

POINT OF DEPARTURE

Parkman Prize–winner Jared Farmer reflects on writing the *Biography of a Landform*

A history book is less creative than a novel, for the novelist creates a new world. The historian, meanwhile, is restricted by this world—the extant sources, especially, but also the rules of the guild. However, just as a fugue or a sonata can be surprisingly creative and stunningly beautiful, an artful history book can be euphonically logical: it can play with the conventions even as it honors them.

The hardest part of composing *On Zion's Mount* was the pre-writing—the landscape design, so to speak. My primary goal was simple: I wanted to write a local history that had national significance. I love local history—the fine points and the idiosyncrasies, the very wackiness of it. The danger, of course, is that the local can become parochial.

To get around this danger, history writers have developed different strategies. Microhistorians take a slice of life—a singular event or even a single day—and explore it in such depth that the piece elucidates the whole: a whole mentality or era or process. Social historians have written biographical studies of both ordinary people and outlier figures, and longitudinal studies of villages and neighborhoods.

My strategy was different. My starting point was topography. I like to think of myself as an Earth-based humanist, and to think of this book as a biography of a landform. For my

local matter I deliberately chose a topographic feature that seems timeless and natural—a steep, high, rugged mountain. I wanted to show just how much cultural history could be found in the so-called natural world.

HISTORICAL FASHIONS come and go: we have been admonished to remember the nation-state, to go beyond it, to embrace the transnational, to recognize the global, to return to



the local. As a scholar and a writer, I've tried to creatively illustrate how the world turns in all these spheres at once. The best global histories will have some of the local in them, and vice versa. It's a challenge to make room for these nested spheres given the constraints of researching and storytelling, not to mention the constraints of publishing. But it's fun. There are so many ways to play with the concept of scale. It's exciting to contemplate a literary analogue or complement to Geographic Information Systems or Google Earth. Our narrative histories can be maps of words. ♦

~ This excerpt comes from Jared Farmer's speech upon accepting the 2009 Francis Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians for his book *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape*. To read the full text of the speech, visit our Web site at www.theamericanscholar.org.