

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 Jared Farmer

Reviewers do two things: they assess the book that was written and the book that was not. Historians tend to focus on the latter because history is an art of omission. Faced with the impossible vastness of the past, historians have no choice but to leave out most of it. What exactly historians choose to include and exclude says everything about their approach to the past. *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, a book that ends on September 13, 1857—two days after the crime—is a consummate insider’s history. Judged on its own terms, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* stands as a new benchmark for Mormon history and also the relationship of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the historical profession. At the same time, seen from the outside, the project may seem like misdirected energy.

First the praise: *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* is exhaustively researched, beautifully illustrated, and highly readable. The authors use a strict chronological approach, with minimal interpretive insertions, which makes for effective storytelling. They generously pepper the narrative with primary quotes without burdening the reader with too many methodological discussions about source material. The main text, which takes up only 231 pages, has been composed with a nonacademic readership in mind. The audience presumably is Latter-day Saints who have a strong background in Church history but little knowledge of the massacre. For believing Mormons who want a final word on “what really happened,” this book will likely satisfy.

I consider it heartening that the Church has given good publicity to the book through its media outlets. Compared to the histories usually on sale in the LDS general book market, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* is the real deal—a warts-and-all history based on exacting scholarship and peer review. Though the book’s acknowledgements do not state it as plainly as possible, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* would not have been possible without the Church lending the staff and services of its Church

History Department. Observers of the Church have interpreted this hybrid ecclesiastical-academic project as further proof of the rapprochement of the Gordon B. Hinckley era. LDS pundits seem relieved—even self-congratulatory—that the Church seems inclined to fully and candidly acknowledge the massacre and other problematic parts of its history. (The forthcoming Joseph Smith Papers, endorsed by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, can be interpreted likewise.) Boasting the imprimatur of Oxford University Press and the implied endorsement of the First Presidency, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* is uniquely and perfectly designed to help Latter-day Saints come to terms with the single most shameful event in their past.

The book's default tone is contrite rather than defensive. Unflinchingly the authors describe the gruesome details of the slaughter. They provide a superb day-by-day, blow-by-blow account of the descent into barbarity. Though the book is dedicated "TO THE VICTIMS" of the massacre, it focuses primarily on the non-Indian perpetrators; the book humanizes the Mormon farmers from southern Utah who became mass murderers. The authors and their research team draw on many sources unavailable to Juanita Brooks and Will Bagley. Though they refute some earlier conclusions, they generally avoid engaging Bagley and other investigators of the tragedy by name. The book's documentary apparatus dwarfs the space allotted to historiography and interpretation. In *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, the massacre comes across unequivocally as a local affair, with little space given to alternative interpretations.

To explain the unthinkable act, the authors provide one new interpretive lens—the sociology of group violence. Instead of asking "What was Brigham Young's role?" the authors begin with a universal, almost philosophical question: Why do basically good people sometimes commit atrocities? I commend the authors for wanting to compare this massacre with other instances of mass killings and ethnonational conflict, but I regret their incomplete application of social science literature. More than once, when their narrative demands a statement of causation or culpability, Walker, Turley, and Leonard simply quote a generalized point from a study on violence. Much more could be done with this literature.

In contrast to *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, Bagley's *Blood of the Prophets* (2002) truly was a victims' book—perhaps too much so. Other differences stand out. Bagley emphasized blood atonement and prophecies about Lamanites. *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* skims over these factors—and polygamy—to a surprising degree. It is less surprising that the authors downplay Brigham Young's direct influence, even his policy that sanctioned Indians to seize property from emigrant parties. Most

questionably, Walker, Turley, and Leonard end their story before the cover-up begins. It is one thing to argue that Brigham Young did not authorize the massacre. That hurdle is relatively low, and *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* clears it to my satisfaction. It is exponentially harder to argue that Brigham Young did not participate in the cover-up. The authors sidestep the matter by saying they will treat the massacre's aftermath in a follow-up volume. How long must we wait for that volume?

Massacre at Mountain Meadows targets not only a general Mormon readership but also LDS historians and Mormon history buffs. For them the book's main attractions will be the ample appendices and endnotes, not to mention the associated online bibliography, and the separate publication of documentary evidence in this issue of *BYU Studies*. The overall compilation of research is spectacular, a testament to openness.

The book's notes can be frustrating to unravel, however. For the sake of readability and literary effect, the authors often combine contemporary and reminiscent accounts, or accounts from various people, to create composite scenes. Experts will find plenty of material to nitpick. The authors' speculations about anthrax being the basis for poisoning rumors on the southern trail will also generate discussion.

One additional audience exists for this book, an audience with different predilections. Historians of U.S. religion and the North American West include Mormons in their purview, yet they have a distant relationship with the LDS historical community. Daunted by the mountains of documentary and historiographic material, most outsiders cede Utah and Mormon history to insiders. They rarely do research at the Church Archives or even suppose they can. Many times western historians have quizzed me about my own research trips: "Really, you can work there? Don't you need one of those temple passes?" Based on conversations with colleagues, I sense that opinions about *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* hardened before publication. To them, the prevailing perception is that the book was a Church-ordered refutation of Bagley, and it seemed fore-ordained that the authors would absolve Brigham Young. The fact that the authors "discovered" new material in the First Presidency's archives only reinforces the suspicion that the Church hierarchy conceals sensitive material in the vault, where of course regular historians cannot visit. And while no one doubts the professionalism of Walker, Turley, and Leonard, their status as Church employees raises deeper doubts for secularists. Historians tend to be reflexively skeptical when a believer writes a history of his own religion, or, for that matter, when a historian writes a history of a corporation—in this case, the Church—while being employed by that

corporation. Fair or not, few professors beyond Provo will validate the authors' declaration of academic freedom (xv–xvi).

Meanwhile, outside of religious and regional studies, American historians will probably pass over *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* just as they disregard Utah and Mormon history. That is not because of anti-Mormon prejudice—though it persists in the academy—but because of intellectual indifference. With the exception of the half-formed sections on group violence, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* simply does not engage with current scholarly trends. To be fair, Walker, Turley, and Leonard did not intend their book for an all-purpose academic audience. Writing for divergent readerships may seem like a tall order, but it is possible to produce high-quality Mormon history that works for nonspecialists as well as specialists. Sarah Barringer Gordon's *The Mormon Question* (2002) serves as a model.¹ Gordon took polygamy—the *other* tired topic from nineteenth-century Utah—and gave it new life by injecting scholarship from legal and constitutional history.

Unfortunately, Mormon and non-Mormon historians more often talk past each other. It is disappointing that Ned Blackhawk's prize-winning book, *Violence Over the Land* (2006)—a book about Utah Indians that uses violence as its organizing theme—has nothing to say about the Mountain Meadows Massacre.² Blackhawk's book is theoretically sophisticated but underresearched, whereas *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* is bibliographically impeccable but undertheorized. *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* fails to build on Blackhawk's argument that Spanish colonialism created a legacy of violence in the eastern Great Basin long before the Saints arrived. Mormon-Paiute relations—including Paiute participation in the massacre—become more explicable with this added context.

I view *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* as a necessary corrective and counterpoint to *Blood of the Prophets*, but my enthusiasm is dampened by the recognition that some future historian will have to write yet another book about Mountain Meadows—a synthesis, neither condemnatory nor apologetic, that draws on the research and perspectives of Bagley and Turley, while fully engaging with outside scholarship. Only then will the good work begun by Juanita Brooks be complete. Paradoxically, even as I look forward to that book, I consider it a waste of energy when so many other worthy topics cry out for attention. Imagine, for example, that the Church History Department had chosen to spend the better part of this decade collecting, transcribing, annotating, and digitizing every document regarding Mormon-Indian relations in Utah Territory. Compared to *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, such a project would have added exceedingly more to our understanding of Mormonism, Utah, and the U.S. West.

For obvious reasons these authors—and the Church—chose differently. While Mormon history is markedly better because of their work, it will be much better still when historians put the massacre to rest and move on.

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1. Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
2. Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).