

Scissors and Paste Massacre

RICHARD W. SADLER

Massacre at Mountain Meadows. By William Wise. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976. 317pp., \$11.95.

The Mountain Meadow Massacre was one of the most tragic criminal events in the history of the United States, and William Wise's book concerning the massacre is similarly tragic in its lack of scholarship and objectivity. In reviewing this book in the *New York Times*, Stanley Hirshson called it one of the half dozen boldest and most important books ever written on the Mormons. This is definitely not the case. Like Hirshson's *Lion of the Lord*, Wise's book is based on outdated secondary sources, and it betrays a remarkable lack of knowledge of Utah and Mormon history, much of which has been researched in the last thirty years.

Wise begins by describing Mormonism as springing up in the midst of religious turmoil, marked by violence, lawlessness, and sexual licentiousness encouraged by the official organization of the Danites in Missouri and their actions in Illinois. Wise asserts that the Mormon belief in a rapidly approaching Millennium increased thievery, and as plural marriage was introduced, "they became full-time lawbreakers, who were destined to be further corrupted by more than ten years of concealment, lying and deceit." The practice of polygamy brought ridicule to the Saints, which in turn brought about "an intensified sense of hostility mingled with an ill-concealed desire for revenge." Wise further notes that when the law of God and the law of the land seemed in conflict, Mormons were obligated to observe the law of God.

As the reins of the church transferred

from Joseph Smith to Brigham Young, Wise made some comparisons,

Each suffered from excessive vanity and considerably overestimated his own talents as well as the honors and rewards those talents could justly claim from an all-too-frequently indifferent world. Each was a supreme egotist, steeped in his own self-importance, who was convinced of his right not only to lead a vast army of followers but ultimately to rule supreme over all mankind. To further his own ends, always in the exalted name of religion, each was capable of organizing a great variety of covert misdeeds and open felonies. The attempted assassination of ex-Governor Boggs, undoubtedly commissioned by the late Prophet, already lay several years in the past. What lay ahead were other crimes that would be planned and commissioned by a more-calculating leader, a man utterly without remorse or conscience, who had come to believe, during his service to the Church, that any means were justified in strengthening or defending the true faith, and that to gain revenge from the Gentiles was a grave duty, placed on every Saint by command of the Lord.

As the Mormons moved into the Great Basin, Wise writes that lawlessness increased. Mormons dressed and disguised as Indians massacred immigrants and apostates, and troublesome gentiles were disposed of by "Mountain Justice." The Danites operated openly, rule by the priesthood was all-encompassing and swift punishment was meted out to the rebellious, including death, castration

and ostracism. A major thesis of the volume is that Brigham Young was a virtual dictator with intimate knowledge of everything that happened in the territory. Wise thus sets the stage for the massacre:

And so the ninth year of Brigham Young's unrestrained rule began, bringing with it a brief and fearful epoch that reached its savage climax in a single extraordinary crime, a crime spawned by almost three decades of lawlessness, by a thirst for vengeance deliberately fostered as a matter of calculated policy and by the barbarous conviction—still so familiar in our own century—that the members of other societies and faiths were morally inferior beings and therefore had no right to justice, to freedom or even to life itself.

Into the Utah territory of 1857, threatened by an invasion of U.S. troops, came such immigrant parties as the Fancher Party from Arkansas. Wise notes this party numbered nearly 150 men, women and children and that they were wealthy. The central theme of the volume unfolds as Wise suggests that Brigham Young coveted this wealth so much that he determined to have the Fanchers done away with as they approached Mountain Meadows. Young was assisted in this scheme by George A. Smith and Charles C. Rich. Rich therefore persuaded most of the Fancher Party that the southern route was the safest, according to Wise, and the wagon train turned south, and Smith was sent to the southern settlements to make all of the necessary arrangements for the massacre.

According to Wise it was Young who initiated reports of lawlessness among the Fancher Party, and this was done to cover up the premeditated massacre. A variety of other cover-up attempts were made by Young, including spreading the rumor that some of the party were Missouri Wildcats who had participated in the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Wise avows that events moved ahead according to plan and the immigrants were massacred early in September of 1857. Only young children were spared.

With the completion of the massacre, a cover-up was even more necessary. According to Wise, John D. Lee, on his first visit to Brigham Young following

the massacre realized that Young was shifting the entire burden of the guilt to him. The cover-up culminated with Lee's execution in 1877. During this period, Wise notes, it was only through the assistance of Colonel Thomas L. Kane that Young was able to stay in a position of political power. Wise tars Kane with much the same brush that he uses on Young.

The cover-up has continued into the present, Wise writes, and warns the reader that Juanita Brooks' works should be treated with extreme caution, because she has attempted "to defend the Church's reputation at any cost." Bits and pieces of many works, including Brooks, are paraphrased by Wise, but rarely cited. The book reminds one of scissors-and-paste, first draft term papers with large quantities of Brodie, Linn, Werner, the Stenhouses and Brooks, glued together by liberal amounts of Kelly and Birney's *Holy Murder*, Hickman's *Brigham's Destroying Angel* and Lee's *Mormonism Unveiled*.

Wise is not only sloppy but he is also sensational in his approach to serious historical questions. He continually makes errors of both fact and interpretation. Many telling statements are made without any evidence either cited or alluded to. The volume cannot even be characterized as bad history. It is rather a cross between an ill-contrived romantic novel and a nineteenth-century melodrama.

The subject deserves better. There are unanswered historical questions with many pieces of the historical puzzle in the form of primary sources still missing. Serious scholars, both Mormon and non-Mormon, should continue the investigation into the many contradictory events surrounding the massacre, both within and without the territory. Juanita Brooks has set the example. Other scholars should follow. Wise has only muddied the waters.