

A Missive on Mountain Meadows

Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard. *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 430 pp. Notes, maps, illustrations, appendices, index. Hardback: \$29.95; ISBN: 0-195-160-347

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In some ways, this volume is just the latest in a long line of books written on the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857. Historians, journalists, and others have told this story and furnished analyses from a variety of angles and perspectives, suggesting this devastating tragedy's multiplicity of explanations and implications. Nonetheless, this book is *sui generis*, in that it was supported by the LDS Church with astonishing commitments of financial and human resources. All three authors are practicing Latter-day Saints, and are employed by or are retired from the LDS Church and the LDS Church History Department (xv; back jacket flap). The participation of Richard Turley, now assistant Church historian, signals an unprecedented degree of official cooperation.

According to the many statements and presentations at professional meetings the authors have made over the past few years, as well as the preface to this volume, the Church has supported this project by providing what they call "full and open disclosure." Because "thoroughness and candor" were governing priorities, the Church granted the authors unfettered access to all relevant documents in its history library and archives, including the archives of the First Presidency (xi). This access to relevant historical materials, as well as the resources to conduct unusually thorough research, is important not only for the production of this work, but perhaps also as an indication of possible directions for future Mormon scholarship. This volume answers several perennial questions about Mormon historiography: Just how free and open is the Church prepared to be when it comes to granting access to sensitive materials to professional, scholarly historians? How candid will a Church-condoned history of Mormonism's most disturbing historical moments actually be? Have we finally arrived at the point where histories offer more than transparent

apologia for the perpetrators of this unthinkable vicious crime or sweeping, knee-jerk indictments of any and all involved and of Mormonism (and, perhaps, of religion) itself?

The introduction indicates that the researchers found or gained access to some crucial and previously untapped sources: "Among the most significant discoveries in the church's collections were the field notes of assistant church historian Andrew Jenson, who collected several reminiscent accounts of the massacre in 1892. This discovery, in turn, led to the full collection of Jenson materials in the First Presidency's archive" (xi). This access marks a fundamental shift in the historiographical terrain. Ronald Walker and Richard Turley are currently preparing the Jenson papers for publication.¹ Additionally, the authors revisited all of the minutes from the John D. Lee trials, employing an expert in nineteenth-century shorthands to generate new transcripts, which included previously untranscribed material. These records figure prominently in the notes attached to the sections describing the days leading up to the attack on the Fancher party and the massacre itself. Significantly, the authors have affirmed at academic conferences that all these "new" sources will be made public for other historians and scholars to scrutinize.

The authors' reliance on these sources also points to the complicated methodological and analytical problems associated with historical reconstruction of this nature. Observe the following paragraph of narrative:

Stewart and White backtracked toward Cedar City and eventually found their quarry. The two immigrants were on horseback returning to camp and had paused to let their mounts drink from Little Pinto Creek near Leach's Spring. Stewart and White approached the unsuspecting men and struck up a conversation. The Mormons learned that one of the immigrants was William Aden, the other the much-talked-of "Dutchman." Seeing a tin cup attached to Aden's saddle, Stewart asked to borrow it to get himself a drink. When Aden turned to reach for it, Stewart "shot him through the head, killing him instantly." The Dutchman "put spurs to his horse and fled," dodging the bullets fired after him, one of which apparently wounded him. The men at Hamblin's ranch saw him speed past. So did the besieging Indians, who tried unsuccessfully to bring him down before he entered the corral. (159-60)

There is one note at the end of the paragraph. The corre-

sponding endnote mentions the following sources: An entry entitled “Elliott Willden” in the Jenson papers from the First Presidency vault (AJ2); “Lee’s Confession” from an 1877 issue of the *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*; “Lee’s Last Confession” from an issue of the *San Francisco Daily Bulletin Supplement*, also 1877; a second Willden entry in the First Presidency vault portion of the Jenson papers; an “Elliott Willden” entry in Jenson’s papers in the LDS Church Archives (AJ1); the Phillip Klingensmith testimony from the newly reconstructed transcript of Lee’s first trial; and an 1872 interview with John D. Lee by *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter J. H. Beadle. Elsewhere, the authors cite their sources more directly, with citations scattered throughout a narrated paragraph.

However, the citation style raises questions about the nature of the sources themselves. What, for example, is the difference between the two sets of Jenson papers? Turley clarified in an email: “Jenson sometimes expanded from memory on his sometimes cryptic notes in the subsequent transcripts. He also rearranged information to make it more understandable or omitted details that may have seemed unimportant. Thus to give a complete picture, it is sometimes necessary to cite both the notes [AJ1] and the transcripts [AJ2].”² Despite the lack of bibliographic clarity, the insight furnished by the new materials should not be underestimated. In addition to providing the details of the Cedar City plan of attack, the new sources shed light on the later decision of the “tan bark council” between Isaac Haight and William Dame, which authorized the ultimate slaughter and provides significant evidence for Brigham Young’s contemporary ignorance of the massacre. As a research aid, the publishers have created a website that includes errata, a full bibliography (something the book lacks) and the volume’s appendices, which catalogue massacre victims, their property, and the perpetrators {<http://mountainmeadowsmassacre.org>}.

Another notable contribution is the authors’ deployment of key theoretical strands from the sociological literature on group violence to ask new questions about the massacre. Their most important sources are Roy Baumeister, Ervin Staub, and Stanley Tambiah; and they draw additional analytical perspectives from the work of Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram.³ Although the authors’ engagement with this literature is sometimes disappoint-

ingly superficial, the primary focus of their analysis is, understandably, not sociological or anthropological.

The theoretical heuristics suggested by this literature do, however, provide a useful approach to one of the driving questions of their analysis: How did basically good men end up committing such a horrific atrocity? According to this model, three distinct social factors set the stage for atrocities of this kind. (1) Actors allow “the dictates of ‘authorities’ to trump their own moral instincts” (127); (2) They experience the pressure to conform, meaning that they are unwilling to act differently from their peers; and (3) They dehumanize potential (and actual) victims. Interrogating the evidence with this model in mind allows the authors to avoid some of the problems of earlier works, which either apportioned blame among the conspirators and actors without adequately explaining why (Juanita Brooks), or fixed inordinate attention on the role of Brigham Young (Will Bagley), treating Young’s complicity as having the greatest explanatory power for the massacre and, implicitly, relegating the actual murderers and local leaders to the role of mindless automatons, driven only by their obsession for vengeance-taking and their uncritical obedience to Young’s directives. And while this volume does address the question of whether Young was directly complicit, it also frames the question differently, presuming that Young’s orders would not be enough, by themselves, to ensure the bloody outcome and that a deeper, more localized, and immediate context is required to account for Mormon participation in the slaughter.

At times, the application of this theoretical paradigm seems uneven. For example, fairly early in the narrative the authors claim that “for the most part, the men who committed the atrocity at Mountain Meadows were neither fanatics nor sociopaths, but normal and in many respects decent people” (128). At the same time, John D. Lee, who appears to sustain the brunt of the narrative’s causal weight, is portrayed as a fanatic. Lee was a “religious zealot” who viewed the events as “God’s purpose” (144). He viewed himself as a “modern-day Joseph of Egypt,” an interpreter of dreams—a persona that Lee invoked to affirm the Piute shock troops’ resolution for battle (157–58). Further, the authors quote Samuel Knight of Mountain Meadows who had intimate knowledge of the massacre, as recorded by Apostle Abraham H. Can-

non that both Haight and Dame were “fanatics” (213). Did complex social-psychological factors coalesce into the mass killing, or was it the work of a handful of lunatics?

The authors argue that, while Brigham Young must shoulder a fair share of the responsibility for creating the tinderbox conditions within which the violence erupted, there is no hard historical evidence that he, in fact, struck the spark by ordering, either directly or cryptically, the massacre of the Fancher party. Will Bagley, who has most persuasively argued for Young’s ordering the massacre, lays down a case based primarily on two pieces of documentary evidence. First, John D. Lee, the only massacre participant to be convicted (and executed) for his crimes, penned a series of “confessions” which his defense attorney, William Bishop, compiled and edited into a book, *Mormonism Unveiled*, after Lee’s death. Lee pins responsibility on Brigham Young who, he claims, sent George A. Smith to southern Utah in advance of the Fancher party to order their destruction at the hands of Mormon settlers in cooperation with local Paiutes. The second piece of textual evidence Bagley cites is an excerpt from Dimick Huntington’s diary in which he describes a September 1 meeting of Young with Dimick Huntington, Jacob Hamblin, and several Indian leaders from throughout the territory. Young tells the southern Utah Indian leaders that they can have all the cattle belonging to California-bound emigrant parties along the southern road.⁴

The new material in this volume complicates much of Bagley’s argument for Young’s culpability.⁵ For example, Walker, Turley, and Leonard argue that Bishop posthumously expanded *Mormonism Unveiled* to implicate Young, a credible assertion considering the attorney’s pecuniary interest in the volume and Lee’s consistent claims to the contrary up to the end of his life. Still, as this volume demonstrates, the lingering question of Young’s involvement is not fully resolved by his September 10 letter to Cedar City leaders: “In regard to emigration trains passing through our settlements we must not interfere with them until they are first notified to keep away” (184). This sentence absolves Young only of the presupposition that he knew nothing of the Mormon involvement in the first Fancher attack. Otherwise, it is simply a tactical instruction presenting no moral or strategic prohibition on violence against the emigrants and even providing for its deployment after

“notification.” The evidence presented by the authors, however, most of which is previously unpublished, indicates that Young was unaware of Mormon involvement with the immigrants.

In examining the role of Young and other prominent LDS leaders, the authors sparsely treat the evidence related to the “blood atonement” rhetoric of the Mormon Reformation (24–26). The subject is broached in only a single paragraph, with no effort to contextualize or clarify the ramifications of the sermonizing. This lacuna is perhaps shaded by the authors’ quotation of Heber C. Kimball’s words at the July 24 canyon celebration where he defied and humorously mocked the U.S. Army but they omit his words immediately preceding the quotation, cursing the U.S. president and his staff in the name of Jesus and by the Mormon priesthood (44). The authors’ failure to deal productively with this body of evidence is a missed opportunity. Bagley and others seem to correctly assess the overall significance of this teaching but misjudge the way it actually figured into the social context for the massacre. Researchers, amateur filmmakers, and historians encounter the sermons in question and envision Mormons wildly eager to enact blood-letting vengeance on anyone remotely suspected of having been involved with Mormon persecutions or the murders of other prophets (e.g., Joseph and Hyrum Smith and Parley P. Pratt). However blood atonement was more about Mormon apostates than Mormon enemies. It was a rhetorical threat that loomed over those who would disregard the injunctions of Mormon priesthood and the imperatives of Mormon colonizing, a theological dressing-up of religious authority on the frontier, buttressed and enforced by violence—particularly during the Reformation of 1856–57. This radical and disturbing doctrine—preached up and down the Utah Territory by Young and other key Mormon leaders—contributed to the massacre, not by inculcating a murderous obsession for vengeance against imagined enemies in the Fancher party, but by ensuring an unwillingness on the part of the perpetrators to disobey their leaders.

The centrality of intensified authoritarianism in war-ready Utah territory is difficult to overstate. The book provides an illuminating example from the Walker War of 1853–54. The strategy that Young had implemented to put the Mormon kingdom on a war footing dictated that cattle be sent to Salt Lake for safekeep-

ing. A group of Mormon settlers in Cedar City refused to send their livestock north and brandished guns against their own militia. Local military leaders threatened to execute them for sedition in “a time of war” (63). Significantly, the men who carried out the attack at Mountain Meadows, in addition to being Mormons, were members of the militia; and the conspiring architects of the massacre, in addition to being their ecclesiastical leaders, were also their military commanders.

Significantly, the new sources make clear that, at precisely the time when Brigham Young was ostensibly sealing the fate of the Fancher party (to paraphrase Bagley) by telling Indian leaders they could have the emigrants’ cattle, Haight and Lee were already conspiring with Paiute leaders in and around Cedar City to attack the Fancher party and promising to share the spoils with them. Of course, the fact that no evidence has been discovered directly implicating Young in the conspiracy does not in itself constitute evidence of his noninvolvement. Yet one should apply such logic in strict moderation. Part of the appeal of the conspiratorial view of history—in addition to furnishing simple, often satisfying explanations for otherwise complicated and difficult-to-comprehend phenomena—is that it is governed by a self-fulfilling circular logic. In the search for mustache-twirling puppet masters pulling history’s levers, the absence of evidence can be taken as evidence of the hypothesized conspiracy. The logic is not just circular; it entails a reversal of evidentiary standards. The fact that verifiable evidence cannot be discovered, rather than leading to a revised theory of what happened, actually reinforces the theory for which evidence is elusive.

Part of the problem with focusing narrowly on the technical, legalistic aspects of Young’s complicity—whether he issued a direct order, intended the massacre, or was aware of the conflict with the Fancher party—is that it sidesteps far more interesting and important questions. Young can bear a portion of moral culpability even if he did none of the above actions; but even an approximate apportionment of blame in that case requires a more nuanced sociological analysis of the crime and the events leading up to it and devoting less focus to a putatively omnipotent, omniscient prophet. To what extent, for example, does Young bear responsibility for what happened even if he did not order the attack

on the Fancher party or the massacre to cover it up? How do intensely hierarchical social structures become self-reinforcing, and to what extent can the effects of panopticism account for what happened? If the massacre was perpetrated by good Mormons, many (if not most) of whom retained their good standing in the Church and their communities despite widespread knowledge of what happened, what does that mean for those of us who claim that religious and historical heritage? By emphasizing the on-the-ground run-up to the massacre, the tensions that built between Fancher party members and local leaders, the authors offer a compelling (if not totalizing or comprehensively explanatory) narrative in which violent, escalating frontier conflict mixed with undeviating obedience, religious conviction, in-group/out-group dynamics, and war hysteria leading to a horrible crime that took on an insurmountable inertia and resulted eventually in a cover-up of staggering proportions and unimaginable wickedness—all of it carried out by believably human, conflicted actors.

A major weakness of the book is the failure to apply this more nuanced analytical logic consistently to all of the historical actors. The authors go to great lengths to portray the Mormons involved in the massacre as complex human beings and historical agents, whose actions have explanations that, while defying rational or moral justification, do not defy basic understanding. This is a far more sophisticated reading of history than one in which the murderers figure only as the mindless tools of their insane, blood-thirsty prophet. The problem is that such sophistication is not really extended to the non- or nominally Mormon participants—the Paiutes whom Lee (among others) convinced to attack the Fancher party to begin with and, after the extended siege, to help clean up the mess by slaughtering them in the most cowardly manner. The Paiutes in this account feel a little like Mormons in the Blood-Atoning-Brigham readings. That they would agree to what the Mormon leaders proposed is taken almost as a given. No effort is made to understand how these basically good men participated in this atrocity. They are pawns in the hands of the insidiously manipulative Cedar City leaders. Subsequent scholarly treatments of the massacre must do for the Indians what this volume has done for Mormon settlers: flesh out their motives and their

behavior in ways that acknowledge their agency, their humanity, and the inhumanity of their actions.

Never again will such a staggering sum of resources be devoted to the massacre at Mountain Meadows. This book is a life's work compressed and the result is a clear, exhaustive, and riveting narrative. With a collection of sources spiked by previously unavailable material, the reader follows new paths in a story that has been walked by historians, antagonists, and apologists with vivid and sometimes misplaced zeal. Juanita Brooks would have little to quibble over in this book; but that the LDS Church feels it can now stand with her and allow its historians to tell the story as fully and as accurately as they can, even facilitating the process, indicates a new trajectory of Mormon historiography, one more in keeping with the sentiments of Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph F. Smith of the LDS First Presidency in 1892: "We are anxious to learn all that we can upon [the Massacre], not necessarily for publication, but that the Church may have the details in its possession for the vindication of innocent parties, and that the world may know, when the time comes, the true facts connected with it" (xi).

With all future work on the massacre, historians will be required to consult *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* as the starting point. The volume reads mostly as if it were written in a narrative vacuum. However, their work does still engage some of what is now part of the bibliographic terrain. Bagley, Sally Denton, Jon Krakauer, and those who will follow may very well persist in their interpretations; but they must carefully consider the evidence and analysis of Walker, Turley, and Leonard.

Notes

1. Another significant source brought to light by this volume includes extracts from Jacob Hamblin's journal. Jacob Hamblin, Letter to Brigham Young, November 13, 1871, Brigham Young Office Files, as well as Jacob Hamblin, Statement, November 28, 1871, Young Office Files. Hamblin's journal is available at the Utah State Archives, but two sections of pages are ripped out. Presumably this communication includes at least some of those missing entries. Donald R. Moorman with Gene A. Sessions, *Camp Floyd and the Mormons: The Utah War* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 137–38 quotes from the Hamblin letter which, according to Moorman's preface, he probably accessed in