Loose Ends that Defy Explanation

The Unsolicited Chronicler: An Account of the Gunnison Massacre. Its Causes and Consequences. By Robert Kent Fielding (Brookline, MA: Paradigm Publications, 1993).

Reviewed by Vivian Linford Talbot, professor of history, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah; and Fred R. Gowans, professor of history, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

AFTER FOURTEEN YEARS OF "PAINStaking historical detective work on the Gunnison Massacre" (see dust jacket), Robert Kent Fielding has concluded that the history of the Mormons between 1847 and 1859 has not been dealt with in a credible, scholarly manner and has decided to "correct such neglect and distortion" (iii). The result of his labors is a prodigiously researched work that offers little new concerning this time period and does not deliver the promised "proof" of Mormon complicity in the Gunnison Massacre and other dark deeds for which church leaders have been blamed.

In assessing the events which occurred Fielding asserts that "even now it may be impossible to deal with these issues objectively" (iv). Indeed he seems to make no attempt at objectivity himself, seeing in every omission in conduct and written record an ulterior motive, and seeing the stimulus behind every action the belief of the LDS church in "blood atonement." Finally, in addition to the paucity of new pertinent material and objectivity, Fielding's work often suffers from a lack of coherence as he introduces too much extraneous material which serves only to confuse readers and adds unnecessary length to the work.

In spite of its title, examination of the Gunnison incident occupies relatively little space in Fielding's book. However, his interpretation of the massacre and its contingent events provides numerous examples of his flawed logic. Captain John Williams Gunnison of the United States Army Topographical Engineers was charged with locating one of the contemplated railroad routes (this one between the 38th and 39th parallels) which would tie the nation together. When Gunnison was near the end of his assignment he decided to split his survey party in two to complete the work before winter. While camped along the Sevier River several miles northwest of Fillmore, Utah, Pahvant Indians attacked and killed the captain and seven of his party while four members of the group escaped.

Fielding sees the massacre as a pivotal event in relations between the LDS church and the U.S. government since the ultimate investigation of the massacre brought federal officials to the Great Basin and this led to the tensions leading to the Mountain Meadows Massacre and the "Utah War." However, in Fielding's own words, it was the "Runaway Judges" episode "which made Brigham Young infamous in congressional and administrative circles in Washington" (54), a controversy predating Gun-

nison's trip to the West. Indeed, there were federal officials in the territory beginning in 1851. Although a tragic incident, Fielding does not convince us that Gunnison's death was a turning point in relations between Mormons and the U.S. government.

In claiming Mormon complicity in Gunnison's death Fielding does not adequately address the subject of motive, usually important when accusing individuals of murder. The facts indicate that Mormons had more to gain by keeping the captain alive. While residing in the East, and when in the company of those with influence, Gunnison often defended the Latter-day Saints' right to practice their religion and praised their accomplishments in settling the Salt Lake Valley. He was especially vocal in their defense following the "Runaway Judges" incident. In a letter to Albert Carrington, Gunnison wrote that he had formed a friendship with the editor of the *Free Press* of Detroit, the leading Democratic organ in the area, who wanted Gunnison to arrange an exchange of publications with Willard Richards, editor of the *Deseret News* (see Brigham D. Madsen, "John W. Gunnison's Letters to His Mormon Friend, Albert Carrington," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 59 [Summer 1991]: 278). Gunnison also met with Franklin Pierce, an old acquaintance, and gave the president some background concerning the Mormons and expressed his admiration for them (ibid., 281). Finally, he wrote to Brigham Young that he had suggested the railroad should run north of Utah Lake so that Mormon settlements would benefit from the resulting increase in commerce (see David Henry Miller, "The Impact of the Gunnison Massacre on Mormon-Federal Relations," M.A. thesis, University of Utah, 1968, 17). One wonders how anyone as pragmatic as Brigham Young would wish harm to come to such an individual as Gunnison.

Fielding is correct in stating that Gunnison's book was often critical and uncomplimentary of the Mormons. However, compared with other castigations against the church from eastern presses Gunnison's work was mild in its reproach and reasonably objective and fair in its assessments. Fielding finds ominous meaning in the words of Edward R. Hunter when at the cornerstone laying of the Salt Lake temple the bishop "defiantly" challenged those who would persecute Mormons to follow the advice offered by Gunnison, who Hunter referred to as "our much esteemed, though distant, learned, very polite and unsolicited chronicler . . . 'of letting us alone severely'" (22). Somehow this reference to the captain does not sound as threatening to us as Fielding finds it.

Fielding presents much circumstantial evidence to prove Mormon leaders were behind Gunnison's death. However, the data he considers damaging can be used just as effectively to prove the innocence of the Mormons. Many times Fielding is inconsistent and contradictory as he builds his case. For instance, he notes that it was a "remarkable fact" that none of the victims of the massacre had been scalped (160). Yet he later quotes the testimony of Judge Drummond that "by order and direction of the Mormons the Indians sprang out of the ambush where they lay disguised during the night before the firing, which occurred about sunrise in the morning, and went across the river to *scalp* [emphasis added] and otherwise maltreat the men in their agonies of death" (367). Fielding also introduces "evidence" that Mormons disguised as Indians massacred the survey group and then at other times gives testimony

"proving" Mormons conspired with local Indians in getting them to attack Gunnison's group. He never says which of the two he thinks actually happened.

Fielding discounts the argument that since one of the men killed was an active Mormon (William Potter, a guide for Gunnison), members of the church could not be responsible for the massacre. He asserts that Potter probably signaled the Indians the day before the attack when he went duck hunting and that he was killed by mistake. But Potter was not alone when he went hunting. Two of the privates from the party's military escort were with him. In addition, it was only two days before the massacre that the decision was made to split the group in two, thus reducing the size of Gunnison's party, so no Mormon leader in Fillmore or elsewhere would have been aware of this decision and known of Gunnison's new vulnerability to attack.

Fielding discusses at length the question of from whom Gunnison received information and advice in Fillmore concerning the degree of danger he could anticipate from Indians, inferring that the captain had been deliberately misled. He takes issue with the reminiscence of Anson Call, written many years after the fact, that Call himself had discussed the situation with Gunnison in Fillmore when in fact there is uncertainty that Call was even in Fillmore at the time. But a contemporary source, the journal left by Frederick Kreutzfeldt, the botanist in Gunnison's party who was killed with Gunnison, reported that while in Fillmore "the Captain and his men were invited to dinner 'by the President of the place,'" who according to Fielding was Anson Call (154n4).

Fielding argues that it was Dimick Huntington, Brigham Young's "special Indian agent," who apprised Gunnison of the local situation and assigns significance to the fact that none of the reports following the massacre mention Huntington's presence in the Fillmore area prior to the massacre. However, Fielding does not offer substantial proof that Huntington really was there—not that it matters. The point is that whether it was Call or Huntington, Gunnison learned that "Indian relations were very tense at the moment," but that local Pahvants were appeased even though one of their number was killed the previous month by a member of an immigrant train on its way to California (146, 148).

Fielding gives special emphasis to what he believes Gunnison was *not* told and this accounts for the captain's "unusual feeling of security" about local Indians (151). This begs the question how we can know what Gunnison was *not* told. Can one assume that Gunnison and others of his party recorded everything they learned and wrote down all such conversations verbatim?

Records indicate that Gunnison was anxious to finish his survey before winter and perhaps he chose to emphasize the positive in the reports he was given. As Fielding mentions, the general instruction to Mormon settlers during this Indian unrest was never to travel with less than a dozen men, and Gunnison could easily have complied with this warning even if he split his party in two. Although members of Gunnison's party had misgivings, their captain had a long and distinguished career in conducting surveys in various hostile and isolated locations and in his haste chose to ignore these misgivings.

Fielding points to several instances when the personal journal of Lieutenant Beckwith, Gunnison's second in command, does not square with his official report concerning events before and fol-

lowing the massacre, inferring that Beckwith withheld damaging information that could be used in evidence against the Mormon hierarchy. But there does not seem to be anything particularly significant in these variations or omissions, and again there would have been no reason for Beckwith to protect the Mormons. In fact, according to Fielding, neither Beckwith nor Captain Morris, who was in command of the expedition's armed guard, were treated particularly well by Brigham Young once they arrived in Salt Lake City, supposedly because Young did not feel these men tried hard enough to recover the remains of their fallen comrades. If Beckwith was trying to protect anyone, there is more reason to believe it was his former captain's reputation, because it was Gunnison's decision to divide the group that put them in greater jeopardy.

As far as the rest of Fielding's book is concerned, aside from the massacre itself, the reader is subjected to a litany of vituperative quotations from sermons by LDS officials against contemporary U.S. leaders, certain federal officials assigned to the territory, and against gentiles in general. Undoubtedly Fielding uses these quotes to illustrate the militant, threatening, and unpatriotic stance of the Latter-day Saint hierarchy. A few of these quotes would have sufficed. However, much of what was said by Brigham Young and others could be interpreted as zealous rhetoric intended to excite the Saints to remain united, repentant, vigilant, and continually on the road to eternal salvation, a method not unlike the "fire and brimstone" approach used by Protestant clergy in times past.

Fielding also calls attention to many instances illustrating the downside of Mormon polygamy although this was extraneous to his focus. He is undoubtedly right in observing that polygamy, more than anything else, was what outraged the "Christian world" against the Mormons. He fails to point out, however, that President Buchanan's decision to send troops to Utah territory in 1857 was basically a ploy to divert attention from the stresses caused by the slavery controversy rather than to put down that other of the "twin relics of barbarism"—polygamy (Fielding quotes Stephen A. Douglas here; see p. 373).

Fielding seems to give more credence to the opinions and testimony of those opposed to Mormonism, whose motives proved to be suspect, than to church leaders. These include individuals such as Judge Drummond, Mary Ettie V. Smith (a disaffected Mormon who Fielding acknowledges was prone to "clearly sensational" charges and whose stories were "among the more colorful"), and Sylvester Mowry, a lieutenant in Colonel Steptoe's company who admitted that he had every intention of seducing Mary Ann Young, the polygamous wife of Brigham Young's son who was then absent on a mission.

In portions of the book Fielding displays the ability of a fine writer. One simile he used is especially striking: "Seen from the hillside near Emigration Canyon, the canvas-topped wagons were as the white capped wavelets of a tumbling brook washing into the city to bob and dance in the street as might water, filling furrows in a cultivated field, bringing nourishment to growing crops" (74). Also the scenes where both Gunnison and Beckwith camp the night before the massacre are vividly told; it is obvious Fielding has done field work in his research.

Paradigm Publications has put together an attractive book which includes interesting contemporary maps.

It would have been helpful to have included a map showing other sites in close proximity to the massacre, such as Beckwith's camp in relation to the area Fielding refers to as "the third leg of a triangle, begun at Cedar Springs three days before" (160). The full-paged sketches of more than thirty LDS and national leaders seem excessive and serve only to add to the expense of the publication. Also, the book has a number of minor editing errors.

In conclusion, it would be well for all authors who write about tragic events in history to understand that there are always loose ends that seem to defy explanation. The innocent do not anticipate having to explain their actions in relation to an event such as the Gunnison Massacre. Unlike the guilty, they are not thinking in terms of having to "cover" themselves later on.

The Burden of Proof

Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-sex Orientation. Edited by Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991).

AMCAP Journal, Volume 19 (Salt Lake City: Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists, 1993).

Reviewed by Gary M. Watts, M.D., diagnostic radiologist and head of Nuclear Medicine, Utah Valley Regional Medical Center, Provo, Utah.

HAVING SOLD OUT ITS TWO CLOTH printings, *Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-sex Orientation* is now available in paperback. First published in 1991 by Signature Books and edited by Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes, it is a landmark book dealing with homosexuality in our Mormon culture. It is a book that should be read by all bishops, stake presidents, regional representatives, and general authorities, as well as anyone who is struggling with homosexuality on a personal or family level.

The book is divided into four major sections including (1) a foreword by Lowell Bennion and an editors' introduction, (2) personal perspectives of gays, lesbians, spouses, and family members, (3) professional and Christian perspectives, and (4) an annotated bibliography, appendices, and published statements of professional and religious organizations regarding homosexuality.

The editors' introduction provides an excellent overview of the problems faced by individuals and their families dealing with homosexuality in the Mormon community and society at large. The editors' perspectives are identified up front and provide some understanding regarding their selection criteria. They basically agree that (1) homosexuality touches far more lives, directly and indirectly, than is generally recognized, (2) that condemnation of homosexuality by church and society leaves most Mormons ill-prepared, emotionally and intellectually, to confront this fact of life, (3) that Latter-day Saints who encounter this issue face many practical problems, and (4) that much of the suffering by gays and lesbi-