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REVIEW – INNOCENT BLOOD: ESSENTIAL NARRATIVES OF THE
MOUNTAIN MEADOWS MASSACRE

Reviewed by Bernadette Rigal-Cellard

David L. Bigler and Will Bagley, eds., *Innocent Blood: Essential Narratives of the Mountain Meadows Massacre*. Kingdom in the West: The Mormons and the American Frontier Series, Volume 12. Norman, OK: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008. Hardbound.

With this volume, the two master historians of Mormonism David L. Bigler and Will Bagley have produced the most compelling book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the tragedy that on September 11, 1857, befell a large company of Arkansas emigrants traveling through Utah on their way to California. Around 120 people, mostly women (40) and children (at least 50, including 20 girls from the age of 7 to 17), were treacherously and savagely slaughtered by a group of men who dressed like Indians but were in fact members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While a few genuine Indians appear to have attended or participated in the massacre, their actual participation in it remains unclear.

Innocent Blood is a powerful book that provides the reader with a vast array of primary sources, many of them never published before. The book never reads like a mere anthology for the two historians have structured it in such a clever way, with vividly eloquent (sometimes tragi-comic) chapter titles, that it operates like a thriller and a court trial, mounting evidence upon evidence to finally ensnare the real culprit. As in all good American trials, the prosecution leaves it to the jury to decide how the sentence must be meted. Yet, the two prosecutors bring enough evidence for the reader to make up his/her mind, definitely at variance from the official position of the Church today.

The Arthur Clark series *Kingdom in the West* has so far published twelve volumes that provide a huge trove of primary sources on the different aspects of Mormonism. Will Bagley is the general editor.

In the second volume, *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847–1896* (1998), David Bigler had already devoted a long chapter to the massacre in which he explained the cover-up by the Church authorities. He pursued the track that Juanita Brooks had opened in 1950 with the first critical book on the tragedy, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, and her subsequent publication of the journal of the only participant who was to be tried and executed for it, John Lee, published as *A Mormon Chronicle* (1955). Complementing Bigler's work, Will Bagley gave the Massacre maximum development in his *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002). Using diaries, letters, confessions, he weighed them all carefully with a rare knack for perceiving deceptions and fake remorse. By fastidiously double checking dates, places, occurrences, people's names, actors' relations among themselves and with the authorities, he could detect possible forgeries and ascertain whether the confessions put out by the participants in the massacre and/or by their confidants, as well as by the authorities of the Church, were once more spinning tales or somehow betraying some truths. He came to the conclusion that no saint would have dared perform the massacre without having received the authorization from the Prophet, so that, in fact, the mastermind behind the attack was but Brigham Young himself who made sure he retained full control of his Territory and all its citizens.

Innocent Blood offers the investigative reader all the evidence that *Blood of the Prophets* relied on, except for those documents already published somewhere else. The central questions about the massacre revolve around the motivations of the saints: how could men who "had been raised in a culture in which it was man's duty to lay down his life rather than see violence done to women and children" (16) set aside their religious conscience? The tragedy differs from the other massacres on the American frontier in that it was not an act of war between two enemies, the settlers and/or their army against the Indians as in Sand Creek or Wounded Knee, but the cold execution of brother emigrants in a bout of religious fanaticism and greed (individual and collective).

The editors have found the documents in library collections all over the United States, in the Church history library and in some private collections. They have achieved a major feat since many documents were hard to come by. Some are still sealed in the First Presidency archives.

The editorial voice introduces the documents, explains the history behind them, pointing to the possible contradictions in the texts that were used for the cover-up of the massacre, but it never substitutes for the voices of the players and their accomplices, or those of the families of the victims, or those of the few survivors. Moreover the editors did not weigh down the primary sources with too many notes or comments. The reader is thus almost bluntly confronted with the voices of the murderers, of those who covered them up, of the survivors, and of those who forced the truth to come out.

The introduction lays out the major factors that may explain the tensions felt by the saints at the end of the summer of 1857. First, the powerful millenarism of the Church and its conviction that the only possible mode of divine government was theocracy. Second, the vision of Indians as descendants of the "Tribe of Manasseh," and therefore as cousins of the white Mormons ("Tribe of Ephraim"). As "Blood of Israel," the Indians would naturally ally with the saints under the rule of the Prophet and help usher in the Second Coming. Third, the killing of Joseph Smith and of his brother, whose "innocent blood" had to be avenged at all cost through Blood Atonement. This tenet was a major signature of Mormonism since it clearly departed from the Christian doctrine of redemption through the blood of Christ. Joseph Smith declared that some sins, such as apostasy or adultery, could not be atoned for by His sacrifice but only by the shedding of the sinner's own blood. Fourth, the Federal government was not about to relinquish its sovereignty over the vast territories that it had just wrenched from Mexico and let the saints declare the independence of Deseret. The tenets mentioned above (the Second Coming, Deseret as Zion, Blood Atonement) were made even more stringent with the Mormon Reformation or revival aroused by Brigham Young in 1856 (the subject of chapter 2) that "set loose" "social and psychological forces" (67). Finally, just before the massacre, the famous prophet Parley Pratt had been murdered in Arkansas by the legal husband of his last plural wife who then rode into Salt Lake crying for "his innocent blood" to be avenged (this is the subject of chapter 3). Rumours then accused the people of Arkansas of these murders.

The first chapters offer testimonies on the emigrants themselves, notably the list of all their possessions that proves that this was a well-off company, not susceptible to have behaved as they would be accused of later, but definitely susceptible to have aroused greed among the saints. Their property would disappear afterwards in the murderers'

farms or sold by the Church. Chapter four stresses the fact that the only fault of the emigrant train was their high number of cattle (from 300 to 1000) that did graze on saints' lands, seen by the Arkansans as public land (107). The documents in this chapter show how Brigham Young felt confident that the Lamanites (Indians) would "fulfill their duty", probably meaning they would attack the emigrants. Later, the day after the massacre, he wrote to the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs to complain about the destruction wrought by emigrants companies in his territory.

Chapter five focuses on the reality of the reports of the massacre to Brigham Young. The participants took an oath of secrecy and except for a few haunted souls; they stuck to it until their death. We read texts detailing the rumours about the wrongdoings of the Arkansas settlers (poisoning water...), about the fervour of the Indians, each text building more and more imprecision and confusion as to the exact time Brigham Young heard about the massacre, which may indicate that he did not really need to know rapidly since he had given orders beforehand. The letters he wrote afterwards seem to betray an absence of real panic.

Throughout the volume many documents are newspapers articles, notably from California or the *Salt Lake Tribune*, that show that already at the time (which is a point the editors of the volume underline forcefully) non-Mormons understood more or less what had taken place and why. It is indeed rather surprising to read very sensible arguments on the subjects, with many investigators overwhelmed by what they discovered, in particular those who did go to Mountain Meadows later and found the body remains of the emigrants and tried to bury them in decent graves.

The documents in chapter 6 prove how concealment operated, notably with the judicial system in Utah bought by the Church, when it was not run by it altogether. It took a long time for the Federal government to start investigating the case, all the more so as the Civil War kept minds focused elsewhere. Chapter seven has the "Army crack the Case". The official reports of 1859 are ghastly in their meticulously rehearsing of what took place just two years earlier. The revelation led Mormon authorities to arrest mysteriously Brigham Young on a warrant from Judge Elias Smith. President Buchanan refused to have the military investigate the case, thus putting an end to the investigation. No

one was arrested until much later, in fact a long 17 years after the massacre.

Chapter eight gathers all the documents found on the 17 surviving children (they had been felt too young to be able to remember anything). Here again the story is extremely strange: the children were placed in families and not cared for at all. When finally an investigator came to retrieve them in order to send them back to their families in Arkansas, he found them in an incredibly state of neglect: "We found them in a most wretched condition, half starved, half naked, filthy, infested with vermin, and their eyes diseased from the cruel neglect which they had been exposed." (241-42). The tragedy is also a Shakespearean play about traitors as the person (Jacob Farney) in charge of their removal from their hovels finally played to the Mormons once in Salt Lake because Brigham Young bribed even federal officers.

Chapter nine, "A Dose of Rope," offers much circumstantial evidence as to the direct implication of Brigham Young. The series of letters signed Argus (1871) cite the teaching of the Church on Blood Atonement, as opposed to the teaching of the Gospel, and chillingly describe what happened in the meadow (this has been described several times already in the book, but always in a different fashion): how the company was surrounded by Indians (but many testimonies in the same chapter explain that the Indians refused to take part in this massacre, so that we do believe an earlier witness who said how the White murderers wiped the war paint off their faces), how they circled the wagons, and how after a few days Mormons came with a white flag to negotiate their surrender, told the Arkansans to leave their weapons and to follow them. It is at this point that they were all mowed down by their assailants who had pretended to have peaceful intentions. What is most striking in these Argus letters is that they are written by a Mormon (excommunicated, grant it), Charles Wesley Wandell, who demands an investigation so publicly that he forced Brigham Young to move in order to protect himself and his institution. The Prophet in danger gave up his adopted son John D. Lee to appease the crowd. Lee had been the Indian agent who had pretended the Indians had gone and that the emigrants should follow him and his men to safety, and who had thus been the major executioner.

Chapters ten and eleven follow the trials of John D. Lee and his execution in the context of the Poland Act meant to curtail the influence of the Church on the probate courts, but that "failed to break theocratic control of Utah's judicial system" (356). The documents we

read both show Lee's travails (and his final letter to his wife, not entirely honest again, and his confession, 1877), and the manipulation of the justice system in the State. We also read a summary of the testimony (published by Juanita Brooks) of the only eyewitness who "broke the secrecy oath and described the massacre before the trial" of Lee: Philip Klingensmith. We also read the interview Brigham Young gave to the *Deseret News* in 1877.

Chapter twelve concentrates on the rush to shield the Prophet from the repercussions of the previous trials, reports, etc. It explains how even historians like Bancroft were blindfolded from the facts since he relied on one Apostle (Franklin Richards) to write the volume on Utah, and how the official version handed down by the Church remained the one found in Bancroft's book: the Indians murdered the emigrants in spite of the saints who, at the Prophet's speedy request, tried to rescue them.

Chapters thirteen and fourteen explain how more tales were fabricated about the emigrants (accused of being Missouri wildcats...) and about the Indians. Chapter fifteen publishes the memories of the surviving children (1875, 1897, 1938, 1940) They are very hard to stomach for one is grimly reminded that even though they were considered too young to be an impediment later, they in fact were tragically conscious of the butchery that befell their loved ones as they were slaughtered in front of their eyes. Chapter sixteen gives the testimonies of the contemporary people who pondered on what the legacy of the massacre would be, how they would be blamed for it.

The book is dedicated to the "families of those who died at Mountain Meadows" and when one closes it, one does feel sympathy for them, and a profound mistrust of the human soul able to commit such atrocity one clear day at the end of summer. The next feeling is that the volume does redeem the people of Utah since all that could be said to explain the tragedy has been said in those pages. The past can somehow rest in peace.

Now, ever since Bagley's *Blood of the Prophets* came out in 2002 several Church historians have been desperate to find out whether Brigham Young had really called upon his trusted aides to "take care" of the emigrants or suggested the Indians did as they pleased, and whether he had been involved in the cover up. As expected from all religious institutions, the current Church authorities have problems accepting such a vision of their second Prophet. The Church has been accused of

not fully measuring the implications of its refusal to consider the responsibility of Brigham Young in the tragedy, even if in 2007 it did express its “profound regret” on the 150th anniversary of the Massacre.¹ Coming to the rescue, Mormon historians quickly acted to counter the impact of *Blood of the Prophets*. Richard Turley, Ronald Walker and Glen Leonard published in August 2008 *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Oxford University Press). The presentation (on Amazon.com) summarizes the massacre as having indeed been perpetrated by “a band of Mormon militia, under a flag of truce” that lured unarmed emigrants. This part of the tragedy is thus now consensually admitted. The book promises “fascinating new insight” into the reasons why the Mormons acted in this way, and seems to place the onus on the hysteria due to the threat from the Federal government. The summary does not announce much on Brigham Young’s role, except that “the influence of [his] rhetoric and military strategy during the ‘Utah war’” will be analysed as well as the “role of Mormon militia leaders in enticing Paiute Indians to join the attack”, the latter point implying (as in the earlier stories) a greater role for the Indians than *Innocent Blood* proved.

It seems that the Church position is that the massacre must be seen within the context of the tremendous violence of the West. One of the unanswerable questions is whether it was simply Brigham Young’s fiery sermons that encouraged his disciples to act as they did without his directly prodding them into it, or whether they were carrying out unwritten orders, as Lee and other participants in the massacre would indicate later.

Then to counter *Innocent Blood*, Richard Turley and Ronald Walker published in 2009 a documentary history *Mountain Meadows Massacre: The Andrew Jenson and David H. Morris Collections* (Brigham Young Press/Studies). Turley has announced a forthcoming narrative on the post massacre events in order to elucidate fully the involvement or not of the Prophet.

After reading all the documents published by Bigler and Bagley, though, the reader (all the more so the one immersed in the study of religions) feels that there were reasons behind the massacre much more perverse than just cultural and conjunctural cruelty.

¹ See Jessica Ravitz, ‘LDS Church apologizes for Mountain Meadows Massacre’, *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 12, 2007.

Innocent Blood is more than just an impressive bouquet of primary sources on a past event. It is a brilliant example of how history should be researched, and also of how history can serve the present by enabling the families of the victims and of those who perpetrated the murders to complete the mourning process and move on to a more fraternal future even as more revelation keep creeping up.²

This book must be read by everyone who wants to understand how the West was won and often lost, and how through religious fanaticism men can be manipulated into committing atrocities they would not have conceived of their own volition. It must also, of course, be read by all those interested in the rich history of Mormonism, its transformations since the 19th century and the healthy dynamics of the scholarly debates around it that have never really abated. This is a book about the search for Truth, not about God, but about Men.

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² Interestingly (and this shows that it seems impossible to have the definitive book on the case) in their most recent works both R. Turley and W. Bagley (423) have cited an affidavit made in 1924 by William Edwards (testifying on his participation under the command of Lee in the massacre as a fifteen-year-old) that has just been identified by two experts consulting with the Church as one more possible forgery. This can read on the website of Utah State Historical society that apparently acquired the letter almost 30 years ago: http://history.utah.gov/events_and_news/press_room/forgery.html, accessed 2 February 2011.