner seem more in agreement. Both recognize the impact of his mother's departure on his personality. Moreover, they both see his weaknesses, especially his huge ego and his abuse of people who tried to help him. Yet two differences emerge. Taliaferro recognizes Borglum's Klan activities as part of a larger pattern; Lerner does not. But as Taliaferro states, "A person who consorts with the Klan, even for a short while, can never expect to rub it from his résumé, regardless of what else is

accomplished in his life" (185). More significantly, Taliaferro recognizes Borglum as a genius whose creations are unparalleled. Lerner does not.

When it comes to faults, the books stand in contrast as well. Taliaferro's has few errors, with only the lack of footnotes standing out as a drawback. Lerner's book is footnoted, but lacks photos and an index. It also contains several factual errors. For instance, Lerner states that the monument received funding from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) (319). While federal funds poured in to Rushmore, Borglum hated the CCC, and it had nothing to do with the actual monument.

What have these books done for my own understanding of Rushmore? Beyond the historical material I have learned, I have come to realize that Rushmore stirs me because it reflects human toil and achievement. I'm not referring to the presidents, but to the workers who carved that mountain. That same sense of awe visits me at Hoover Dam and even at the Homestake Open Cut Mine. I am certain that its millions of visitors will continue to feel a similar sense when viewing Mt. Rushmore.

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