

Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr.,
and Glen M. Leonard,
Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2008

Reviewed by Brian Q. Cannon

In May 2002, Richard E. Turley Jr., now Assistant Church Historian for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, publicly announced a forthcoming book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Turley traced his idea for the book to the early 1990s. In the intervening years, a statement made by Roger V. Logan, a descendant of massacre survivors, impelled him to proceed. “Until the church shows more candor about what its historians actually know about the event, true reconciliation will be elusive,” Logan observed (x). In 2000, Turley persuaded Glen M. Leonard, former director of the LDS Museum of Church History and Art, to coauthor the book, and in 2001 he recruited Brigham Young University history professor Ronald W. Walker. The timing of the announcement, within months of the release of Will Bagley’s *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, implied an intended challenge to that book’s conclusions. While the Church had not commissioned the book, Turley said, the authors would have full access to the Church’s relevant archival materials and the assistance of a large team of researchers. Church leaders would not “direct the output” of the book. The arrangement represented a mature willingness on the Church’s part to disclose the sordid details of a most heinous episode in Mormon history.¹

Turley’s expectations of autonomy were maintained: the authors “retained full editorial control over [their] manuscript” (xv–xvi). However, Turley’s initial timetable for writing the book stretched from one to six years. Sifting through the rich array of sources, many of which contradicted each other, and working through the scrutiny and reviews of the manuscript by many colleagues, took years. The end product, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy*, is to date the most thorough

account of the massacre and the events leading up to it. The book is meticulously documented, with 127 pages of endnotes. Much of the evidence used in the book was available to other historians—the Church Archives had not previously withheld as much evidence as some had supposed—but some pieces are new. A new transcript of the John D. Lee trials by a specialist in nineteenth-century shorthand offers new information. So do over a dozen reminiscent accounts of the massacre collected by Assistant Church Historian Andrew Jenson in 1892. Aside from Donald Moorman, who made limited use of them in the 1960s, historians studying the massacre over the past century have not been permitted to examine most of Jenson's collection.

The book is written in narrative style for a broad audience. To a greater degree than previous authors, Walker, Turley, and Leonard interpret the massacre through the lens of scholarship on vigilante activity, mob psychology, religious and ethnic violence, and mass killing. They blame U.S. President James Buchanan, President Brigham Young, Elder George A. Smith, “some of the Arkansas emigrants, some Paiutes, and most of all . . . settlers in southern Utah” for “errors” that culminated in the slaughter at Mountain Meadows (xiv).

This volume is the third major history of the massacre. In her pioneering work, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, published in 1950, Juanita Brooks exonerated Brigham Young and George A. Smith of direct responsibility for the massacre, but she concluded that their reformation preaching and preparations for war with the United States helped set the stage for the bloodbath in southern Utah. Brooks accepted reports that the ill-fated Fancher Party included ruffians from Missouri, and she repeated tales of the Fancher Party's malfeasance although she recognized that Mormons had exaggerated the emigrants' wrongdoing. She depicted the initial attack upon the emigrants as an Indian maneuver carried out with encouragement from the Mormons but before white Mormons arrived on the scene; she described John D. Lee's later role in persuading the emigrants to surrender; and she blamed the death of most of the emigrant men on the Mormons but charged the Indians with murdering the women and children. After the massacre, she concluded, Church leaders shielded the guilty from arrest. She believed Church authorities eventually turned Lee over to federal authorities as a scapegoat in order to shield the Church from injury.

In his prizewinning revisionist study, Will Bagley argued that the Fancher Party was comprised exclusively of Arkansans who asserted their rights legally as American citizens. He blamed the massacre squarely upon Brigham Young: in a meeting early in September in Salt Lake, he contended, Young encouraged Paiute chiefs to attack the emigrants in order

to demonstrate to Americans the perils of waging war on the Mormons. Bagley documented Lee's participation, possibly along with other whites, in the initial attack on the emigrant encampment and attributed most of the killing in the massacre itself to the Mormon militia. Like Brooks, he accused Young and others in high places of thwarting justice and suppressing incriminating evidence.

The authors of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, like Bagley, primarily blame white Mormons for the massacre, although they acknowledge the Paiutes' key involvement, particularly in the initial attack. Largely following Brooks's reasoning, but with the weight of added evidence, they conclude that Brigham Young neither desired nor ordered the massacre. They saddle flinty William Dame, zealous and intolerant Isaac Haight, and lewd and volatile John D. Lee with primary responsibility for the massacre, singling out Haight as "the man most responsible" (229). It was Haight who plotted the attack on the wagon train, set it in motion and then reluctantly sent a missive north to Young asking his advice when the high council refused to ratify the plan.

Using statements from John D. Lee and others, the authors persuasively counter the notion that Brigham Young sent George A. Smith to southern Utah in August 1857 to set up residents for the slaughter of the Fancher-Baker party. But they admit on the basis of Lee's testimony that during his tour of southern settlements "Smith may well have asked Lee if he thought the local people could stop a threatening company traveling up the canyon" (72).

After the massacre, some Mormons alleged that a troublesome contingent of Missourians who styled themselves the Wildcats traveled with the Fancher-Baker emigrant train. Brooks accepted this story while historians Dale Morgan, Lawrence Coates, and Bagley dismissed it. Walker, Turley, and Leonard breathe new life into the story, showing that several non-Mormon travelers on the overland trail reported that Missourians traveled in tandem with the Fancher Party. The evidence is inconclusive, but the authors' conclusion that some "Missourians were probably among those killed at Mountain Meadows" is plausible, given the fact that many of the victims have never been identified by name (87).

Massacre at Mountain Meadows paints a less favorable portrait of the emigrants than does Bagley. The authors note that emigrants who passed through Utah settlements only a few days after the Fancher Party—people who had no reason to accuse the wagon train of misdeeds—reported hearing that members of the party had insulted the Mormons and particularly defamed Mormon women. An often overlooked sentence in the Samuel Pitchforth diary quoted by the authors indicates that the emigrants also

threatened to kill Bishop Philip Klingensmith of Cedar City. Dismissing the old allegation that the emigrants poisoned an ox that was later eaten by Indians, the authors conclude that anthrax spores in the carcass rather than arsenic or other poison likely killed the Indians who ate the animal. But they note that the stories of poisoning could have seemed credible to Mormons and Indians trying to explain the deaths. On balance, they admit that “most of the emigrants’ acts were nothing more than taunting words or, at the very worst, small acts of vandalism” (114). Along with Brooks and Bagley, they conclude that the emigrants did nothing that warranted the death penalty.

Previous authors working to explain the mentality that drove the Mormons to kill the emigrants have used a chilling statement made by stake president Isaac Haight in a church meeting as evidence that southern Utahns hoped to avenge the wrongs of Missouri and Illinois by attacking the Fancher Party. “I am prepared to feed the enemy the bread he fed to me and mine,” Haight proclaimed (131). Through careful scholarship, Walker, Turley, and Leonard demonstrate that Haight said these words several weeks before he knew of the Fancher Party rather than on the day he plotted the party’s fate. The authors introduce a key new source, the minutes of the Cedar City Female Benevolent Society, to illuminate the perspective of Cedar City residents. Shortly before the massacre, while the men were en route to the Meadows, the society gathered to pray “in behalf of the brethren that are out acting in our defence” (135).

The most powerful evidence marshaled by scholars to support the argument that Brigham Young ordered the massacre is interpreter Dimick Huntington’s diary account of a meeting on September 1 between Young and Indian leaders from southern and central Utah. In that meeting, Young told the chiefs who had traveled north to Salt Lake City with Jacob Hamblin that if they allied militarily with the Mormons against the United States, they could seize “all the cattle that had gone to Cal the southe rout” with the Mormons’ permission (146). The authors of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* point out, though, that Huntington had made the same promise earlier in the week to other chiefs regarding travel on the northern trails. They argue reasonably that raids and theft of cattle were part of Young’s Utah War strategy, not an order directed at the Fancher wagon train. Whereas Bagley and Brooks believed that the Paiute chiefs in Hamblin’s party left Salt Lake the day after their meeting with Young and returned to southern Utah in time to participate in the attacks and massacre between September 7 and 11, the authors clearly demonstrate that they remained in Salt Lake at least through September 4. Three different Mormon sources document that one crucial member of the party reputed to have been at

Mountain Meadows, the Paiute chief Tutsegavits, was ordained an elder in Salt Lake sometime between September 10 and September 16. Walker, Turley, and Leonard conclude that Tutsegavits remained in Salt Lake until after the ordination and therefore could not have relayed Young's war policy to the Indians who attacked the emigrants in Mountain Meadows. Alternately, Bagley argues that Tutsegavits traveled from Salt Lake City to Cedar City, participated in the massacre, and then returned to Salt Lake City for his ordination on the 16th. Either scenario is possible, although the weight of the evidence supports Walker and his coauthors. The authors convincingly reinterpret a key piece of evidence implicating Tutsegavits in the massacre. Although his name appears on a report regarding the massacre that John D. Lee submitted in 1857, it was added along with the names of other Paiutes to the top of the document by Young's clerk, along with the phrase "between 21st to 26th Sept" (266). The authors note that the same names appear on a reimbursement voucher that Salt Lake City merchant Levi Stewart submitted to the Church for goods he doled out to Paiutes late in September. Thus Tutsegavits' name likely appears on the document not because he was a massacre participant, but because he along with the other Indians received goods from Stewart.

This new volume shows to a greater extent than previous works the appalling complicity of Mormon men other than Lee and Haight in murders prior to the massacre itself. Using evidence collected in 1892 by Andrew Jenson, the authors chronicle the murders of two members of the Fancher Party who broke out of the besieged wagon train as well as the killing of at least two others who were gathering pine tar when the attack commenced.

In 1895, Nephi Johnson, who participated in the massacre, told Elder Francis M. Lyman that "white men did most of the killing" (204). Bagley regarded Johnson's admission as the most significant piece of new evidence that emerged between the publication of Brooks's book and his own. The authors of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* report Johnson's testimony in support of their conclusion that whites were primarily responsible for the massacre, but they appropriately question its reliability, pointing out that "Johnson, who directed the Indians in the Friday attack, may have answered as he did to downplay his own role" (367).

The book includes appendices prepared by Michael Shamo listing all known Mormon participants in the massacre. Forty-five participants are listed for whom the authors believe the evidence is strong. Another twenty-three are listed for whom they find the evidence inconclusive. All told, they conclude, less than one-fifth of the Cedar City militia participated. Another appendix identifies the names of fifteen Indians who were

clearly present at the massacre and another ten for whom the evidence is inconclusive. The authors present a range of evidence regarding the extent of Paiute participation, but they identify white Mormon settlers as “the principal aggressors” and those who “persuaded, armed and directed some Southern Paiutes to participate” (265).

Unfortunately, the authors create the appearance of incomplete disclosure at one key point. Jacob Hamblin’s retrospective account of Brigham Young’s reaction to the missive from Haught carried north by James Haslam—“the fullest account of what happened when Haslam entered” Young’s office—is not fully quoted (182). The ellipses in the passage (two versions of the passage survive) leave one wondering what was omitted and why.

The aftermath of the massacre is as choked with controversy as the actual killing. It includes a tangled web of subterfuge, sparring between Church and federal officials, and attempts to bring those responsible for the massacre to justice. As the authors obliquely observe, Brigham Young largely “held his tongue on the subject [of the massacre], for policy and personal peace” (229). Brooks and Bagley devoted half of their narratives to these matters. Regrettably, aside from a five-page epilogue recounting the execution of John D. Lee, the authors leave the “second half [of the story] to another day” (xii). Given the care with which they evaluated and assembled this volume, one hopes that a second volume will be forthcoming soon.

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1. Carrie A. Moore, “New Facts on Guilt in Massacre,” *Deseret News*, May 18, 2002, A1.