

A Bloody and Diabolical Deed

Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows, by Will Bagley (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002). 382 pp.

Reviewed by M. Guy Bishop, Woods Cross, Utah.

Will Bagley stands, metaphorically, on the shoulders of Juanita Brooks, peering into southwestern Utah's landscape to witness a ghastly sight: the murder of over one hundred men, women, and children at the hands of Mormon frontiersmen. Searching for an explanation of what could have possessed the Mormons to attack an emigrant train is an important part of Bagley's revisionist history of the incident. Joseph Fielding Smith, who served as LDS church historian and, briefly, as church president, denounced the butchery of the emigrants in his *Essentials in Church History* (1922) as a "bloody and diabolical deed."¹

Bagley puts his skills as a researcher to the task of uncovering the causes of this massacre. In *Blood of the Prophets* he skillfully incorporates overlooked examples of mid-nineteenth-century Mormon "militancy" and extant recollections by children

who survived the massacre into a compelling explanation of what happened at Mountain Meadows. The key figure in this tragedy was John D. Lee, whom Bagley quotes as saying, "It helps a man a great deal in a fight to know that God is on his side" (p. 11). At Mountain Meadows many of the perpetrators believed God to be on their side. Drawing upon the work of Eric Hoffer on "true believers" (p. 378), Bagley renders a plausible interpretation of the event. The true believer will do whatever it takes to forward his cause. John D. Lee and his Mormon cohorts at Mountain Meadows were prototypes of the true believer.

Bagley sets the stage for this tale of intrigue and deception by beginning with LDS apostle Parley P. Pratt's murder in May 1857 at the hands of Hector McLean in Arkansas. Eleanor McLean, Hector's estranged wife, was a recent convert to Mormonism and became a plural wife of Pratt's. Word of Pratt's assassination quickly spread throughout the Mormon settlements, shocking the Saints. Those who would die at Mountain Meadows were in an emigrant train from Arkansas.

Then there was the Mormon "Reformation" movement. Believing that the Latter-day Saints had "lost their commitment to righteousness," Brigham

1. *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1922), 511. Quoted in Bagley, xiii.

Young had called for a reformation in 1856 (p. 49). Jedediah Grant, second counselor in the church's presiding First Presidency, became the spokesman for the Reformation. He spread the militant gospel of the Reformation across Utah Territory. As Bagley writes, "The desperate poverty and great faith of the Mormon people, coupled with Young's rousing exhortations, created an orgy of religious extremism" (p. 49). By the time the fated emigrant party arrived at southern Utah's Cedar City in September 1857, the "fires of the Reformation" were "burning brightly" (p. 116).

Quoting earlier Mountain Meadows historian Brooks, Bagley sees "blood atonement"—the paying for one's sins through the shedding of the sinner's own blood—as a "literal and terrible reality" in Brigham Young's world (p. 51). In order to fathom the horrors committed at Mountain Meadows, readers are asked to understand that blood atonement was a reality in the worldview held by the perpetrators. Into such an environment traveled the unlucky Arkansans. Bagley challenges long held myths about the massacre: What role did the Paiute Indians play? Who was really responsible for the tragedy? Discovering what it was that caused the massacre is the author's mission. For example, he counters the long-standing historical account blaming the Paiutes for much of the atrocious butchery. Instead, Bagley places the blame squarely upon the angry Mormons. As the siege wore on and the Arkansans killed some of the Paiutes, others began to doubt the Mormons' "magic" and left the scene prior to the carnage (p. 125).

Bagley seats responsibility for the Mountain Meadows massacre squarely with John D. Lee and the local religious leaders at Cedar City, especially William H. Dame and John S. Higbee.

These men "organized a party of fifty or sixty Mormons to attack the train" (p. 127). Further, the author addresses the attempt to cover up the murders. Due to the depth of his research, this is likely the most telling part of his narrative.

Bagley points primarily to the religious leaders at Cedar City. This claim is strengthened by the fact that on 31 July 1859, Apostle George A. Smith "disorganized" the Cedar City, Utah, stake, "releasing Bishop Phillip K. Klingensmith; stake president, Isaac C. Haight; and counselor, John S. Higbee from their religious callings" (p. 242). This severe action speaks loudly as an indication of whom the church viewed as guilty of the crime. The murderers at Mountain Meadows were now seen as outlaws, yet they managed to retain their status within the community. John Higbee, for example, later served four years as mayor of Cedar City.

Brigham Young discussed the massacre with Apostles Amasa Lyman and George A. Smith "in a series of meetings" held at Salt Lake City in August 1859. Young "did nothing to further the prosecution of the crime" (p. 243). Instead, he made a concerted effort to make the massacre disappear. John D. Lee recorded a private conversation in which Brigham Young, visiting southern Utah in 1861, allegedly told him, "the company that was used up at the Mountain Meadows" was comprised of the fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and relatives of those who had murdered the prophets, and they "merited their fate" (p. 247). But is this evidence proof of Young's culpability?

Public attention focusing on Mountain Meadows in the years following the massacre "hounded the LDS church, from its general authorities to its rank-and-file missionaries"

(p. 269). Apostle Erastus Snow, the church's senior official in southern Utah in 1870, reported that the massacre had created "a new crisis," but the cause of this new crisis was not delineated (p. 271). Snow family tradition reports that when the apostle shared the news with Brigham Young, Young said, "Oh God! Now it will start again" (p. 271).

Realizing that he could no longer defend Lee, Young began to cut his ties with him. In February 1870, President Young met privately with Lee at Beaver, Utah, and "urged him to sell his Utah holdings and move south" (pp. 271-72). This John D. Lee refused to do. On 8 October 1870, John D. Lee, Isaac Haight, and George Wood were excommunicated for the murders. Lee was perplexed by this church action. In December 1870, he traveled to St. George and sought out Young to ask why now, thirteen years after the massacre, "all of a sudden [he] Must be cut off from this church [sic]. If it was wrong now, it certainly was wrong then" (p. 273).

Decades later, Brigham Young's successor as President of the LDS church, Heber J. Grant "worked hard to obliterate the memory of John D.

Lee." Speaking privately to a group of Lee's descendants in about 1927, Grant frankly acknowledged that if he had been present at the time, "I would have been in it too, or I hope I would." He further advised, "This affair should never be mentioned" (p. 343). Thus continued a long institutional effort to rub out John D. Lee and the infamous massacre from the LDS collective memory. Bagley observes that over the years, Mormons "fought and won the battle to define the history of the event and vindicate Brigham Young of any connection with the crime" (p. 348).

Bagley demonstrates that Young seemed to approve of attacking the Arkansans. His role, however, seems to have been more that of having a passing interest than of being a leader in the murder plot. Bagley is convincing regarding the dastardly acts committed by the southern Utahans, less so about Brigham Young's complicity. Granted, Brigham Young cast a large shadow over the Utah Territory and the final word on his involvement might never be fully known. With *Blood of the Prophets*, Will Bagley has given us the most complete look thus far at the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

The Local Politics of Vice and Virtue

Prostitution, Polygamy and Power: Salt Lake City, 1847-1918, by Jeffrey Nichols (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 247 pp.

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One of the most intriguing ironies of life in Salt Lake City during the nineteenth century was the clash of the Mormons who were morally outraged to see the advent of prostitution in their valley and the gentile residents who considered the practice of polygamy equally reprehensible. The struggle between these two groups to