

Letter From Nauvoo

by Thomas Fleming

Inside the Court of the Gentiles



Tolstoy once referred to Mormonism as “the American religion.” I only know that because one of my former assistants, a Mormon himself, used to quote the statement as corroboration of the Mormons’ belief that they are quintessentially American. Despite all of his proselytizing efforts and the gift of a *Book of Mormon*, I took no interest in a church that could offer neither literature and philosophy nor brandy and cigars. He did, however, pique my curiosity about the first major Mormon capital, Nauvoo, Illinois, and although I did not make it to Nauvoo during the brief period in June when the newly rebuilt temple was open to the public, I decided to make Nauvoo the centerpiece of my first sightseeing adventure in the state in which I have lived for 18 years. “See Illinois and die,” I told my wife. (Or *vice versa*, I thought to myself, if you have been bad.)

Like most of the middle Middle West, Illinois is (in Taki’s phrase) “corny and flat as a pancake.” The drive down interstate highways from Rockford to Galesburg, where we were leaving cookies, clean clothes, and a younger sister with our son at Knox College, is entirely without interest. The beauty of the prairie has been destroyed, and the marks left by man on the landscape are worse than vandalism. The Midwestern farmer, judging from the look of his property, must hate nature and beauty both. The little groves of trees planted near the farmhouses, perhaps at some lonely farmwife’s request, are the only sign that there might be more to life in the country than corn-shock-stubbed deserts and high-voltage wires.

To the east of Galesburg are the upper reaches of the Spoon River, where Knox College maintains a beautiful patch of prairie edged by hardwoods. This stretch is considerably north of Lewiston and Petersburg, the setting of Edgar Lee Masters’ poems, but Masters himself spent a

year as a student at Knox, and a room in the library memorializes the poet.

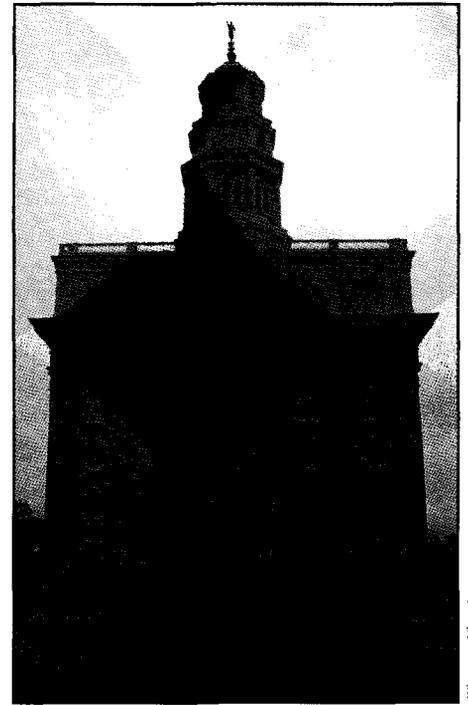
We were in a hurry to be on our way, and, without staying for lunch (the filial apartment was no place in which to eat), we set out on Illinois 41, heading south. That decision proved to be a mistake. There may be good local eateries, but, from what we could see, the local cuisine is determined by the Casey’s General Store chain and Hardee’s. In a fly-ridden Hardee’s in Bushnell, we tried the award-winning “Six Dollar Burger for only \$3.95,” oozing mayo and dripping with a dressing that was as French—and as unconvincing—as a teenager’s French kiss.

We picked up U.S. 136 just south of Bushnell and headed for Carthage. Just before crossing the Hancock County line, we entered a different world. The landscape began to swell and sprout hardwood trees. We felt the distant pull of the Mississippi on the countryside. This Carthage was not the birthplace of the man who swore eternal enmity to Rome but the death place of Joseph Smith, Jr., the Mormon prophet who had set up, with a generous charter from Illinois, the virtually independent community of Nauvoo. Depending upon what you read, Smith was either an inspired prophet or a career con man, a wise and benevolent statesman envied and murdered by the “gentiles” or a fanatic who plotted treason and insurrection against Illinois and the United States.

Although Mormons were never very popular wherever they went, serious trouble started when Nauvoo refused to allow state warrants to be served. Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested on somewhat exaggerated charges of treason and taken into custody in Carthage, where a mob stormed the jail and shot Smith and his brother to death.

We made a brief stop at the Kibbe Museum—a charming assortment of local kitsch that derived from a spinster professor’s personal collection of junk. The warmhearted volunteers were very helpful and told us that, before the temple opened in Nauvoo, they used to get about 1,000 visitors per year. This past summer, however, they were averaging 300 to 600 per day.

The volunteers directed us across the street to the world-famous jail. At the first of the Mormon visitors’ centers, we heard



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The reconstructed Mormon temple

the refrain that would be repeated all day: *The tour starting in five minutes is booked up, but in an hour, there will be another tour.* I do not like tours, especially when they are conducted by eager missionaries. At two times in my life, I have been “missionized” by the Mormons, and two doses of that vaccine were sufficient to confer immunity. Sidling away from the greeters, we were asked the inevitable “Where you folks from?”; when one of the visitors heard “Rockford,” she told us there was a Rockford lady in the rest room. We preferred not to wait for our Mormon compatriot and eased our way out, but my resourceful wife poked her nose into the jail, dragging along her husband hobbling on his broken ankle.

We were soon accosted by a tour guide with two women in tow. “Are you the folks from Rockford?” she asked. Hearing an affirmative, she explained that she was leading a “personal tour” and seemed to expect us to follow. As we heard her tell the tale of the martyred Smith, it began to dawn on me that we were getting a special tour under false pretenses: She must have confused us with the Mormon lady who was probably still in the rest room, recovering, perhaps, from her Six Dollar Burger. The guide told us what was to me the familiar version of the tale,

omitting the fact that Illinois' eccentric governor, who disliked Mormons, was a fair man who was riding to their rescue when the lynching occurred. The governor refused to believe that the Smiths, who were very influential in both political parties, were involved in insurrection, and he insisted that there was no evidence of their intent to institute polygamy. He was certainly wrong about the future, and if the local stories are true, some of the Mormons, Smith included, were already practicing a kind of informal polygamy that disgusted the fathers of the farmers' daughters who were being recruited.

The story of the Good Samaritan jailer and the evil local authorities came near to a climax in the third-story "dungeon," where the Smiths had been imprisoned for some hours, before the kindly jailer took them to his own room, where the final scene took place. "*Don Giovanni*, last act, in Nauvoo," as a poet with a better command of opera than of geography once put it. Inside the jail, the guide closed the door and stood in front of it, as if she were a real-estate salesman, and played a four-minute tape that narrated the Smiths' last few moments of life.

When the tape stopped, the three ladies were weeping with an intensity I have only seen at funerals, among widows and mothers who have lost children. The guide explained that it was this story in this place that confirmed the truth of her faith, and she referred to Smith's killing as another Calvary. "This was," she concluded, "the final dispensation." We obviously did not belong there, and, to spare the ladies' feelings, we kept up the charade. On our way out, the guide warned us to stay *under* the posted speed limit in Nauvoo, a notorious speed trap. Perhaps the local authorities are tired of the Mormon pilgrims.

Shaken but determined to go on, we drove to the Mississippi and then north up her beautiful banks along Illinois 96. This was not Illinois as we had known it but part of the great Mississippi Valley, more like Missouri or Tennessee. There are few good places to stay in Nauvoo: one or two bed-and-breakfasts and the charming, if a bit rackety, Hotel Nauvoo right in the middle of town—my kind of place, exactly. The Hotel Nauvoo even has a restaurant to liberate travelers from Hardee's. Since reservations at Hotel Nauvoo were impossible on short notice,

we had booked a room at the Schramm House, a classic bed-and-breakfast in Burlington, Iowa, hardly more than 30 to 40 minutes away.

While some bed-and-breakfasts are small enough to make the visitor feel like an unwelcome guest in someone else's home, the Schramm House is a spacious Victorian mansion located in a picturesque historic neighborhood on top of Heritage Hill. The house is only a stone's throw away from Snake Alley, dubbed the most winding street in the United States. The hosts, Bruce and Sandy Morrison, could not have been more gracious, and we had one of the rarest of experiences: a good night's sleep on the road. I thought we were being original in choosing Burlington as our base, but Sandy told us that a steady stream of Mormon pilgrims had made their way to her house since June. They were all model guests, though they made her husband, whose only task is to make the morning coffee, feel a little extraneous.

We took some time to explore the town. While urban renewal has ruined some of the riverfront, Burlington is, overall, one of the prettiest towns in the Midwest. The limestone churches are handsome, and the downtown streets, though blighted by the expected number of antique stores, seem like the streets of a real town.

At Sandy's recommendation, we tried the Jefferson Street Café for dinner. I had a good steak of Iowa beef, and my wife's request to have her duck breast cooked rare was interpreted literally by the chef. It was not what she actually wanted; it was better. We had a classic Midwestern evening. The pleasant waitress seemed a little puzzled by the request for a wine list, and her confusion turned to consternation when we asked

her what the red wines actually were. No matter: In the end, we got a more than drinkable Australian shiraz.

The entire staff was friendly, efficient, and well groomed, and no one said "I'll be your server this evening." At the next table were a dozen high-school students celebrating homecoming. Unlike people their age in Chicago or even Rockford, they were very quiet and well-behaved. "Oh, isn't your life extremely flat / With nothing whatever to grumble at." The very nice girls were dressed to the nines in the bordello style popularized in the 90's, while the boys were wearing their regulation khakis and dress T-shirts on which the girls had pinned boutonnieres.

Questions of fashion aside, they were good kids who might have been stand-ins for a production of *The Music Man*—the Middle-American *Marriage of Figaro*, written by Iowa's most important artist, Meredith Wilson.

If the landscape of Illinois and Iowa had come as a minor revelation, a greater one lay in store for us in Nauvoo. First, there is the beauty of the natural setting along a bend of the Mississippi. Someone had an eye for beauty, perhaps Smith himself, who built his house on the spot with the best view of the river. Up the steep hill that crowns Nauvoo—I could not help thinking of it as the "Temple Mount"—the Mormons built their first temple, which was, and now is once again, one of the strangest buildings in the United States.

The old irony was that visitors to Nauvoo would go to the top of the hill only to find a Catholic church. The new irony is that a Christian church is now overshadowed by a Masonic temple. Compared with the mock-Gothic temple in Salt



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The view from Joseph Smith's house

Lake City, the Nauvoo Temple is a masterpiece of elegance and simplicity, suggestive—to my poor eye—of a neoclassical renaissance style. The bizarre Masonic imagery of sun-faces with streaming hair, men-in-the-moon, and Tarot stars confirms the report that the Mormons had embraced Freemasonry *en masse* in the 1840's. In fact, Masonic meetings were held in Smith's store, and there are more than a few similarities between Mormonism and Masonry: Both are based on an improbable rewriting of ancient history, and both set themselves up as rivals to Christianity.

Although Mormons call it "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints," there is hardly a single point of contact between their religion and historic Christianity as measured by the creeds, hardly a single phrase of which is accepted by the LDS. God did not create the universe; Jesus was not "begotten not made" but a creature like the rest of us; and so on.

Once again, we had little time to take the tours offered either by the LDS, which owns the temple and the homes of such Mormon celebrities as Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, or by the Reorganized Mormons, now calling themselves the "Community of Christ," which have Joseph Smith's house and store (among many other sites). The two groups do not appear to be on speaking terms: At the dueling visitors' centers, neither group has much to say about the other.

While walking around, I recalled the uncertainties of the 19th century, when Christian faith, among the educated classes, was being replaced by Unitarian abstractions that offered little mystery and less comfort. In the wake of this great spiritual destruction, a thousand mushrooms bloomed, especially in New York and Connecticut: the Oneida free-love colony; the no-love Shakers; spiritualists; socialist communarians (one group of which replaced the Mormons at Nauvoo); and, most spectacularly, the Mormons.

I have rarely felt the attraction of any cult, though I did once spend an evening in San Francisco at a Daishonin Buddhist meeting, learning to chant *Namyo-horengekyo* to a Gohanzon available for only \$15 plus shipping and handling. (I went for the food, but the hippies had eaten it all before I got there.) I do, however, understand the desperation of the 1840's, when so many people put their hope in a prophet who offered a living

faith and a living church instead of the sterility of smug Congregationalism and the depleted enthusiasm of Methodism.

In the period after the 1940's, when everything that conservative Americans valued was being destroyed, some remarkably decent people, once again, turned to the "American religion" for the sense of order and commitment that neither politics nor mainstream religion seemed to offer. If Christians are worried about the success of Mormonism, they should ask themselves where they and their churches have failed. All too often, "the hungry sheep look up and they are not fed," except on a diet of the Social Gospel, theological inanity, and vandalized liturgy. The LDS, on the other hand, claims to offer the truth and a living prophetic authority to resolve the problems of our time. If Christian pastors refuse to say that they are preaching revealed truth, their flocks have no reason to accept their authority.

Thomas Fleming is the author of Montenegro: The Divided Land.

Letter From Great Britain

by Michael McMahon

Four Deaths and Three Funerals



It was one in the morning, and my headlights were cutting a tunnel of light above the road through the woods by the Whissonsett turn, when an image suddenly dropped right in front of me like a slide before the lamp of an old-fashioned projector. It was a hare: not a young, sedentary, Dürer hare, but a full-grown, full-length creature with legs stretched out fore and aft, haring from the overhanging darkness on my left to the symmetrical nothingness on my right, and hanging for a fraction of a second in mid-air—a moment in which I had time to exult in his elegance and to fear for his safety, but not to move my foot from the accelerator to the brake. I struck him full on. A thud and a pitiful crunching of bones and he was behind me, his beauty as irrecoverably broken as if it had indeed been etched upon glass.

There has been a lot of death in my life recently. I hit that hare on the way back from the third funeral I had attended in a month. The first had been of an Anglican friend in his early 50's, who had been laid to rest in the churchyard of his Norfolk village with the order of service set down in Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*. As the coffin was brought into the perpendicular Gothic church, the parson read the appointed text: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." An old friend delivered an affecting panegyric. Another read the Lesson, from the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians: "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept." We sang Greatorex's "Lift up your hearts!" upliftingly and heartily. We followed the coffin on foot to the graveyard. "Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God in his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed: we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." After the committal, we walked the hundred yards to the reception in the village hall. "That was a beautiful service," said a little old lady to nobody in particular. "Why can't all funerals be as dignified as that?"

The answer, of course, is that most people think that they have to settle for services like the one I attended ten days later. It was held in the Roman Catholic church I had known as a youngster. From the outside, it is still the high, handsome Victorian Gothic building I remember; but the interior, inevitably, has been "reordered" to suit the drab sub-liturgical norms that were left like so much rubbish on the seashore after the storm tide of the Second Vatican Council. Gone were the grand baldachino and altar rails; the focal point was no longer the tabernacle but a presidential throne. The high altar had been ripped from its setting to make space for a freestanding stone table over which contemporary celebrants can grin at those gathered before them, and the first dozen rows of benches had been absurdly rearranged in a herringbone pattern that protested against the existence of the nave. I sat as far away from the catafalque as was decent and put my head in my hands when a funeral director appeared and invited us all to move nearer