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REVIEW – MASSACRE AT MOUNTAIN MEADOWS

Reviewed by Ingrid Sherlock–Taselaar

Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Hardback: \$29.95.

Studying Mormon history is, to say the least, a thorny road with here and there some traps. Some of these traps are imagined but others are very real. As a result Mormon historical research has, until recently, been somewhat polarized. One camp most often contained the conservative and faithful Mormons who consider everything that is not positive or uplifting as negative or anti-Mormon. On this side of the divide one also finds a number of apologists. In the other camp one finds the anti-Mormons (often conservative Protestants or disaffected Mormons) who consider everything connected to the Mormon Church, its leaders or members evil. This group has produced an array of one-sided and condemning literature on Mormonism that also does an injustice to honest Mormon history. Luckily, the group that generally seems to be able to toggle both camps has been professional historians and scholars of Mormonism who have generally sought to determine the truth about Mormon history from an objective perspective. While this group does receive opposition from the latter two groups, it often seems to be the body that brings balance to the ideas of two polarized camps.

In recent years, however, it seems that archivists at the Mormon Church's Church History Library, which contains the archival collections of the Mormon Church, have striven for more openness, though full access to archival materials at the Church History Library is still not granted to the public. At the same time some Mormon intellectuals and academics have worked for more openness by writing a number of books that certainly give the appearance of dealing with some of the skeletons in the Mormon cupboard. A number of these books are published by well known non-Mormon publishers. Although not sanctioned by the Mormon Church, a good example of this is the biography *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* by practicing Mormon Richard Lyman Bushman, an emeritus historian of Columbia University, which is an excellent and long overdue warts and all biography of Joseph Smith. *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* by Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley, and Glenn

M. Leonard, published by Oxford University Press in 2008 and the subject of this review, also contributes to more openness about a black page in Mormon history. The Mountain Meadows Massacre is one of the most tragic and shameful events of Mormon history and an open account of what really happened that day was long overdue. The fact that the book was published is in no small part due to the Mormon Church's generous sponsorship of and support for the project. The three authors are all practicing Mormons, and were employed by the Mormon Church to write this book. The Family History Library was granted permission from church officials to allow the three authors unprecedented access to Mormon archival materials and the result is an intended honest assessment of the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

To get down to business I have to say that the book is scrupulously researched, well documented, and considering the complexity of the subject fairly easy to read. For scholars there is a wealth of footnotes to check and for the non-scholarly reader there is a well told transparent account of a very controversial event.

I am not an authority on the Mountain Meadows Massacre nor have I studied any of the primary sources. I have only read the book and done a lot of background research into what others have said and written about this event. While this may count against me in the eyes of some, I think that one of my trump cards is the fact that I am a European Mormon and, therefore, I can look at the available material on this dreadful massacre without ever having been taught about it in school or church and thus judge what I read without any preconceived ideas.

A brief sketch of what happened at Mountain Meadows reveals that on 11 September 1857, Mormon settlers in southern Utah with the aid of some Indians and using a false flag of truce persuaded a group of California-bound emigrants to leave the relative safety of their circled wagons. The cornered emigrants did not have a lot of choice as conditions within their circle of wagons had become impossible. Reluctantly they accepted the terms of the truce which was presented to them as a rescue and protection plan. Nothing was further removed from the truth. As the emigrants trudged out of Mountain Meadows, leaving behind most of their property they were slaughtered in cold blood by their 'rescuers and protectors'. Their property, estimated to be between \$27,240 and \$48,102.50 (251–254) was largely divided among the perpetrators of the massacre. That day about 120 emigrants, men, women, and children were massacred. Only 17 children age six and under, deemed to be too young to tell the story, were spared.

Many books have been written about the Mountain Meadows Massacre, each with their own approach. Some portray the perpetrators as the good people and victims as evil people who somehow deserved what happened to them because of their behaviour while travelling through central and southern Utah. Some use exactly the opposite approach and center their work not only on blaming the perpetrators but also trying to prove that the highest leaders of the Mormon Church of the time in general and Brigham Young in particular were involved in some kind of conspiracy. Therein, of course, lurks the danger that it becomes personal. This, unfortunately, is e.g. the impression Will Bagley, who is undoubtedly a great historian, gives through some of his works. A third approach, adopted by e.g. Juanita Brooks in her *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950), is to navigate between both extremes and look at both perpetrators and victims and try and understand how such a terrible tragedy could ever take place.

The authors of the book under review warn that people expecting either the first or second approach are going to be disappointed by their book because these approaches do not take into account the complexity of human beings. In this there is logic because history is not a fairytale where there is a clear line between good and evil. Furthermore the authors wisely steer away from writing a book that is to serve as a response to arguments or conclusions of any previous author on the subject. The advantage of this is that the book is not an exhausting work of argument and counter argument.

What then, one may ask, is their approach? In the preface we can read more about their approach. They state that their aim is to take 'a fresh approach based on every primary source we could find' (x) and to give the reader a work that tells the story and lets the events speak for themselves (xv). The sheer amount of material they thus accumulated was such that they concluded that there was enough for two books, the first one, here under review, tells the story of the massacre itself and the events leading up to it and a future second volume will tell the story of the aftermath of the massacre although the tip of the veil is lifted in the epilogue of the current volume in order to conclude it. They also state that they largely shy away from topical or critical analysis in order to make the book more appealing 'to a larger audience than just scholars' (xii). This approach has obviously many advantages inasmuch as it leaves the reader free to draw his or her own conclusions. It certainly avoids the pitfalls of presentism where current values and standards are projected back to events of the past. Last but not least, instead of assigning

blame, they hope to answer the troubling question: How could basically good people commit such a terrible atrocity? (xiii). The story itself is underpinned by a thorough explanation about nineteenth century American violence, group psychology, the history of violence in general and last but not least the atmosphere in Utah at the time.

I read the book without preconceived ideas about what had happened that fateful day and was pleasantly surprised how clear and organised the lay-out of the book is. In this respect I think the authors have succeeded inasmuch as the book caters to both scholars and non-scholars. The fourteen chronological chapters are well organised and dates are given to indicate which period is going to be discussed. In the back there is a list of names for the emigrants and a list of names for the perpetrators which makes it easy to quickly refresh one's mind with the details of persons mentioned in the book. There is also a list of the property of the emigrants. All through the book there are relevant pictures. The book can roughly be divided into four parts, each comprising of a few chapters viz. chapters 1-3, 4-6, 7-12, 13-14.

Chapter 1 (1830-1846) sets the scene with a description of the time before the Saints crossed the plains. This description readily prepares the reader to wonder how a people that were tormented by illegal actions in Missouri and Illinois were soon to become the perpetrators of an illegal action themselves.

Chapters 2 (1847-1857) and 3 (July 24, 1857) give a clear sketch of the local and federal political situation and elaborate the on the religious and cultural events such as Pioneers' Day. They chronicle, however, that all was not well in Zion and that by the mid-1850's the Mormon leaders believed that there was a great religious lethargy. There were several reasons for this lethargy; the decade-long focus on pioneering, the droughts, the poor crops, the insect plagues, and also the growing number of apostates and dissenters. Knowledge about Brigham Young's character and background easily explains how his preaching caused the Mormon Reformation (1856-1857).

Chapter 4 (July 24-August 8, 1857) explains that the people believed that their prophet, country, and religion were once again in danger from the advancing American army and the various militias were on high alert.

Chapter 5 describes in great detail the main perpetrators of the Mountain Meadows massacre.

Chapter 6 (1857) describes the emigrant trails and the emigrants, including the Fancher party that was to become the victim of the

Mountain Meadows Massacre. In the third and largest part the reader is presented with a picture of the direct and indirect preparations that would eventually lead to the massacre itself. Various policy changes such as the prohibition on selling grain to non-Mormons are described but the reader also can read about meetings, public and clandestine of local leaders that would change 'the Cedar City plan' from 'a harsh response to a minor conflict' into a planned 'massacre of men, women, and children'(143).

Chapter 7 (July–August 1857) describes how the prohibition of selling grain to non-Mormons came into being and how hard Brigham Young came down on Mormons who out of greed and out of anger about the emigrants' behaviour wanted to mob some of the emigrants. It also describes the reluctance of the Indians to help the Mormons in their up-coming war. As far as the Indians were concerned they would watch the war unfold and negotiate with the victor.

Chapter 8 (August 1857) describes the ongoing conflicts between settlers and emigrants and how minor incidents were completely blown out of proportion. As the authors wrote in the previous chapter 'There were conflicts on the southern road. But the emigrants did not deserve what eventually happened to them at Mountain Meadows' (115).

Chapter 9 (late August – Early September 1857) mainly describes the step-by-step process that led ordinary decent men (according to the authors) to commit atrocities by transforming their opponents into the Other (127).

Chapter 10 (July 24 –September 5, 1857) shows how devastating incitement and rumours can be to a community. It also highlights the internal strife between the local leaders and the militia and Isaac Haight's peculiar interpretation of Brigham Young's new Indian policy. Instead of adopting a non-interfering stance as Brigham Young had counselled, Haight armed the local Indians and sent them after the emigrants.

Chapter 11 shows that the emigrants were 'unaware that their hour in Cedar City has lasting repercussions, the emigrants had no reason to believe they were in danger. But side by side with the emigrants' feelings of security were the deadly plans of Cedar City's leaders which were going forward at several places' (152). This chapter also describes the two initial failed attacks on the emigrant camp which let them to circle their wagons. The authors show that 'the Paiutes would not have attacked the company unless local settlers had stirred them up' (158). They also indicate that at this point the first effort at a cover-up was

made when Haight sent a messenger to Salt Lake City with a letter that omitted key details (164).

Chapter 12 (September 7–10 1857) reveals the frantic efforts made to have a straight story and to cover up the participation of the settlers in the first two attacks which led to more bloodshed. Most importantly this chapter includes the letter of Brigham Young to Haight, dated 10 September. In it Young informs Haight that the American army is not going to arrive in Utah that season and that disaster has been averted with the help of God. Young further advises Haight to stay friendly with the Indians but to let ‘Indians and emigrants resolve their own problems without Mormon interference’ (184). As far as Mormon relations with the emigrants the letter states that any emigrant trains already in the area should be left ‘to go in peace.’ (186)

Chapters 13 (September 10 –11, 1857) and 14 (September 11 – 13, 1857) tell the story of the massacre and the horrible aftermath. Aside from describing the horrors of that day the authors conclude that ‘the plan was succeeding because it was so calculated, [...], because it was improbably sinister’ and that the emigrants ‘could not have imagined anything happening to them that was so premeditated, evil, and cunning’ (199). Visiting the scene of the massacre, William Dame and Isaac Haight, two of the main instigators though not the perpetrators realised that ‘the twisted bodies of the dead, some already torn open by wolves and coyotes, mocked the armchair planning that had led to the deaths of so many men, women, and children’ (213–214).

Have the authors succeeded in shedding long overdue light on the complex issues behind the Mountain Meadows Massacre? I am convinced they did, their presentation of the enormous amount of primary sources provides the reader with a transparent and organised account. This style of writing makes topical and critical analysis indeed obsolete for the most part. As to answering the question of how ‘basically good people’ could commit such a terrible atrocity, I must admit that I feel the jury is still out on this. I may be guilty of presentism but I am left to wonder whether the main perpetrators were what I would call ‘basically good people’. I am more inclined to call them religious fanatics who had lost all perspective of the ideals their faith stood for. Granted that their fanaticism was fuelled by the historical circumstances, nevertheless their attempts at covering up their roles is evidence enough that their conscience was not clear. Quite apart from any Mormon ideals, they were guilty of breaking two of the basic laws of the Ten Commandments viz. thou shalt not kill and thou shalt not covet.

Nevertheless I cannot escape the feeling that this book is also, at least in part, an institutional exercise in truth telling. On the one hand I am left to wonder whether this book should be seen as part of a worldwide wave of governments and institutions apologizing for all sorts of misdeeds hundreds of years in the past as a way of making reparations to the descendants of the victims while at the same time unburdening, as it were, the descendants of the perpetrators. On the other hand I am left with a feeling that this exercise aims to absolve the institution i.e. the Mormon Church from the crime by shifting the blame on lesser individuals who indeed were guilty but who did not wake up one morning deciding out of the blue to kill a train of California-bound emigrants. The nine indicted men and indeed everyone involved in the Mountain Meadows massacre must bear that awful responsibility but what about Brigham Young, George A. Smith, and some of the others? Looking at the evidence presented in the book I cannot agree with Will Bagley and his, in my view, personal vendetta against Brigham Young. The evidence is clear that Brigham Young did not secretly or otherwise order the massacre. It is not only evinced from his letter (183–185) which unfortunately arrived too late but also by earlier sanctions against settlers who were intent on mobbing the emigrants. At the same time I also cannot agree with the authors that Brigham Young was not to blame in any way.

The Mormon Reformation (1856–1857), a direct result of Brigham Young's preaching created a climate of violence, his orders not to sell any goods to non-Mormons, although understandable under the circumstances, caused problems and his ambiguous statements about the New Indian Policy (August 16, 1857) caused confusion. As far as Brigham Young and some of the others were concerned I would, therefore, suggest something like guilt by association. I come to this conclusion because the sources presented in the book make it clear that Brigham Young did only rarely speak about the events in Mountain Meadows. One could quite cheerfully interpret that as a conspiracy to hide things and no doubt many will be only too happy to do this, not least because the Mormon Church, as an institution, has always struggled with assigning any form of blame for any historical mishap to one of its prophets. I, however, would like to suggest that perhaps Brigham Young had come to the awful realisation that in his capacity as prophet and leader, his preaching had indirectly led to this massacre. He may have come to regret some of the decisions he made but, like the rest of us, he, too, had to live with the consequences.

In conclusion I think the book is certainly worth reading as it lays out the events leading up to that tragic massacre in a transparent and overall balanced manner in spite of the fact that all the evidence is retrospective and that the testimonies of the witnesses are largely exculpatory. I would like to agree with the authors when they write:

The tragedy at Mountain Meadows played out on several levels. The murdered emigrants lost their hopes, their dreams, their property, and their lives. Some lost their very identity, their names forever effaced from human memory. The surviving children were robbed of the warmth and support of parents, brothers, and sisters. Their first sobbing night at Hamblin's was just the start of their ordeal. The Paiute participants would bear the brunt of the blame for the massacre, shamelessly used by the white men who lured them to the Meadows. For the militiamen who carried out the crime—as well as their families, descendants, and fellow church members—there was another kind of tragedy. It was the gnawing, long anguish that flows from betrayed ideals. The burdens of the massacre would linger far beyond what anyone imagined on the night of September 11, 1857. (209)

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