

Patterson, Daniel. *The True Image: Gravestone Art and the Culture of Scotch Irish Settlers in the Pennsylvania and Carolina Backcountry*.

Benjamin Staple

Volume 76, 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr76br01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

National Museums of Canada

ISSN

0316-1854 (imprimé)

0000-0000 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Staple, B. (2012). Compte rendu de [Patterson, Daniel. *The True Image: Gravestone Art and the Culture of Scotch Irish Settlers in the Pennsylvania and Carolina Backcountry*.] *Material Culture Review*, 76, 117–118.

Comptes rendus de livres

BENJAMIN STAPLE

Review of

Patterson, Daniel. 2012. *The True Image: Gravestone Art and the Culture of Scotch Irish Settlers in the Pennsylvania and Carolina Backcountry*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Pp. 496, 234 halftones, 2 maps, notes, bibliography, index, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3567-8, \$49.95.

This book is the culmination of decades of research. And it shows. Patterson's *The True Image: Gravestone Art and the Culture of Scots Irish Settlers in The Pennsylvania and Carolina Backcountry* was born out of curiosity in the 1960s and, tempered by an impressive number of sources and careful writing, has become a multi-dimensional historical ethnography of Scots Irish stone carvers in 18th-century North Carolina. His focus is on the Bigham family: ordinary men who left something extraordinary. The gravestones they produced are "the only local works of art surviving from the first two generations of British settlers in the region" (112). Gravestones serve to anchor and pattern each chapter of this work.

In the first chapter, Patterson charts the beginnings of the Bigham family as William and Samuel arrive in 18th-century Pennsylvania from Northern Ireland. Using the literary technique of walking the reader down the same road the Bighams likely would have known and used, Patterson sketches into being a sense of the world these Scots Irish craftsmen entered into. Like following a trail of breadcrumbs, Patterson is able to literally follow a trail of gravestones, made by William and Samuel Bigham, from Pennsylvania to North Carolina.

Blending archival and secondary sources, Patterson broadens his focus in the second chapter to reveal the social context in which the Bighams lived and worked in North Carolina. A discussion of education, religious belief, music, dance, weddings and funeral customs serves to flesh out the Bighams' neighbours and add life to historical records. It is in this chapter (and the

only time he does so) that Patterson also describes the material landscape of late 18th-century Mecklenburg County by exploring the regional vernacular architecture through photographs and floor plans. Breaking the historical narrative for a moment, he juxtaposes the 18th-century log-constructed landscape with the 21st-century "highways, glassy office towers, repetitive malls, industrial sites" (50) that separate our experience from the Bighams'. Understanding the Bighams, or even the North Carolinian Scots Irish, requires understanding the landscape with which they interfaced.

The third chapter is concerned with craftsmanship. Patterson explores the development of the Bigham workshop and its unique style. The chapter is divided into sections for each stone carver (which help greatly for a reader inundated by this point, although usefully, with names and dates). Each includes biographical information, a history of the carver's works and the stylistic features that differentiate, however slightly, the Bigham carvers. Through Patterson's detailed analysis and description, we learn that most Bigham stones were characterized by "a curving tympanum flanked on each side by a small rounded shoulder" but that individual carvers' styles could be also be determined—such as James Sloan's inscriptions, which used a "capital letter A with a downward bend of the crossbar" (96).

Patterson's fourth and fifth chapters deal with interpreting the gravestones themselves. Chapter four explores gravestone iconography in depth, while chapter five focuses on inscrip-

tions. The Bigham gravestone designs were symbolic polyvocal expressions of vernacular culture. Beginning with a brief history of the social development of gravestone use, Patterson compares Scots Irish stones with contemporaneous examples in Scotland and Northern Ireland in search of a common iconographic tradition. He traces the changes in designs through the 19th century: the death's head begins as a skull, warning of mortality, only to transform into an anthropomorphized face gazing upward toward immortality. Significantly, Patterson also situates iconography within a web of broader social pressures and political events: he documents the impact of the rise of a national culture at the local level. This is expressed through patriotic imagery of flags, stars and the materiel of war—a Revolutionary identity so fervently experienced that it was necessary to carve it in stone. This is paralleled in text: through analysis of opening formulas in inscriptions (from “Here lies...” to “In memory of...”), Patterson reveals how by 1780 the function of gravestones had shifted from mortality marker to war memorial.

Patterson turns his attention to local legendry in the sixth chapter. Legends surrounding each individual are given alongside a photograph of his or her Bigham-made gravestone. In previous chapters, Patterson constructed the world of Mecklenburg County using historical documentation; in this chapter he examines the folkloric dimensions of that world. Legends of locals outwitting Redcoats, murderous Tories and courageous women have familiar Anglo-American motifs and give a sense of the community's struggles over power, religion and identity.

The seventh and eighth chapters are concerned with the dangers of romanticizing

the past and how the Bighams fit into the Southern slave economy, respectively. In these chapters, Patterson grounds the world that he has constructed, presenting the Bighams and their neighbours as fallible actors struggling within a society of social, political and economic pressures. The epilogue follows the Bighams and a few other families (such as the Polks) out of the 18th century and up to the Civil War. Through his examination of the moral dimension of the struggles faced by the Bighams, and the broader Scots Irish communities in the southern states, he humanizes them.

Patterson tries to do a number of things in this book. He conducts genealogical research on the Bighams; he uses a staggering number of primary and secondary historical sources to document the social, religious and political life of Scots Irish communities over the course of a century; he analyzes the material culture of gravestones and interprets their symbolism; and he undertakes a historical ethnography of a crafting tradition (i.e., stone carvers). At times, it almost feels as though he tries to do too much, but the way he masterfully details each of these dimensions only serves to strengthen and justify the scope of the work. The narrative, at times, treads far from the Bighams and their workshop, but underpinning the whole work are the gravestones. This work successfully demonstrates the rich historical ethnographic potential of blending different approaches to create a world and a sense of the everyday lived experiences of its inhabitants. The particularity of the title belies the true scope of this book; all interested in American history, identity and ethnicity, or material culture and memorialization, should clear space for it on their shelf.