Will Bagley. *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Lawrence Coates

Although Frank James Singer, a successful California businessman, hired Will Bagley to rewrite the story of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Bagley says Singer did not influence his interpretation (xxiv). Drawing upon his literary skills as editor of several volumes in Western history and as a columnist for the *Salt Lake Tribune,* Bagley presents his story by dramatically weaving the massacre into such themes as blood atonement, vengeance for the blood of the prophets, the second coming of Christ, absolute obedience to priesthood authority, deception, abuse of power, conspiracy, cover-up, and rebellion against the United States. "For Brigham Young and his religion," Bagley charges, "the haunting consequences of mass murder at Mountain Meadows are undeniable" (380). Bagley accuses Young of destroying incriminating evidence and soliciting testimonies that he had nothing to do with it; despite these efforts, Bagley claims, Young "could not change the past. He knew the full truth of his complicity in the crime. The Mormon prophet . . . initiated the sequence of events that led to the betrayal and murder of one hundred twenty men, women, and children" (380).

Bagley sees nineteenth-century Mormons as zealots who embraced millennialism, polygamy, and communalism with "total submission to a leader they considered ordained by God" (9). When government officials, immigrants, and news editors challenged Mormon theocracy, the American ideals of individual freedom and thought clashed with the Utopian dreams of Church leaders and created "a cycle of escalating violence" (9). Bagley asserts that persecution produced a spirit of revenge, which became an overriding Mormon trait. Sermons declaring "a war of *extermination*"

became the pattern (9). In Illinois, Joseph Smith laid the foundation for "his theocratic state [that] would govern both spiritual and temporal affairs" (15). Striking at freedom of speech, Bagley alleges, Smith destroyed the press and burned the *Expositor,* which had condemned him for advocating polygamy, seducing women, counterfeiting money, and forming a theocracy.

After Joseph and Hyrum Smith were murdered, Bagley says, the Mormons enshrined them. "Their *innocent blood*" became the Saints' rallying cry; scriptures promised that these blood stains would "cry unto the Lord of Hosts till he avenges that blood on earth. Amen" (17). Then, Bagley goes on, Brigham Young pushed aside other claims to leadership, seized control of the hierarchy, finished the Nauvoo Temple, and conducted temple adoption ceremonies that sealed thirty-eight men "to him as sons, the second being John D. Lee" (19). Tying Lee and Young together in the massacre at the Meadows, Bagley interprets the Mormon temple ceremony as a binding obligation "to avenge the blood of the Prophet, whenever the opportunity offered, and to teach their children to do the same" (21).

According to Bagley, Brigham Young migrated west with these ideas, created a theocracy extending over the entire Great Basin to the Pacific Ocean, and intimidated government officials, non-Mormons, and emigrants. Even though Bagley acknowledges that relations with the Indians ranged between war and peace, he argues that the Saints regarded the Indians as "the battle ax of the Lord," "Angel[s] of Vengeance," and weapons "God had placed in their hands" (37). Consequently, Bagley concludes, when the Arkansas travelers stopped at Mountain Meadows, Young had already set the stage for violence by sending George A. Smith to this region with a message to defend Zion against the Unites States Army at all cost. Reports of Parley P. Pratt's assassination escalated the desire for revenge. Eleven days before the massacre, Bagley charges, Young made final arrangements for the death of 120 people when he formed an alliance with Indian leaders from the Meadows and gave them all the emigrants' cattle.

Rejecting the stories about the emigrants harassing the Mormons and Indians along the trail, Bagley claims that William Dame, commander of the Nauvoo Legion in southern Utah; Isaac Haight, president of the Cedar City Stake and a major in the Legion; and another man arranged for John D. Lee to lead the Indians in an unprovoked attack on the emigrants. In Cedar City, the war hysteria, the fires of the Mormon Reformation, and religious fanaticism became driving forces in the decision to kill the emigrants, Bagley asserts. Laban Morrill, a member of the stake high council, objected to this decision and forced a reluctant Haight to send a messenger to ask Brigham Young for advice. Although Young's response was to leave the

Arkansas emigrants alone, Bagley argues that his "shrewd reply seems calculated to correct a policy gone wrong if it arrived in time and to cover his tracks if received too late. Whatever the letter's intent, it carried a hidden but clear message for Isaac Haight: make sure the Mormons could blame whatever happened on the Paiutes" (137).

In detailing the gruesome events of the weeklong siege, Bagley pens a dramatic story from many conflicting accounts—affidavits of the participants, trial testimonies, newspaper reports, *Mormonism Unveiled,* Major Carleton's *Special Report,* John D. Lee's last confessions, and the recollections of the surviving children. For the gory details, for example, Bagley draws primarily upon the memories of Rebecca Dunlap, Elizabeth Baker, Nancy Huff, and Sarah Baker, who ranged in age from six to three years at the time of the massacre. From these sources, some of which are clearly biased or unreliable, Bagley pieces together his version of the massacre: before dawn on September 11, 1857, Mormon leaders plotted the mass murder of the emigrants and charged John D. Lee with the task of decoying them from their barricades. After disarming them, the Mormons separated them into groups. The young children and wounded rode in wagons, while the women and older children walked some distance behind, and the men brought up the rear. On command from Major John Higbee, the militia escorts turned and murdered the men, while Nephi Johnson ordered some Paiutes and Mormons disguised as Indians to massacre the women and older children.

In addition to blaming the Mormons for taking temple vows to avenge the blood of the prophets and practicing blood atonement, Bagley charges the Mormons with several other crimes—shifting the blame to the emigrants and the Indians, enforcing a vow of silence, looting the emigrants' property, lying to government officials, failing to honestly investigate the massacre, placing the sole blame on John D. Lee, tampering with juries, destroying and hiding evidence, and making deals with prosecuting officials to protect Brigham Young from liability. With the passion of an investigating journalist, Bagley details these claims in 175 pages and concludes:

> The faith must accept its role, open all of its records on the subject, acknowledge its accountability, and repent—or learn to live with the guilt. Church leaders might wish until the end of time that the matter could be forgotten, but history bears witness that only the truth will lay to rest the ghosts of Mountain Meadows. (382)

The major strength of this book is Bagley's compelling writing style, which rivets the reader's attention quickly on the main issues surrounding the massacre. Bagley also quotes extensively from the primary and

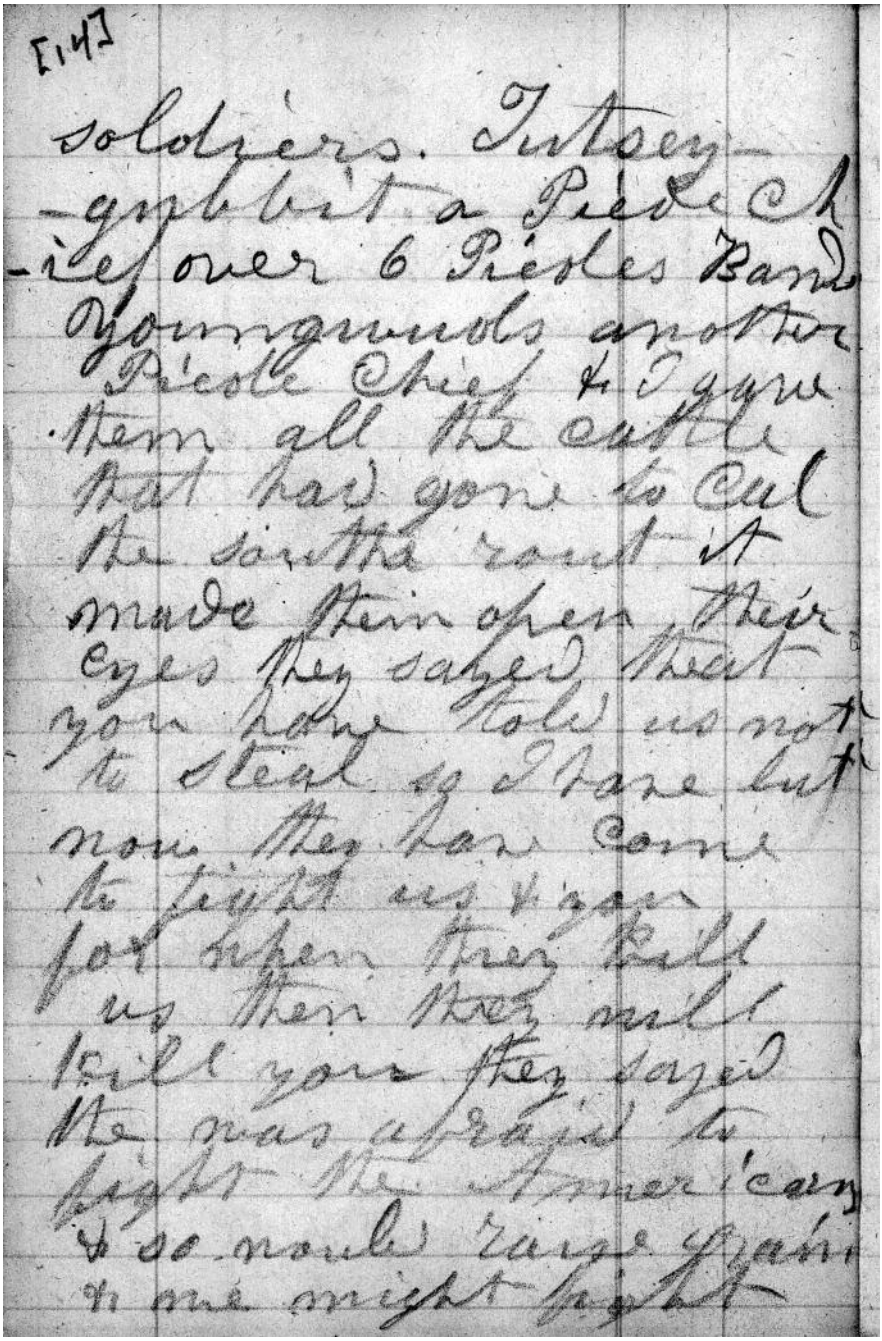
secondary sources, which gives the book the ring of authenticity. Furthermore, he identifies some new sources in various archives.

Serious errors in historical scholarship, however, severely undermine the fundamental arguments in his book. First, there are several important primary sources that he did not use accurately. Historians must verify the facts they use and avoid misusing information to support their interpretations. Bagley fails on both counts, because he seems to be driven by his passion to blame Brigham Young for this tragic event. For example, Bagley sees Young's offer to give the Piedes, a band of the Paiutes, "all the cattle that had gone to Cal[ifornia] the south rout" as the formation of an alliance (114). To make this point, Bagley quotes D. B. Huntington, Brigham Young's interpreter, as saying that the Piedes were "afraid to fight the Americans & so would raise [allies]" (114). Instead, Huntington's journal for September 1, 1857, says the Piedes "would raise grain"[1] (fig. 1). Replacing the word *grain* with *allies* substantially changes the meaning, but most readers will not be aware of Bagley's changing these words.

An equally serious fallacy occurs when Bagley fails to include all pertinent facts in his narrative. For example, he leads readers to believe that there was a direct link between Brigham Young and the Indians involved in the massacre. After meeting with Brigham Young on September 1, Bagley claims, Tutsegabit and Youngwuds returned to Mountain Meadows, participated in the massacre, and then came back to Salt Lake City and reported this news to Young. According to Bagley, Young apparently rewarded the Piede chief, Tutsegabit, for participating in the massacre by ordaining him to "Mormonism's higher priesthood" (170). Huntington, on the other hand, says Young commissioned this Native American to "preach the gospel & baptize among the House of Isreal[*sic*]."

Careful examination of contemporary documents that mention this ordination reveals problems with Bagley's link between the ordination and the massacre. D. B. Huntington recorded September 10 as the day Brigham Young "ordained Tutsequbbeds an elder" in Salt Lake City. If this date is accepted, then it would have been impossible for Tutsegabit to have been at the massacre the following day. Other observers, however, recorded different dates for Tutsegabit's ordination. On September 13, George A. Smith wrote to William Dame about it, and Wilford Woodruff noted it in his journal on September 16. Even if this last date is accepted for the ordination, Tutsegabit would have had to travel an impossible eighty-eight miles per day to cover roughly 350 miles in four days, since the massacre occurred just before dark on September 11.

Bagley has also not mentioned the evidence that Brigham Young had no knowledge of the massacre until well after it occurred. Huntington says the first news about the massacre at Mountain Meadows reached Salt Lake


[14]

soldiers. Tutsey-
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Piede Chief & I gave
them all the cattle
that had gone to Cal
the southe rout it
made them open their
eyes they sayed that
you have told us not
to steal so I have but
now they have come
to fight us & you
for when they kill
us then they will
kill you they sayed
the was afraid to
fight the Americans
& so would raise grain
& we might fight

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Fig. 1. D. B. Huntington's journal entry written September 1, 1857. Note the second and third lines from the bottom: "they was afraid to fight the American[s] & so would raise grain." Bagley substitutes *allies* for the word *grain* in this entry, which changes the meaning substantially. In the context of the rest of the entry, *grain* makes sense: the Piedes would raise grain rather than take the cattle.

City on September 20, when Arapene, a Native American, told Brigham Young that "the Piedes had killed the whole of a Emigration Company & took all their stock" (170). In nearly every chapter, Bagley speculates about the events without providing concrete factual evidence.

Furthermore, Bagley errs when he states that theological concepts were a direct motivation for killing the emigrants at Mountain Meadows. He gives literal meaning to Young's sermons and statements about blood atonement, avenging the blood of the prophets, and using the Indians as battle axes of the Lord and rules out any possibility that Young or his listeners viewed these statements as symbolic, figurative, theological, or hyperbolic in meaning. Bagley fails to provide any empirical evidence to show a direct link between Brigham Young's rhetoric and the massacre. Similar faulty arguments have been used to connect the oratory over slavery with the primary cause of the Civil War.

Attempting to write a gripping story, Bagley exaggerates and sensationalizes the details beyond their actual significance. Throughout the entire book, facts associated with the massacre become crucial when tied to prophecy, omens, signs, oaths, patriarchal blessings, or temple rituals. Facts become extremely important if they are dark and dirty, have hidden meaning, or hint at some insidious secret, plot, or conspiracy. In addition, Bagley creates a melodrama characterizing the Mormons as sinister, evil, deceptive people, while the governor and Indian agents who cooperate with the Saints are weak, spineless dupes. The judges, military officers, and officials who challenge the Mormon theocracy he views as honorable, upright, respectable, courageous men.

Among the many volumes on this topic that bash Brigham Young and the Mormons, Bagley's *Blood of the Prophets* stands alongside William Wise's *Mountain Meadows Massacre: An American Legend and a Monumental Crime*. At the other pole, there are books that blame the Indians and the Arkansas emigrants for this terrible disaster. In between these two extremes, Juanita Brooks's *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* stands as one of the most balanced books on the subject, even though it has some serious limitations. This topic, consequently, needs an honest scholarly version to correct the false impressions that so often distort the tragic event that occurred on September 11, 1857.

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1. Dimick Baker Huntington Journal 1808–1879, September 1, 1857, 14, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.