

*Vengeance Is Mine:
The Mountain Meadows Massacre and Its Aftermath*
By Richard E. Turley Jr. and Barbara Jones Brown

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Reviewed by Kent P. Jackson

September 11, 1857.

Thirteen years earlier, the Prophet Joseph Smith was murdered while in state custody. The Latter-day Saints had been driven from their homes in Missouri and Illinois, with no protection from those states or from the United States. The U.S. Army was on its way to the Utah Territory to put down a rebellion that didn't exist, and Utahns thought they might be driven from their homes once again. Because of the anticipated military invasion, leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had recently told settlers in Utah not to sell food, including grain, to non-Latter-day Saint emigrant companies passing through.

Those circumstances provided the backdrop for what became known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre. They are not an excuse for it—there is none—but they were realities in the world of Latter-day Saint settlers in the Utah Territory in the summer and fall of 1857. The events unfolded like this:

- A wagon train of about 130 emigrants from Arkansas arrived at Cedar City in southern Utah on its way to California.
- Men from the wagon train came into the town and tried to buy grain and other supplies to continue their journey.
- Latter-day Saint townspeople refused to sell to them.
- As a result, the travelers insulted the settlers and made idle threats against them.
- The wagon train moved on.
- The Cedar City residents felt they were disrespected by the actions and words of the travelers, so they decided to take revenge on them by means of a murderous attack on the wagon train.

- Not wanting to be implicated in what they planned, the settlers hired local Native Americans, Paiutes, to do the attacking and killing.
- The attack took place but didn't go off as planned, though several of the emigrants were killed.
- Surviving emigrants became aware that there were also whites among their attackers.

At that point, the men of the Cedar City area felt that they had a serious problem. If the train moved on and the emigrants arrived in California, the news would eventually get out that white residents of the territory— Latter-day Saints—had been involved in the attack on the emigrant party. That certainly would bring unwanted repercussions on the territory and on the Church.

Settlers, including officers of the territorial militia, deliberated over the course of a few days about what to do. Their decision? Send the militia to slaughter everyone in the traveling company except those who were so young that they wouldn't be able to tell anyone what happened.

So that is what they did.

Vengeance Is Mine: The Mountain Meadows Massacre and Its Aftermath is the long-awaited sequel to the 2008 *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy* by Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard. The new volume is authored by Turley and Barbara Jones Brown, who served as content editor for the first book. Basically, *Massacre* tells the story of the crime, and *Vengeance* tells the story of its aftermath. Yet as the authors point out in *Vengeance's* preface, the details of the crime are retold sufficiently in the new volume that one need not read the first book before the second (xvi). Indeed, the crime is retold very well in *Vengeance*, and repeatedly, as it is narrated in the voices of those who experienced it or heard about it from the perpetrators.

Working for a combined total of forty years researching the massacre, the authors and their predecessors on the first volume have found, and made use of, sources never before available to historians. Thus, through these books, we now have a greater understanding of the events than was ever possible before.

In addition to the quality of its exhaustive research, *Vengeance Is Mine* is also a superb work of narrative history writing. It is divided into forty-seven short chapters, each with a chronological and geographical focus. Those chapters take the reader rapidly through time from one episode to

the next to the story's conclusion. The book is not a whodunnit because we already know, or we learn very soon, who did it. But the tension that the authors create is nonetheless persistent. We want to know, Who is going to get caught? Who is going to come forward and tell the truth? Who is going to blame whom? Who is going to be held accountable? How many unforced errors can the politicians, judges, and prosecutors make? Are any of the perpetrators going to try to implicate Brigham Young? And is anyone going to be punished in the end?

The book eventually answers all those questions. It also puts to rest, or hopefully will put to rest, three persisting narratives about the massacre: the narrative that it was the Paiutes who devised and carried out the massacre, a lie that the perpetrators told from the beginning and that was passed on for generations; the narrative that the traveling emigrants somehow deserved what they got, a lie that many Latter-day Saints have believed to the present time; and the narrative that Brigham Young and other Church leaders in Salt Lake City ordered the massacre, a lie told by anti-Mormons from the beginning and still believed by many now.

In addition to the answers revealed in *Vengeance Is Mine*, the book exposes questions that need to be considered but likely can never be answered. The Mountain Meadows Massacre is America's most heinous example of what we now call "road rage." Travelers engage in "trash talk," so one of the parties decides to chase down the other and commit murder. We see this kind of behavior among narcissists on our highways and among rival urban gangs, but what could convince otherwise ordinary frontier farmers and shopkeepers to think that verbal insults justify murder? Or how can a rational person understand the twisted math that executing over a hundred people could possibly conceal the killing of a handful? And what about future consequences? How could they imagine that no one involved would ever talk?

The Mountain Meadows story is an example of the hypocrisy of group-identity thinking and the ease with which people can vilify whole populations. Non-Latter-day Saints were "gentiles," not to be trusted and somehow probably complicit in the murder of Joseph Smith and in other atrocities. Mormons, in turn, were "murderers, fanatics, and whores" (236). "We will sweep them from the face of the earth" (56). U.S. Army Col. James H. Carleton, outraged over what the Mormons had done at Mountain Meadows, soon led his soldiers to slaughter Paiutes and hundreds of Navajo in Arizona and New Mexico (235). Col. Patrick Connor, commander of American forces in Utah, hated the Mormons and became one of the founders of an anti-Mormon political party in Salt

Lake. When he massacred hundreds of Shoshone across the border in Idaho, the army promoted him to brigadier general, and that slaughter was celebrated for years on its anniversary (236–37). When we so thoroughly dehumanize others—whether Latter-day Saints, dissenters from the Church, emigrants from Arkansas, Native Americans, or anyone else—we allow ourselves to act without conscience, and horrible things can happen.

Some of the leaders of the southern Utah militia clearly thought that their murderous plot was morally justified to protect the Saints. Others, who had nothing to do with the planning, arrived at the scene, some from other settlements, only in time to take part in the killing. In all, there were fifty to sixty participants. The planners, high officers in the militia, were also leaders in the Church. They told the militia members that the plan was the right thing to do, so they followed their orders. They were, after all, militia members acting under military orders in a militia operation. When I joined the U.S. Army in 1970, the specter of the Mý Lai massacre of 1968 in Vietnam was hanging over everything the army did. So I was trained emphatically that I was not to obey “illegal orders.” The farmers and shopkeepers of Cedar City, Washington, Santa Clara, and Parowan had no such training, and they believed what they were told. Nor would they have had any idea what an “illegal order” was.

For the most part, Turley and Brown ignore those participants in the massacre, largely because they had no role in its inception, went back to their homes, and played no further public part in the story. They were not pursued by lawmen and remained mostly under the radar, leaving few hints and fewer written testimonials of their involvement. Yet I could not help but think about those men through the pages of the book—what their lives were like after September 11, 1857. In time they undoubtedly concluded that what went on at Mountain Meadows was horribly wrong and that their own involvement—killing innocent people mostly by shooting them through their heads at close range—was something they would have to live with through the rest of their lives. They must have lived with the terror of their actions largely in silence and in secret, for few of them were willing to let others know that they were involved (see 385, 390–91).

Turley and Brown do a masterful job dealing with the very long effort to bring the guilty to justice. Only nine men were indicted for the crime, but they included the planners and leaders. The vast distances between Utah settlements and the many potential hiding places in the West were among the reasons why prosecutors and their agents had so little success

apprehending the perpetrators. But infighting among federal officials, poor decision making on the part of prosecutors and judges, and the political machinations of anti-Mormons in Utah contributed. As did the Civil War, which began three and a half years after the massacre took place. In the end, only one man, John D. Lee, was tried, convicted, and executed, but that was twenty years after his crime. The authors tell us why it turned out that way. Most of the other indicted men lived out their lives, often in hiding for years, often in despair and sometimes in misery. As Brigham Young stated regarding the massacre's instigators, if God's judgment doesn't catch up with them in this life, it will in the next (249). And as American soldiers wrote on a cross atop the monument they erected over the victims' bones, "Vengeance is mine: I will repay saith the Lord" (196, 240).

Turley and Brown dedicated the book to Juanita Brooks, a descendant of a massacre participant, who published *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* in 1950. Brooks grew up in a time and place that had long sought to put the events of 1857 in the past. People there wanted it to go away, a sentiment that continued among many Latter-day Saints well into the twenty-first century. *Vengeance Is Mine*, following on the heels of the 2008 *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, further opens the horrible event to public view, enabling our generation to know the truth about the crime and to learn from it.

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