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The lasting allure of the meetinghouse



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<http://www.eagletribune.com/lifestyle/x713541807/The-lasting-allure-of-the-meetinghouse>

By Lisa Fluet
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In the title to his 1955 poem "Church Going," Philip Larkin presents an intriguing pun that might usefully be brought to bear upon Atkinson photographer Paul Wainwright's amazing collection of New England meetinghouse photographs.

That is, the speaker of Larkin's poem is "church-going," in that he is visiting an English church while on a bicycling trip; however, he makes a point of "going" to this church when "there's nothing going on" — just as Wainwright does in the images included in "A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England," which capture empty meetinghouse exteriors, particular details of their interiors like rowed and box pews, and smaller elements of detail carved into pulpits, gates, doors, windows, keys and keyholes.

Larkin's speaker, moreover, ponders what will happen to church structures when they are no longer a "going" concern, since as spaces for community gathering, worship, and public meetings, churches are "going" in the sense of "departing." They are not "gone" yet, but they are on their way out, Larkin's speaker suggests, and stopping in as a visitor involves trying to articulate a perspective on what one sees, before such spaces revert to "Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,/ A shape less recognizable each week,/ A purpose more obscure."

When Larkin's speaker goes to empty churches, his visits "always end much at a loss like this,/ Wondering what to look for..." Wainwright's photographs present one strategy for coping with that dilemma over what to look for when one is meetinghouse-going. His photographs do not look for so much as look at, as carefully as one can, combining camera, negative and print work, as he describes in his preface, in a way "harnessed to produce the desired image."

With his photographs of 18th-century meetinghouse interiors, Wainwright avoids artificial lighting and relies entirely upon the natural light that would have been the congregation's main source of illumination; he uses a "traditional wooden field camera, sheet film, chemicals and photographic paper" that compel him to "slow down and think" when assembling the final image. His hands-on approach to working with older photographic media rather fittingly echoes the hands-on craftsmanship of the builders discussed in Peter Benes' accompanying historical essay on meetinghouse architecture in New England.

One can only really describe these images in words inadequately, as they're meant to be looked at; a better introduction to them could be gleaned from visiting one of the websites devoted to them, at colonialmeetinghouses.com, and aspaceforfaith.com. That would be the first step, if you are like Larkin's speaker, and like me — that is, someone for whom the prospect of church- or meetinghouse-going means that you might initially feel "bored" and "uninformed" about what you are looking at. It is hard to stay bored when looking at these photographs, and they inform, in their choices and detail, in ways that actually visiting these same spaces in person might not accomplish.

The serious attentiveness of Wainwright's work in this collection recalls, finally, what Larkin's speaker concludes about his visited church: "A serious house on serious earth it is,/ In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,/ Are recognized, and robed as destinies."

The collection opens with a foreword by Brent Glass, the director of the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, who likens the space of the colonial meetinghouse to the contemporary, hastily-contrived meeting space of Sept. 11, 2001's United 93 flight — in which a diverse group of people discussed, took a vote, and decided on a course of anti-terrorist action that would directly affect their community aboard the plane, as well as the community of anonymous

strangers initially targeted by the flight. As a "meetinghouse in the sky," as Glass suggests, United 93 remains a vital testimony to the tenacity of the public meeting's hold upon our understanding of effective action for the public good; it also attests to the meetinghouse as a space in which our individual choices and "compulsions" take on the robe of a collective destiny.

As these photographs suggest, such spaces will never be entirely "gone," so long as "someone will forever be surprising/ A hunger in himself to be more serious,/ And gravitating with it to this ground."

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BOOK REVIEW

"A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England"

By Paul Wainwright, photographer, with accompanying essay by Peter Benes, 128 pages, \$35

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