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Mount Rushmore: A Tomb for Dead Ideas of American Greatness

In June of 1927, Albert Burnley Bibb, professor of architecture at George Washington University remarked in a plan for The National Church and Shrine of America, “[T]hrough all the long story of man’s mediaeval endeavor, the people have labored at times in bonds of more or less common faith and purpose building great temples of worship to the Lords of their Destiny, great tombs for their noble dead.”¹ Bibb and his colleague Charles Mason Remey were advocating for the construction of a national place for American civil religion in Washington, D.C. that would include a place for worship and tombs to bury the great dead of the nation. Perhaps these two gentleman knew that over 1,500 miles away in the Black Hills of South Dakota, a group of intrepid Americans had just begun to make progress on their own construction of a shrine of America, Mount Rushmore. These Americans had gathered together behind a common purpose of building a symbol to the greatness of America, and were essentially participating in the human tradition of construction that Bibb presented. However, it is doubtful that the planners of this memorial knew that their sculpture would become not just a shrine for America, but also like the proposed National Church and Shrine a tomb – a tomb for the specific definitions of American greatness espoused by the crafters of Mt. Rushmore.

In 1924 a small group of men initiated the development of the memorial of Mount Rushmore and would not finish this project until October of 1941.² The gigantic memorial carved into a granite peak would soon become known as a “Shrine of Democracy” and as a symbol of the greatness of America as a place for freedom and hope for all.³ This popularized view of the memorial still exists in America, and it has value in that it helps to create a sense of

¹ Albert Burnley Bibb, introduction to Charles Mason Remey, *The National Church and Shrine of the United States*, (Washington, D.C: Organizers of the National Church Foundation, 1927), 18.

² “Timeline: Carving Mount Rushmore,” *American Experience*, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/rushmore/pbs.org/timeline>.

³ Rex Alan Smith, *Carving Mount Rushmore*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994), 278.

national pride and inspires visitors to promote these values in their everyday lives. However, this interpretation also ignores the historical context of the memorial and its original notion of American greatness. Those merely accepting the popular conception of the granite sculpture will remain ignorant of a fuller view of the history presented by Rushmore and the reality of the intended meaning of the memorial by specific men in history. A thorough and critical exploration of Doane Robinson, the former state historian of South Dakota and visionary of the memorial, Peter Norbeck, the most influential political and financial supporter, and Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of the mountain will help to create an understanding of the view of American greatness held by the planners of the memorial.

Robinson's biography and his historical writings demonstrate his sympathy for farmers, and his fondness for the West. His supremacist view of white Americans came to light through his claims that American Indians lag behind white Americans in their progression of civilization. South Dakota Governor and U.S. Senator Peter Norbeck's biography and political career exhibit his recognition of the essentiality of the farmer to the progress and prosperity of the nation as well as his liking for the Western region of the nation. He also shared a view of white greatness with Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of the memorial. Borglum bared through his art and political beliefs his faith in the farmers of the West as the great men of the world. These men all held a high view of America, but their ideas of American greatness were completely exemplified in the white male Western farmer. Their own biases of greatness evince themselves in the early plans of the memorial and the ultimate selection of the four men for the memorial that represent these great American traits the best: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. The public, however, did not perceive of Rushmore as representative of this specific view of greatness; from the very beginning Americans took a broader view of the

greatness encapsulated in Rushmore and applied it to multiple groups of people. Thus, an examination of the lives and opinions of Doane Robinson, Gutzon Borglum, and Peter Norbeck illuminates a specific idea of American greatness that Mount Rushmore originally portrayed: a greatness fulfilled in the lives of the white male farmer living in the expanded lands of the great American West. Ultimately though, this narrow definition of greatness was left unseen by the first public observations and interpretations of the memorial and is now dead to contemporary Americans.

The study of the development of Mt. Rushmore, particularly the men responsible for its creation, although not widely known among wider American society, is nothing new. As early as two decades after the completion of the memorial historians like Walker Rumble began examining the life of its sculptor, Gutzon Borglum. Rumble's critiques of Rushmore and its sculptor saw past the generally accepted nature of the memorial as simply a source of general American greatness and began to examine the personal views of Borglum, especially his obsession with American continental expansion and the farmers of the American West.⁴ The intriguing character of Borglum led many scholars after Rumble to profile the life of the prodigious and productive sculptor. However, one of the latest scholars to write critically on the meaning of Rushmore, Jesse Larner, explains that many of the available works on Rushmore and Borglum (excluding Rumble's) do not reveal a complete picture of the man, especially his views on the greatness of whites.⁵ Thus, an examination of the developers of Rushmore as a method of understanding the meaning of the memorial must include a view of the sculptor that does not immortalize the man in a similar way as he immortalized four men on the face of a mountain.

⁴ Walker Rumble, "Gutzon Borglum Mount Rushmore and the American Tradition," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (Fall 1968 1968): 121-127, *America: History and Life with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 8, 2014), 126.

⁵ Jesse Larner, *Mount Rushmore: An Icon Reconsidered*, (New York: Nation Books, 2002), 188.

Still, while Walker, Larner, and a few others successfully employ this method to understand Rushmore through the life of Borglum, they do not take a similarly comprehensive and critical lens to the lives and worldviews of some of the other men involved in the construction of Rushmore. Scrutinizing the lives of Doane Robinson and Peter Norbeck, will augment the examinations of Borglum and create a larger picture of the view of American greatness held by the creators of the memorial. Understanding the context of the lives of these men during the production of the memorial will help in grounding the beliefs and actions of the planners of Rushmore.

The nation went through various changes in the long time period between the conception of the idea of Rushmore in 1924 and completion of the memorial in 1941. In the early 1920s, America grappled with its new post-Great War role that “render[ed] the once periphery New World nation’s peculiarities central to the planet’s concerns.”⁶ America had begun its path towards greatness on a world scale, but before the nation could reach its full potential as a hegemon, the market collapsed. Late October of 1929 ushered in the Great Depression and the nation, from bankers to farmers, struggled to remain afloat.⁷ In response to this crisis President Franklin Delano Roosevelt developed the New Deal and commenced “a time of hope restored, even though economic recovery still had a long way to go.”⁸ Thus, throughout the period of construction of Rushmore, the United States began to rise to prominence only to falter, but started to regain its strength before another blow would soon strike the nation from the East.⁹

⁶ Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression & the New Deal : A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 7, 2014), 8.

⁷ Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier, *Progressivism, the Great Depression, and the New Deal*, (New York: Benchmark Books, 2001) , 45-53.

⁸ Bernard Sternsher, Introduction to *Hope Restored: How the New Deal Worked in Town and Country*, ed. by Bernard Sternsher, (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1999), 1.

⁹ H.P. Willmott, *Pearl Harbor*, (London: Cassel & Co., 2001), 12.

However, before the attack on Pearl Harbor spurred another new age in American history, the carvers had already descended the mountain for the final time and Rushmore stood complete.

In this tumultuous period of American history preceding the Great Depression and ending before the nation's entrance into World War II, many in the nation produced forms of aggression linked to a general sense of white American male superiority. The United States had welcomed millions of immigrants into its borders in the early decades of the 20th century, but Mae Ngai reveals that after the Great War many "rejected the idea of the melting pot altogether" in favor of the restrictionist policies of the Immigration Act of 1924.¹⁰ People held prejudiced views against those who did not match their version of the pure white Anglo-Saxon American race. Matthew Jacobson evinces that this popular prejudiced view included a notion that these other peoples had not progressed to the same level of civilization as the great white Americans.¹¹ Still, the belief in the superiority of white Americans evident in this early period of the 20th century did not end simply with race. In her exploration of masculinity in the U.S., Gail Bederman proclaims that the white man was "not just any man, but a civilized man who embodied what was manly."¹² Thus, existent in the popular notions of the first decades of the 20th century was an understanding of the greatness of the white American man as the most progressed version of humanity. In this setting the three planners of Rushmore lived and devised the memorial and their definition of American greatness.

The Original Vision

The conception of a grandiose sculpture carved into the natural features of South Dakota began in the early 1920s with Doane Robinson, gathered federal support through the work of

¹⁰ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 23.

¹¹ Matthew Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 109.

¹² Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 50.

Peter Norbeck, and ultimately came to fruition through the hands of Gutzon Borglum. Doane Robinson, born in 1856 to a family of farmers, eventually served as the state historian of South Dakota after beginning his adult life as a farmer.¹³ In his time as state historian he began imagining in 1924 a sculpture in the skinny rock formations of the Black Hills known as the Needles in which “[he could] see all the old heroes of the west peering out from them.”¹⁴ With this vision, the “Father of Mt. Rushmore” soon came into contact with Gutzon Borglum, the impudent, but talented sculptor born in 1867 to Danish immigrants in Idaho.¹⁵ The artist, working on a sculpture of Confederate General Robert E. Lee on Stone Mountain in Georgia, was “very much interested in [Robinson’s] proposal,” and agreed to carve Robinson’s dream into reality given the location would change from the Needles to Rushmore.¹⁶ However, the question still remained of how they would finance the project. Fortunately, Borglum and Robinson gathered support from U.S. Senator Peter Norbeck, the son of Scandinavian immigrants, who became “the driving force behind the project.”¹⁷ His relationships with presidents Coolidge and Roosevelt and his influence in Senate ensured that the project had federal support. More than these three men made Mt. Rushmore possible, including John Borland and William Williamson; however, the shared heritage and ideas of these specific men were pivotal to the creation of this memorial and help to evince what it was intended to signify. Beginning with the visionary of the memorial, the ideas behind the monument will begin to form more clearly.

¹³ O.W. Coursey, *Who’s Who in South Dakota* (Mitchell, SD: Educator School Supply Co.,1913).

¹⁴ Doane Robinson, “Letter to Lorado Taft, Jan. 26, 1924,” *South Dakota Manuscripts Collection*, no. 149: 3, <http://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/manuscript/id/642/rec/3>.

¹⁵ Howard Shaff and Audrey Karl Shaff, *Six Wars at a Time: The Life and Times of Gutzon Borglum, Sculptor of Mount Rushmore*, (Sioux Falls, SD: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1985), 12-13.

¹⁶ Gutzon Borglum, “Western Union Telegram to Doane Robinson, Aug. 28, 1924,” *South Dakota Manuscripts Collection*, no. 149: 14, <http://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/manuscript/id/642/rec/3>.

¹⁷ Shaff and Shaff, 2.

Doane Robinson, the state historian of South Dakota, began his life as a farmer in the Midwest and eventually settled west of his birthplace in South Dakota to work as a publisher and lawyer. Born in Sparta, Wisconsin in 1856 to a family of farmers, Doane Robinson grew up attending country schools and even teaching in one. After gaining his inheritance from his family of “old Revolutionary stock,” Robinson participated in the proverbial westward movement of Americans and settled on a farm in Minnesota. From his very youth Robinson held inside him an American identity linked to the ideals of freedom promulgated by the Revolutionary War and an association with the movement West to try one’s hand at the natural American task of farming. He quit this occupation though in favor of law and continued to move west to South Dakota where he became, in his own words, “an enthusiastic Dakotan,” and began publishing the great stories of his state.¹⁸ Although not born completely in the Western region of the United States, Robinson eventually migrated to the West and identified himself strongly with this place and its culture. In his writings of the history of the state, Robinson revealed his white supremacist views linked to his belief in the progression of civilization.

Although relatively sympathetic to American Indians, Robinson’s view of the progress of humanity led him to the adoption of a plan for the memorial that excluded any recognition of American Indians in the West. Through his writings on American Indians, Robinson evinced a care and understanding for these peoples abnormal for his time. He wrote that “the Sioux Indian is very human,”¹⁹ and many times he addressed the “barbarous” acts of white settlers and American military forces on Indian tribes.²⁰ As a white man raised in a region of the country where white settlers lived in a culture of fear of attacks of the savage American Indians,

¹⁸ Coursey.

¹⁹ Robinson, preface to *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1956).

²⁰ Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1956), 225.

Robinson held an abnormal view of these peoples; he saw them as proficient human beings capable of being the victim of unnecessary violence of white people. However, these positions did not prohibit Robinson from regarding American Indians as “heathen” and needing to be educated and civilized by the white Americans.²¹ They needed this training precisely because they had not yet made their “way up to the higher levels of civilization.”²² Robinson believed in the notion, which Jacobson presents as popular for this period, that humanity existed on a continuum of civilized peoples.²³ Many groups, like American Indians, had not yet progressed to the greatest levels of civilization, but Americans on the other hand had progressed to that pinnacle of civilization. In the early 20th century, Americans located this progress in many areas, and the financial supporter of Rushmore identified farmers as essential to this progress.

One such individual, Peter Norbeck, supported farmers in large part because of his Western identity and upbringing on Western farms gained through the movement of Manifest Destiny. Born in Clay County of the Dakota Territory in 1870 to Norwegian immigrant parents, Norbeck’s childhood consisted of work in the fields and caring for his younger siblings. In the spirit of Manifest Destiny his parents had moved west from Wisconsin to find more fertile land, and as they reached the village of Sioux City, Iowa “as far as the eye could see in a northwesterly direction lay the flat rich bottom land, most of which was yet unturned by the homesteader’s plow.”²⁴ His parents had participated and gained in the assumption that the land of the Western United States was created for settling on and farming. Maturing in the environment of the Western plains formed Norbeck into a man with “[a] warm smile, a hearty greeting, and firm

²¹ Ibid., 507.

²² Ibid., 508.

²³ Jacobson, 109.

²⁴ Gilbert Courtland Fite, *Peter Norbeck: Prairie Statesman* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1948),

handshake [that] identified him with the democratic West.”²⁵ These virtues of the West grew out of the history of the strength and codependency needed by settlers to survive their expansion into unknown lands. Norbeck adopted these cherished traits and brought them with him during his time as a politician in South Dakota and Washington.

Norbeck’s Western farmer roots bled into his work as a governor and U.S. senator as he continually supported the Western farmer and consistently identified them as exceptional Americans. Living in South Dakota in the early 1900’s Norbeck soon became aware of the discontent of farmers with the systems of railroads, money-lenders, and grain elevators that they believed put them at a disadvantage.²⁶ In this context and with this upbringing in an agrarian household, “Norbeck became the champion of the farmers.”²⁷ He believed strongly in the support of the farmers because this was the America that he knew. He associated greatness and virtues of America with the virtues of these folks in the West, and his unapologetic support of this region showed to others as they elected him as governor of South Dakota and multiple times as U.S. Senator. After his first reelection as U.S. Senator, the *Mitchel Evening Republican* remarked that he prevailed in part because “[h]e ha[d] refused to obey the whip of the East.”²⁸ Norbeck recognized something special about the West and its farmers for the progress of the nation, and he did not attempt to placate those men in Washington who did not understand the virtues of the men in the West. Importantly though, Norbeck did not remove this greatness of the American West from his view of the greatness of the white race.

Despite Norbeck’s association with Progressives and his care for men from all income levels, he did not transmit this view to people of color. Norbeck may have had a “desire to help

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁶ Ibid., 29.

²⁷ Ibid., preface.

²⁸ Ibid., 122.

the common man,” but this does not mean that he was untouched by the theories of the progress of humanity that Robinson also held.²⁹ Norbeck upheld the farmers of the West; more specifically, he upheld the white farmers of the West. As the son of a Norwegian immigrant, “[h]is ancestral pride caused him to scorn all Latins,” in favor the purer white races.³⁰ Just as Robinson held sympathy for an oppressed group of people, but ultimately recognized the greatness of the white American, so too did Norbeck recognize the humanity of all, but identify greatness with a particular group of people. These theories of the greatness of the white Western farmer also evinced themselves in the life of the bold and exceptional sculptor of the memorial.

Gutzon Borglum, the son of Danish farmers, eventually rose to prominence as one of the greatest sculptors in the United States and the world. In the spring of 1867 in the small village of Bear Lake State, Idaho, Mormon Danish settlers gave birth to their first son, John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum, who later became known simply as Gutzon Borglum. The life of Borglum took him to many cities in the Western U.S. including Omaha, Nebraska and Los Angeles, California, and in these places he “became the archetypical American.”³¹ This son of European immigrants eventually rose from his beginnings on the harsh American frontier to live as a prominent artist awarded many contracts in the United States and abroad. He eventually settled in Connecticut, but Borglum felt that “whatever [gave] his art strength... [came] from the courage imparted by the [W]est.”³² Borglum identified the source of the power of his art in his own Western upbringing. For Borglum, the West possessed a unique nature, and his Western roots and opinions become even more evident through examining some of his sculptures and the subjects of his sculptures.

²⁹ Shaff and Shaff, 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³² Borglum, qtd. in Shaff and Shaff, 7.

In many of his contracts, Borglum sculpted images of the West: the men that conquered it for the United States, the American Indians that once lived free in the region, and the ideal form of a Western man. In his time as a professional artist, Borglum sculpted two memorials of American General Philip Sheridan.³³ After his experience in the Civil War, Sheridan fought American Indians in Western America where he is attributed with saying “the only good Indians I ever saw were dead.”³⁴ Whether he actually said these words or not, Borglum still willfully memorialized a man that exterminated American Indians to help usher in white settlers to the West. Borglum did not just portray the white men of the West though, he also preserved American Indians in art “with realism and vigour.”³⁵ His sculpture of “Indians Pursued,” pictures two American Indians riding on their galloping horses, signaling the westward migration of American Indians at the hands of the white settlers. However, the sculpture is not meant to evoke sympathy for these people; rather, as a contemporary of Borglum and art critic Charles Caffin suggests, it is simply to portray the physical strength of these peoples. While this initially may seem like a compliment of Indians, it does not respect the virtues or intelligence of these people, but only their animalistic physical prowess. Still, even this physical robustness of the Indians could not match the greatness that Borglum saw in the white men of the West. During his planning for a statue dedicated to the Nevada pioneer John McKay, Borglum rejected the inauthentic poses of models and instead asked a local man standing nearby to take off his coat and demonstrate “what a real western man looks like.”³⁶ Models could not fake the natural vigor and

³³ Borglum, “General Philip Sheridan Memorial,” sculpture, Washington D.C., 1908.

³⁴ “Philip Henry Sheridan,” *New Perspectives on The West*, last modified 2001, http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/sheridan.htm.

³⁵ Charles H. Caffin, *American Masters of Sculpture*, (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 226.

³⁶ Borglum, qtd. in Mary Ellen Glass. “Sam and the Statue: An Untold Nevada Story,” *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (June 1973): 112-118. *America: History and Life with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 8, 2014), 116.

virtue of the western man. They could not pretend to be a western man because they could not pretend to be great.

Like Robinson and Norbeck, Borglum imagined the greatest man of the West as white and a toiler of the soil. Borglum undeniably held anti-Semitic beliefs as Shaff records that “Gutzon was an avowed anti-Semite.”³⁷ Furthermore, racism and nativism also characterized Borglum who loathed the “mongrel hoard that is fleeing form its own responsibilities in Europe” into the nation with the “greatest aggregate of [the Nordic] race under a single constitution.”³⁸ Borglum then, associated greatness with whiteness, and the great man of the West must have pure white blood. In addition, Borglum pronounced that “the most successful people today on the political horizon, is the insuring Northwestern farmer.”³⁹ The sculptor immortalized the farmers of the Midwest and the West as the pulse of the nation. Rumble remarks how Borglum adhered to the “agrarian myth” that “the yeoman farmer was the ideal citizen.”⁴⁰ Great men had their virtue in the fact they participated in the most virtuous occupation that a man could hold. Still, these men could not realize their full greatness unless they lived in a specific region of the United States.

Only in the West could this great man exist and fulfill Borglum’s and the other planners’ notion of greatness. The West, specifically the rural West, produced the successful leaders of America as they “got their guts from the West.”⁴¹ In Borglum’s mind, the nature of great men meant less than the nature of the geography of his upbringing. Certainly great men had to possess virtue, strength, and honor, but the inherent characteristics of the West produced these traits

³⁷ Shaff and Shaff, 104.

³⁸ Borglum, qtd. in Larner, 193.

³⁹ Borglum qtd. in Rumble, 123.

⁴⁰ Rumble, 123.

⁴¹ Borglum, qtd. in Rumble 123.

tenfold in the great men of the late 19th and early 20th century. The West intrinsically held an exceptional greatness that allowed it to produce great men, like Robinson, Norbeck, and Borglum. Thus, all of these planners of the memorial sanctified the farmers, championed the white race as the great race, and identified the West as the exceptional region of the nation. Even though Larner, Rumble, and others only identified these notions with Borglum, they realized themselves in other key players of the construction of Rushmore and ultimately in the memorial itself.

These views did not remain inside the planners of the memorial; they were explicitly revealed in the development and completion of Rushmore. Robinson's original idea could not escape his views of white American exceptionalism. Although Doane Robinson originally formed the idea of a massive rock sculpture in the Needles to attract tourists to his state, he also imagined that this memorial could stir up a sense of American pride in the citizens that would see it. Robinson recognized the possible value of tourism that South Dakota had with its wonderful vistas, but had the belief that "[t]ourists soon get fed up on scenery unless it has something of special interests connected with it to make it impressive."⁴² Upon hearing of the project of Borglum on Stone Mountain in Georgia, Robinson became enamored with the construction of a similar project in his state of South Dakota to attract more tourists. Robinson imagined that Borglum would craft a "vast sculpture that would express the Spirit of America."⁴³ The attraction would not only draw tourists, but serve as a representation of the American identity and greatness that would connect emotionally with its viewers. From the earliest dreams

⁴² Robinson, qtd. in Smith 23.

⁴³ Robinson, "Letter to Dr. O'Harra, Sept. 9, 1924," *South Dakota Manuscripts Collection*, no. 149: 23, <http://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/manuscript/id/642/rec/3>.

of this memorial, the notion of representing America in its greatness was paramount, but what exactly did that look like for the “Father of Mr. Rushmore”?

Doane Robinson’s original idea for the memorial grew from simple portraits of American Indian leaders to a grandiose scene of the supposed heroes of the American West. Throughout much of his career Doane Robinson studied the American Indian tribes of South Dakota and the rest of the West and wrote multiple works on their culture and history.⁴⁴ Perhaps it was this interest in and respect for American Indians that led him initially to “thin[k] of some notable Sioux such as Red Cloud, who lived and died in the shadow” of the Black Hills.⁴⁵ However, Robinson soon shifted his vision of this monument to include more than just a solitary American Indian. The dream began to include also “Lewis and Clark, Fremont, Jed Smith Bridger, Sakaka-wea, Redcloud, and in an equestrian statue Cody and the overland mail”⁴⁶ and later a scene of “Custer and his gold-discovering cavalcade winding its way through the Needles, with Red Cloud and a band of Sioux scouts, resentful and suspicious.”⁴⁷ Robinson’s views would not permit him to represent America and the heroes of the West simply with a lone American Indian chief; rather, his sense of American white superiority pulled him to include white American explorers and military men who aided in the expansion of the U.S. into territory once belonging to American Indians.

Eventually though, even Robinson’s idea of remembering the heroes of the West did not suffice as Borglum and Norbeck convinced the historian that the sculpture must represent the

⁴⁴ “Jonah Leroy (“Doane”) Robinson,” *Strangers to Us All*, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://myweb.wvnet.edu/~jelkins/lp-2001/robinson.html>.

⁴⁵ Robinson, “Letter to Lorado Taft, Dec. 28, 1923,” *South Dakota Manuscripts Collection*, no. 149: 2, <http://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/manuscript/id/642/rec/3>

⁴⁶ Robinson, “Letter to Lorado Taft, Jan. 26, 1924.”

⁴⁷ Robinson, “Letter to the editor of the Pioneer Times, Feb. 6, 1924,” *South Dakota Manuscripts Collection*, no. 149: 4, <http://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/manuscript/id/642/rec/3>.

greatness of the West. Robinson's idea of just sculpting scenes of famous Western events would not fully capture the greatness that the monument sought to portray. Borglum and Norbeck had initially thought of carving George Washington and Abraham Lincoln into the granite of the Black Hills, but they soon recognized the value of Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt in representing their version of the greatness of America.⁴⁸ Borglum also added to the grandiose plan of the sculpture by initiating inclusion of an entablature in the shape of the Louisiana Purchase that would include a history of the United States focused on the continental expansion of the nation.⁴⁹ The planned entablature reflected the importance of the West to the planners' notion of American greatness and emphasized the specific nature of their definition. However, budgetary concerns scrapped the inclusion of a textual representation of history of the greatness of the U.S.; fortunately, the planners had selected four men that ideally represented their vision of American greatness.

The first man selected for memorialization in the hills of South Dakota, George Washington, may seem like an obvious candidate for enshrinement, but his participation in Westward expansion and his work as a rugged farmer represented the ideals of the planners. More than a century after his death, Americans still hallowed Washington. The renown of the first president even remained in popular culture, such as the theatrical production *Washington, The Statesman* that proclaimed, "Among our honored heroes there is one/ Whose name is first of all... George Washington."⁵⁰ Excluding Washington from the memorial certainly would have ignored one of heroes of the nation; however, the traits of Washington also aligned with the specific notions of greatness of the planners. Although not a Western man, George Wrong

⁴⁸ Smith, 123.

⁴⁹ Smith, 278-279.

⁵⁰ Belle Willey Gue, *Washington The Statesman: A Drama*, (San Diego: The Canterbury Company, 1928), 6.

remarked in 1921 that Washington “was a keen farmer” who “went off on expeditions into the forest lasting many days and shared the life in the woods of rough men.”⁵¹ Washington did not just spend his time commanding armies or signing legislation, he also came from an agrarian background and elicited some of the rugged characteristics of the masculine West. Furthermore, he also participated in the early Western expansion of the United States by speculating purchasing tracts of land in Transappalachia belonging to American Indians before America had any legal claim to the area.⁵² Despite not living in the Western regions of the nation, Washington acted as a catalyst for the eventual capture of more Indian land and the development of the great West. The next man selected for the mountain had an even more direct connection with the ideals of contributors to the memorial.

Thomas Jefferson, another purportedly great American, strongly believed in the utopian nature of agrarian society and his finagling for the Louisiana Purchase, the largest expansion in U.S. history, cemented him as a champion of the expansion of the West. The early twentieth century historian James Truslow identified Jefferson as “at once the greatest Liberal America has produced and the most intensely ‘American’ of all the great figures of his time.”⁵³ Again, the planners of the memorial could not ignore such a supposedly great American figure. Still, the greatness of Jefferson became more apparent when examining his notions of agrarianism that identified “[t]hose who labor in the earth” as “the chosen people of God.”⁵⁴ The societal philosophy of Jefferson aligned perfectly with planners’ penchants for supporting farmers. The racist beliefs of Jefferson, such as his view of blacks being “as incapable as children” also

⁵¹ George M. Wrong, *Washington and His Comrades in Arms*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), 13, 15.

⁵² Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 8.

⁵³ James Truslow Adams, Preface to *The Living Jefferson*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936) , vi.

⁵⁴ Thomas Jefferson, qtd. in Merrill Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, (New York: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1984), 290.

aligned with the white supremacist opinions of the planners.⁵⁵ Jefferson fulfilled more criteria of the planners' definition of greatness through his political maneuvering for the Louisiana Purchase, which at least in the eyes of 1930s biographer Gilbert Chindard, "enormously increased the potential riches of the country."⁵⁶ The actions of the third president of the United States made possible the greatness of the West that Robinson, Borglum, and Norbeck celebrated. One of the men who benefited from the riches of this region, found his way onto the mountain as well.

Abraham Lincoln still holds a position of greatness in the collective consciousness of Americans, but his uniquely Western character represented the ideals of greatness in the West that the planners applauded. In the introduction to her collection of poems dedicated to Lincoln, Stella Tyler Matthews proclaimed confidently that "[t]here is not greater character in all our history than that of Abraham Lincoln."⁵⁷ Many in the contemporary United States would concur with Matthews, but in the eyes of the planners, Lincoln exemplified a specific type of greatness. Borglum wrote in his description of sculpting the president that Lincoln was "the first great human return from the West."⁵⁸ Originally a home to the savage Indians, the great West now produced men of great manners and stature like Lincoln and others. The planners, especially Borglum, would have agreed with Matthews in her poetic question of the frontier West: "Don't you think the way they worked/ Made stronger, better men?."⁵⁹ America collectively associates Lincoln with greatness and therefore his place on Rushmore seems obvious; however, the

⁵⁵ Jefferson qtd. in "Thomas Jefferson and Slavery," *The Jefferson Monticello*, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-slavery>.

⁵⁶ Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1933), 425.

⁵⁷ Stella Tyler Matthews. Preface to *The Life of Abraham Lincoln in Verse*, (Seattle: Lowman & Hanford Co., 1923).

⁵⁸ Borglum, "The Beauty of Lincoln," *Everybody's Magazine*, 1910, EBSCOhost (accessed May 8, 2014), 220.

⁵⁹ Matthews, "Pioneer Days," in *The Life of Abraham Lincoln In Verse*, 22.

planners viewed his greatness as diametrically linked to his Western heritage. He was great because he was Western. The last great white man of the mountain shared views so closely with the planners that they all supported him politically.

All three of the men personally advocated for Teddy Roosevelt at one time or another and his inclination for the rugged West and belief in the progress of American civilization aligned with their ideals. In the same year of Roosevelt's death, biographer William Roscoe Thayer wrote that the former president was "the supreme American."⁶⁰ Although dead for less than a decade at the time of the planning of the memorial, the apparent greatness of Roosevelt aided in his selection to the mountain. The political connection between each of the planners and Roosevelt also likely propelled the former president towards a spot on the mountain.^{61,62} Still, the similarities did not cease with political ideologies as the former president also reveled in the West that the planners eagerly supported. Early twentieth century historian Henry Pringle suggests that Roosevelt initially fled to the West from his native New York to escape the femininity of home.⁶³ The rugged nature of the West appealed to Roosevelt because his manliness could not tolerate the emasculating characteristics of the East. Once he became a regular cattle rancher in North Dakota, a local newspaper remarked that "New York will certainly lose him for some time at least, as he is perfectly charmed with our free Western life."⁶⁴ The West fit Roosevelt and the planners of the great memorial recognized this accord between Roosevelt and the region. Roosevelt even shared the view of the progressing nature of

⁶⁰ William Roscoe Thayer, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919) , 445.

⁶¹ Fite, 123.

⁶² Shaff and Shaff, 145.

⁶³ Henry F. Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt A Biography*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931) , 49.

⁶⁴ *The Bad Lands Cowboy*, qtd. in *Theodore Roosevelt A Biography*. Henry F. Pringle. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), 96.

civilizations with the planners as evinced in his belief that the Filipinos could not govern themselves properly and the United States must intervene on their behalf.⁶⁵ Thus, Roosevelt, and all of the presidents cemented in the landscape of South Dakota were great, but they represented a specific type of greatness that the planners of the memorial valued.

In the selection of these men, the planners assured the public that they intended to celebrate the greatness of the American people as a whole, but their definition of greatness ensured that the memorial remained a testament to a specific version of American greatness. At the commemoration of Washington's head on July 4, 1930, a reporter for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* recorded that Borglum "said it was a monument to the aspirations of a great people, not to individual men."⁶⁶ The planners certainly did not intend to make a memorial to commemorating four specific individuals as they always sought to make a symbol of American greatness. However, the supreme representations of this American greatness in the four men selected for enshrinement exemplify the specific form of greatness that the planners valued. The memorial is not about individual Americans, whether presidents or everyday citizens, but it is not about every American either. It is about a specific type of American and a specific type of greatness. It is about the planners' version of the great white men who worked the great fields of the Great West. However, the nation, even from the very beginning did not view Rushmore as a testament to this particular type of greatness.

A Skewed Perception

While the original vision of the memorial as a symbol of greatness of the Western white male initiated the construction, the perception and meaning of the mountain began to shift soon

⁶⁵ Thayer, 171.

⁶⁶ "Crowd Views Washington of Mt. Rushmore," 1930' *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), Jul 05, 1930, <http://ezproxy.valpo.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/181157443?accountid=14811> (accessed May 6, 2014).

after its inception into a broader form of greatness associated with America. Despite the original intent of the builders to magnify a specific type of greatness, the public seemed to always take a broader view of the mountain. President Coolidge's commemoration speech in 1927 initiated the understanding of the memorial as a place for "continuing allegiance to independence, to self-government, to freedom and to economic justice."⁶⁷ This meaning of Rushmore as a symbol of liberalism continued into the 1930s as people like the chairman of the federal commission of the memorial, Joseph Cullinan, began to refer to the mountain as "America's shrine for political democracy" or simply the "Shrine of Democracy."⁶⁸⁶⁹ The public did not understand the planner's vision of the memorial as a reflection of the greatness of the Western white male farmer. Rather, from the completion of the first head of a great white man on a mountain in South Dakota, American society and culture understood Rushmore as a representation of the great American attribute of democracy. Therefore, the public perception of the memorial broadened the definition of greatness of the mountain as it opened the greatness to the wider audience of those who could participate in democracy, even if they lacked all of the characteristics of greatness that Robinson, Norbeck, and Borglum valued.

This version of the meaning of the memorial that celebrated apparently all Americans even gained support from the federal government. In the beginning of the construction of the memorial, Norbeck used his political influence to ensure support from Congress and President Coolidge for the development of the project.⁷⁰ Coolidge even remarked that "[m]oney spent for such a purpose is certain of adequate returns in the nature of increased public welfare."⁷¹

⁶⁷ Calvin Coolidge, "Commemoration Speech at Mt. Rushmore," August 10, 1927, accessed at <http://www.nps.gov/moru/historyculture/upload/August%2010%201927%20Coolidge%20Speech.pdf>.

⁶⁸ "Crowd Views Washington of Mt. Rushmore."

⁶⁹ Smith, 278.

⁷⁰ Smith, 181.

⁷¹ Coolidge, "Commemoration Speech."

Because the public began to view the memorial as a testament to the inspirational greatness available to all Americans, the government could afford to spend money on the construction of a giant stone sculpture. A memorial perceived as dedicated to a very select group of people, like the farmers of the West, would likely not have received federal support. The Great Depression could not even retard the flow of federal funds to the production of Rushmore, as Norbeck again convinced the president of the nation “of the need for legislation to authorize in additional appropriation of \$200,000 for the completion of this project.”⁷² On a national level, the government understood the value of the memorial and its role as a powerful and inspirational symbol of the greatness of America. Importantly though, the greatness supported by the government and celebrated by the public did not completely mesh with the greatness of the planners of the memorial.

Still, even Borglum used language that seemed to indicate a symbolism of meaning of Mt. Rushmore that celebrates all of the United States; however, these statements must be understood in the context of the character of the man who vigorously supported the agrarian white male of the West as the ideal great man. Gutzon Borglum used the term “Shrine of Democracy” in his correspondence about the memorial and even stated that “[t]he purpose of the memorial is to communicate the founding, expansion, preservation, and unification of the United States.”⁷³⁷⁴ On the surface, it may seem that Borglum did not intend at all for the memorial to portray the greatness of only a specific group of people. However, trying to understand these quotes out of the context of the character and ideology of the man does not

⁷² Franklin Delano Roosevelt, qtd. in Fite, 199.

⁷³ Borglum qtd. in, “President Roosevelt’s Remarks at the Unveiling of the Head of Thomas Jefferson,” August 30, 1936, accessed at <http://www.nps.gov/moru/historyculture/upload/PRESIDENT%20ROOSEVELT.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Borglum qtd. in, “American History, Alive in Stone...,” *National Park Service*, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.nps.gov/moru/index.htm>.

reveal the reality of the meaning of the words. As Jesse Larner points out in his exploration of the hidden meaning of Rushmore, “without any historical grounding the truth is not served.”⁷⁵ In this case, the truth is that Borglum, and the other planners of the memorial, did believe in democracy and the greatness of America. However, they believed that democracy and the greatness of America existed because of and for a specific group of Americans and not all Americans. Once again, they had a narrow definition of greatness, but the contemporary presentation of the memorial follows in the footsteps of the public before them in ignoring this initial context of the construction of Rushmore.

Today, the National Park Service manages the memorial and celebrates Mt. Rushmore as a symbol of the greatness of America that respects and empowers all citizens of the world. The official government website of Mt. Rushmore identifies the memorial as “a symbol of freedom and hope for people from all cultures and backgrounds.”⁷⁶ In the 21st century the meaning of Mt. Rushmore has expanded even beyond the initial broadened view of the mountain as symbol of the liberal American democracy. The memorial now associates the greatness of America with all people, no matter their origin. The memorial does not celebrate just Western male agrarian Americans, or just Americans, but all people from every place and society on earth. The memorial has been transformed to symbolize not the exclusivity of American greatness, but the inclusivity of American greatness for the entire world. The character and intent of the planners has died.

A Tomb for Dead Ideas

Mt. Rushmore has always been about American greatness, but the definition of greatness today does not match the definition of greatness of the planners of the memorial. Exploring the

⁷⁵ Larner, 362.

⁷⁶ “American History, Alive in Stone...”

lives and opinions of Doane Robinson, Peter Norbeck, and Gutzon Borglum evinces that the original notion of the memorial focused on a very specific definition of greatness that only included a select sector of American society. A character study of each of these men demonstrates they identified the fulfillment of greatness in the white male American farmer of the West. These men certainly believed that other members of society could contribute to the progress of the nation, but this special group of individuals represented the most complete form of progressed civilization. With these notions in mind, the planners selected four great men of American history as the most ideal representations of the American greatness of the Western frontier white male farmer. However, the public quickly twisted the ideals of greatness espoused by the three most influential men in the Rushmore project, and began shaping a greatness of America that included all members of the democracy, not just a supposedly superior subset. This initial skewing of the definition of greatness did not cease as now the nation officially identifies the greatness of America represented in the memorial as an inclusion of all citizens of the world.

When Albert Burnely Bibb introduced the notion of the National Church and Shrine he probably did not consider that his exegesis of the history of civil religious architecture related to the development of a national memorial in South Dakota. However, it seems that today Mt. Rushmore exists as a “great tomb for the noble dead” ideas of specific greatness championed by the three planners of the memorial.⁷⁷ When someone views a tomb or a tombstone, the epitaph that he or she see fails to give an accurate depiction of the life of the individual it represents. Instead, it can only give a general sense of the reality of the life of this individual, and the visitor to the tomb may leave the site deeply moved, but not completely understanding of the life that

⁷⁷ Bibb, 18.

the tombstone seeks to represent. Only those who truly knew the individual understand the tombstone and how its texts and pictures encapsulate the essence of the individual.

Mt. Rushmore is a tomb. Housed in the faces of the memorial is an idea of greatness that died with the no longer scrutinized histories of Doane Robinson, legislations of Peter Norbeck, and sculptures of Gutzon Borglum. The faces of Rushmore are now an epitaph for the ideas of specific American greatness that thrived in three American men and many of their peers ninety years ago. The visitors to this tomb can only understand the general representations of American greatness that lived long ago. Only those with a knowledge of these ideas can see how Rushmore represents the reality of a specific definition of American greatness. Now the question is, should Americans dig up the tomb of Rushmore to study these dead ideas of American greatness that gave rise to the gravesite or can we simply celebrate the general greatness depicted in its white granite epitaph? The answer to this question can certainly be debated, but I do believe that we will be haunted by these dead ideas no matter which choice we make.

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