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**Title** Sally Denton's *American Massacre: Authentic Mormon Past versus the Danite Interpretation of History*

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**Abstract** Review of *American Massacre: The Tragedy at Mountain Meadows, September 1857* (2003), by Sally Denton.

## SALLY DENTON'S *AMERICAN MASSACRE*: AUTHENTIC MORMON PAST VERSUS THE DANITE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

Robert H. Briggs

In 1950 Juanita Brooks authored her now-classic history, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*.<sup>1</sup> In 1962 she published a revised edition and in 1970 added a new introduction, correcting minor errors and offering refinements in her views. Then in 1976 William Wise wrote *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*.<sup>2</sup> But Wise was not up to the challenge of this daunting historiographical problem. Based largely on secondary sources and full of stock heroes and villains from the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-Mormon Danite genre, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* could not boast of nuance, rigor, or sophistication in its treatment of sources. It is among the worst of the twentieth-century treatments of the massacre.

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1. Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1950).

2. William Wise, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Legend and a Monumental Crime* (New York: Crowell, 1976).

Review of Sally Denton. *American Massacre: The Tragedy at Mountain Meadows, September 1857*. New York: Knopf, 2003. xxiii + 306 pp., with bibliography and index. \$26.95.

In 2002 Will Bagley published *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*.<sup>3</sup> Although Bagley's work was flawed by his jaundiced view of Brigham Young and an inconsistent interpretive framework, it at least had the advantage of his familiarity with the primary sources of the massacre and with Utah and Western history generally. Now Sally Denton offers us *American Massacre: The Tragedy at Mountain Meadows, September 1857*. Just as Wise borrowed heavily from Brooks, so, too, does Denton borrow from Bagley, R. Kent Fielding, and others who have written recent treatments of frontier Utah. Mostly, however, she relies on the old counter-Mormon literature. Unfortunately, Sally Denton's *American Massacre* has done little to advance our understanding of the massacre or its many challenging historiographical problems.

### Organization and Content

*American Massacre* is divided into a prologue, three parts, and an epilogue. The first part deals with the founding and growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The second traces the 1857 passage of the Fancher train through frontier Utah at the outbreak of the Utah War to the bloody massacre at Mountain Meadows in southern Utah Territory. The third treats events after the massacre: the settlement of the Utah War, the government investigations in the late 1850s, and the trial, conviction, and execution of John D. Lee in the 1870s. The brief epilogue sketches the impact of the massacre on such figures as Mormon leader Brigham Young, perpetrator John D. Lee, mediator Thomas Kane, Judge John Cradlebaugh, and survivor Sarah Dunlap. It concludes with the discovery of human bones during repairs to the cairn monument in 1999, with some observations on contemporary issues concerning the massacre site.

In part 1, "The Gathering," Denton describes Joseph Smith and the religious movement he founded. She traces the progress of the church from New York to Kirtland, Ohio, and then to Jackson County, Mis-

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

souri. Denton follows the well-trod history of the growth of the church, the gathering of the faithful into centralized locations, the clashes with old settlers and detractors, the death of the prophet-leader Joseph Smith, and the beginning of the western exodus under Brigham Young to the Great Basin of the American West. She leaves off with the Gunnison massacre of 1853 on the Sevier River in central Utah.

Denton's discussion of Joseph Smith is influenced by the controversial psychoanalytical methods of Fawn M. Brodie and Robert D. Anderson.<sup>4</sup> She seems unaware of the weakness in these psychoanalytical approaches or in psychiatry's efforts to regain its scientific footing by distancing itself from the excessive claims of Freudian analysis in its early history.<sup>5</sup>

Denton also relies heavily on the work of R. Kent Fielding, whose 1993 study, *The Unsolicited Chronicler*,<sup>6</sup> argues for Mormon involvement in the deaths of John W. Gunnison, his Mormon guide, and six members of Gunnison's survey party in central Utah. In her acknowledgments, Denton lists Fielding first and acknowledges her special debt to him. She cites the Fieldings' works, *The Unsolicited Chronicler* and *The Tribune Reports of the Trials of John D. Lee*,<sup>7</sup> some seventy times, more than David Bigler and Will Bagley combined. Again,

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4. The editions Denton consulted were Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), and Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).

5. See the discussion of Robert D. Anderson's study in Michael D. Jibson, "Korihor Speaks, or the Misinterpretation of Dreams," *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1-2 (2002): 223-60.

6. Robert K. Fielding, *The Unsolicited Chronicler: An Account of the Gunnison Massacre, Its Causes and Consequences, Utah Territory, 1847-1859: A Narrative History* (Brookline, MA: Paradigm, 1993).

7. Robert K. Fielding and Dorothy S. Fielding, eds., *The Tribune Reports of the Trials of John D. Lee for the Massacre at Mountain Meadows, November, 1847-April, 1877* (Higganum, CT: Kent's Books, 2000). The Fieldings' book is engrossing, although not for the reasons Denton favors. The *Tribune Reports* grant a revealing view of the extremes of anti-Mormon prejudice in frontier Utah. In our current era of relative civility and tolerance, the blatantly anti-Mormon stance of the nineteenth-century *Salt Lake Daily Tribune* is jolting. The prejudices of some in Protestant America of that era—whether anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, or anti-Mormon—were extremely virulent.

Denton seems unaware of the controversial nature of Fielding's Gunnison massacre thesis or that it represents a minority view among Western historians.<sup>8</sup> She relies heavily on Fielding for her interpretation of both the Gunnison and Mountain Meadows massacres.

Continuing her synthesis of questionable or controversial secondary sources, Denton argues in part 2, "The Passage," that the "heart" of the Mormon reformation was "the revival of blood atonement" (p. 106). However, there is stronger evidence that the heart of the reformation was instead personal reformation, communal economic innovations, and a dramatic increase in the number of those entering plural marriage. Having introduced her readers to "Danite chief Bill Hickman" (p. 81), Denton henceforth conflates every other Mormon marshal, militiaman, or church official into a "Danite." Thus she identifies Anson Call as a Danite (p. 85), she cites the alleged work of Brigham Young's "Avenging Angels" (p. 106), and she claims that federal officials could not challenge the "vigilante tactics of the Danites" (p. 108). She describes John D. Lee's "status with the Danites" in southern Utah (p. 154) and presents the Nauvoo Legion's tactical repulse of Colonel Johnston's Utah expeditionary force in eastern Utah as "the Danites [burning] Fort Bridger" and "forty-four Danites [raiding] an army supply train" (p. 168). When in summer 1858 the Latter-day Saints returned to Great Salt Lake City from the "Move South," Denton maintains that Brigham Young "surrounded

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8. The consensus view of the Gunnison massacre is that Gunnison's government surveying party was attacked and killed near the Sevier River in central Utah by a party from the Pahvant band of the Ute tribe in retaliation for the deaths of their fellow tribesmen killed earlier by a passing emigrant train. A detailed article is Josiah F. Gibbs, "Gunnison Massacre—1853—Millard County, Utah—Indian Mareer's Version of the Tragedy—1894," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 1/3 (1928): 67–75. Standard treatments are found in Robert V. Hine, "Kern Brothers: Edward Meyer (1823–63) and Richard Hovendon (1821–53)" and Richard A. Bartlett, "Transcontinental Railroad Surveys," in *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, ed. Howard R. Lamar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 593, 1120; and Brigham D. Madsen, "John Williams Gunnison," in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan K. Powell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 241. Will Bagley does not credit the accusation of Mormon involvement; see Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets*, 44–45; and David Bigler concludes, "there is no convincing evidence or motive for such involvement." David L. Bigler, *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847–1896* (Spokane: Clark, 1998), 83.

his properties with Danites” (p. 184). Describing Amasa Lyman as “devout and kindhearted,” Denton says further that Lyman was “a high priest, apostle, and Danite since the early days at Kirtland” (p. 212). She notes that Lyman urged participants in the massacre to make “full confession and take the consequences.” Then, dramatically, she concludes: “[Lyman] would be excommunicated” (p. 212). This juxtaposition insinuates that Lyman’s observations about the massacre may have cost him his church membership. Of course, it was his dalliance in spiritualism and other matters, not Mountain Meadows, that led to Lyman’s excommunication.<sup>9</sup> Seeing Danites everywhere, it is only a small step for Denton to conclude that the Mountain Meadows massacre was the work of Mormon Danites under orders of the Mormon prophet Brigham Young.

In part 3, “The Legacy,” Denton narrates the two-decade period from the massacre through the conviction and execution of John D. Lee. Borrowing again from Fielding and Bagley, she analyzes the massacre. Then returning to surer ground, Denton describes the events of 1858, including the work of Thomas L. Kane as mediator of the Washington-Mormon disputes, the appointment of peace commissioners, and the presidential pardon and resolution of the Utah War. By 1859, the influx of government officials and soldiers temporarily energized the massacre investigation. Denton describes the work of Judge John Cradlebaugh, Utah Indian Superintendent Jacob Forney, U.S. Army Captains James Lynch and Reuben P. Campbell, Army surgeon Dr. Charles Brewer, and U.S. Marshal William Rogers, who in the course of their duties acquired information concerning the massacre and left reports or correspondence later collected in important government documents. During most of the 1860s the overriding governmental preoccupation was, of course, the Civil War and its aftermath. Meanwhile, in 1861 Mark Twain described the massacre in *Roughing It*. In the mid-1860s, disaffected Mormon Charles Wandell, using the pseudonym Argus, published an exposé of the massacre in the *Utah Reporter* and loudly

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9. Ronald W. Walker, “When the Spirits Did Abound: Nineteenth-Century Utah’s Encounter with Free-Thought Radicalism,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50/4 (1982): 314–15, 318, 321.

queried why the perpetrators had not been prosecuted. As the 1860s gave way to the 1870s, wealthy Mormon William Godbe formed the Godbeite group. After his excommunication from the Church of Jesus Christ, Godbe started the *Mormon Tribune*, which later became the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*. Eventually sold to gentile interests in Salt Lake City, the *Daily Tribune* became the mouthpiece for the most vocal and strident of the anti-Mormons in Utah.

Meanwhile, in 1870 Brigham Young excommunicated John D. Lee, who moved with his remaining families to Lonely Dell at the confluence of the Paria and Colorado rivers in northern Arizona. Hoping to escape notice, Lee plied his ferry trade on the Colorado. But in 1871 Philip Klingensmith, the former Mormon bishop in Cedar City and a massacre participant, provided an affidavit to court officials in Pioche, Nevada, that was leaked to the press and widely circulated in 1872. This and other events rekindled interest in prosecuting massacre perpetrators. Passage of the Poland Act in 1874 strengthened the jurisdiction of federal courts in Utah. Sitting in the second district court in Beaver, Judge Jacob Boreman's grand jury issued an indictment for murder against nine alleged perpetrators. The leading defendants were William H. Dame, Isaac C. Haight, John M. Higbee, Philip Klingensmith, John D. Lee, and William Stewart.

Denton closes with the two trials of John D. Lee. The first, which took place in summer 1875, concluded in a hung jury, nine to three for acquittal. For the second trial in 1876, Sumner Howard had replaced William Carey as U.S. attorney in Utah Territory. In a controversial move, Howard sought Mormon cooperation in obtaining new witnesses to overcome the weaknesses of the prosecution's case in the first trial. With introductions from Mormon leadership, Howard interviewed Mormon wagon drivers Samuel Knight and Samuel McMurdy and Indian interpreter Nephi Johnson, all of whom had been at the massacre and near Lee. At the second trial in September 1876, Howard presented a lean but focused case, calling these witnesses as well as Jacob Hamblin who, while not at the massacre, had an interview with Lee some days after it. Lee's defense lawyers were not able to shake the prosecution witnesses nor did they call any witnesses of their own in rebuttal. The jury convicted Lee of first-degree murder, and Judge



Boreman sentenced Lee to death. Lee chose the option of dying by firing squad. After his legal appeals and request for clemency were denied, Lee was executed at Mountain Meadows on 23 March 1877.

Denton, like Bagley, argues that there was a corrupt “deal” between the U.S. attorney for Utah and the Mormon prophet. According to this argument, the quid pro quo in the corrupt bargain was Mormon guarantees of a conviction of John D. Lee in exchange for federal prosecutor guarantees that further Mountain Meadows prosecutions would be dropped. This argument is entirely circumstantial, while the countervailing evidence is the little-known, behind-the-scenes efforts of Howard, Judge Boreman, and others to pursue prosecution of massacre defendants and fugitives from justice—Isaac Haight, John Higbee, and William Stewart.<sup>10</sup> But as Congress never approved the funding requests from Utah officials, the fugitives were never captured. Besides, the nation was pursuing an impassioned antipolygamy crusade against the Mormon leadership. In 1877, after the deaths of Brigham Young and George A. Smith, there was more bang for the congressional buck in antipolygamy measures than in Mountain Meadows prosecutions. Thus, as federal antipolygamy efforts and funding increased, Mountain Meadows prosecutions declined correspondingly. The public soon lost interest.

This third part is not without its shortcomings—examples include Denton’s faulty massacre analysis in chapter 11 and her theory of a corrupt “deal” between Howard and Young in chapter 15. Yet this section is better than either of the first two since the errors of fact and interpretation are less frequent and less glaring. Additionally, while still demonstrating her considerable skills at synthesis and prose style, Denton shows that she can approach balance and evenhandedness in treating the Mormon past, if not actually achieving it. Here at least, the Danite interpretation of Latter-day Saint history is less apparent.

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10. At the time of Lee’s second trial in September 1876, the prosecutors agreed not to prosecute Philip Klingensmith and William H. Dame. The trial transcripts and legal pleadings in the two trials of John D. Lee are in HM 16904, Jacob Boreman Collection, Mormon Americana Collection, The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA.

## Evaluation

Denton tells a rip-roaring tale with both economy and color. She also shows skill in synthesizing secondary sources. With better knowledge of her sources and more care in interpreting them, she could be a skillful popularizer. Although she interjects the opinions of past writers on the massacre far too often—quoting, for example, Stenhouse, Gibbs, Brooks, Wise, Fielding, Quinn, Bigler, and Bagley at excessive length—she organizes her sources and maintains a coherent narrative thread. How, then, did her project miscarry so badly?

Denton's book is marred by errors of fact and interpretation too numerous to list. These difficulties mostly stem from Denton's uncritical use of sources. The book's shortcomings can be thus summarized:

- Of the many eyewitnesses to the massacre, John D. Lee is relied upon almost exclusively.
- Lee's views and opinions on militia aims, means, and motives need counterbalancing, yet there are virtually no references to other militia eyewitnesses.
- A critical method for interpreting the John D. Lee accounts (or any others) is lacking.
- Heavy reliance is placed on secondary sources and on counter-Mormon sources from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- There is no discernible method or effort to distinguish between evidence (eyewitness accounts in primary sources) and rumor (e.g., in the works of the Stenhouses and the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, etc.).

### Reliable Sources

Denton cites sources by or about John D. Lee more than one hundred thirty times.<sup>11</sup> Besides Lee, the only other perpetrator accounts

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11. The five Lee sources upon which Denton relies are John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled; Including the Remarkable Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop John D. Lee; (written by himself) and Complete Life of Brigham Young* (St. Louis: Vandawalker, 1891; reprint, Albuquerque: Tierra Blanca, 2001); *Journals of John D. Lee, 1846–47 and 1859*, ed. Charles Kelly (1955; reprint, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984); Robert G. Cleland and Juanita Brooks, eds., *A Mormon Chronicle: The Diaries of John D. Lee, 1848–1876*

she mentions are those of former Mormon bishop Philip Klingensmith, whom she cites seven times. Are these sources sufficient? Since the human enterprise we call “writing history” condenses the complexity of the past, is the “history” (the narrative account) representative of the “past” (the actual complex of events and actors) under consideration? Specifically, is Denton’s narrative synthesis representative of the authentic source material?

I have provided an appendix listing key primary sources. Before the reader forms his or her opinion, consider the extent of the sources listed there. These were witnesses to events surrounding the massacre or to important episodes in its aftermath. Most are militiamen of the Iron Military District in southern Utah. What the appendix shows is that, besides John D. Lee, more than sixty additional witnesses provide approximately eighty-five additional primary documents, very few of which Sally Denton considers in her study. On this ground alone, Denton’s treatment of the massacre is inadequate.

### Reliable Methods of Interpretation

To be sure, John D. Lee is an important source, and his statements should be considered in reconstructing the massacre. By Lee’s own account, he played a central role in the deadly affair. But Denton does not address the obvious question about the reliability of Lee’s accounts: After Lee’s 1876 murder conviction branded him the most notorious mass murderer in the nineteenth-century American West, wouldn’t he logically be tempted to shade his account to justify his own conduct or deflect blame to others? Put another way, how reliable are the accounts of John D. Lee?

In evaluating John D. Lee and every other witness or alleged perpetrator at Mountain Meadows, one should require verification of details from other reliable sources. Next, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> close

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(Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983); Juanita Brooks, *John Doyle Lee: Zealot, Pioneer Builder, Scapegoat* (1973; reprint, Logan: Utah State University Press, 1992); and *Writings of John D. Lee*, ed. Samuel N. Henrie (Tucson: Hats Off Books, 2001).

12. Robert H. Briggs, “Wrestling Brigham,” review of *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, by Will Bagley, *Sunstone*, December 2002,

analysis of the text of the perpetrator or witness narratives shows that they are composed of different elements, some of which are more reliable than others. Among the perpetrators of the massacre, their narrative accounts are a form of apologia—verbal accounts structured as a defense or justification. Many of the accounts have one or more main thematic points whose function is to excuse or justify the narrator. These are sustained by subsidiary themes supporting the main themes.

To a surprising degree, however, many of the accounts contain a second component, elements that admit or confess to participation in crime. Both common sense and the common and statutory law of many jurisdictions interpret such statements in this light: individuals would not make such admissions against their personal interests unless they were true. Thus, given the improbability that a militiaman would make such a confession unless it was true, these statements are reliable, especially when independently verified.

The militia statements also contain a third element, “incidental detail.” These are elements in the narrative that are neither part of the defense nor of the (possibly unintended) confessions, about which each narrator would have “no reason to lie.” When independently verified from other sources, these elements are likely reliable. Thus within each militia statement we may find elements of varying degrees of veracity. The most reliable element is a confession or admission of criminal involvement. The next most reliable element is incidental details, particularly when independently verified. The least reliable is the apologia itself with its evasions, denials, and excuses.

If we impose the requirement of verification or corroboration on these categories, it yields a useful hierarchy of reliability that we can apply to perpetrator and witness accounts alike. Elements of a statement can be ranked from lesser to greater reliability as follows:

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62–65; a longer version, “Mountain Meadows and the Craft of History,” was previously available online at [www.sunstoneonline.com](http://www.sunstoneonline.com).

1. Accusations against others, uncorroborated
2. Incidental detail, uncorroborated
3. Confessions, uncorroborated
4. Accusations against others corroborated by other reliable evidence
5. Incidental detail corroborated by other reliable evidence
6. Confessions corroborated by other reliable evidence

As a general rule, then, if one confesses his or her personal involvement in crime and the involvement is verified by others, it is trustworthy. Similarly, incidental detail (things about which there is no reason to lie), when verified by others, is also reliable.

Consider the example of John D. Lee's account as contained in *Mormonism Unveiled*, the posthumous work edited and published by his lead defense lawyer, William W. Bishop, upon which Denton relies so heavily. For this discussion I will operate under the assumption that John D. Lee authored the manuscript on which the first edition of *Mormonism Unveiled*<sup>13</sup> was based and that it substantially conforms to Lee's (now lost) manuscript. However, readers should be aware that even with the original 1877 *Mormonism Unveiled*, there are lingering concerns about the reliability of the text because of possible editorial changes made to Lee's manuscript by Bishop or possibly other editorial hands. Thus Samuel Nyal Henrie argues that after Lee's death, "his manuscripts were sent to a St. Louis publisher who padded them with anti-Mormon introductions, commentaries, interpolations and appendices. His last writings, which were intended only to recover some of his reputation by telling the true story, were instead propagated in the Midwest and East under an unauthorized title, *MORMONISM UNVEILED*."<sup>14</sup> Concerns about later editions, including the 1891 edition upon which Denton relies, are magnified because of interpolations in these later editions.

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13. John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled, or the Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop John D. Lee* (St. Louis: Bryan, Brand, 1877).

14. *Writings of John D. Lee*, 6.

With this caveat in mind, we turn to *Mormonism Unveiled*.<sup>15</sup> The John D. Lee of *Mormonism Unveiled* presents an apologia consisting of defenses, self-justifications, and accusations against others. But the book also contains confessions and intriguing incidental details. *Mormonism Unveiled* and the 1877 Lee-Howard statement contain admissions of John D. Lee that focus on his own role before, during, and after the massacre, among which are these:

- Lee considered that killing the Arkansas company was in keeping with his religious vows.
- In a militia planning meeting in Cedar City, Lee discussed plans for an attack on the emigrant company with fellow militia major, Isaac Haight.
- Following that meeting and while en route to his home at Fort Harmony, Lee told Paiutes bound for the Mountain Meadows that he would meet them there and lead them.
- He conveyed orders to other militiamen to send Paiutes to the Meadows.
- On the day of the first attack, Monday, 7 September 1857, Lee was the only white man present.
- In one incident that day, Lee was so close to the fighting that he was shot through his shirt and hat.
- He had multiple interactions with the Indians during the week.

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15. One thing that makes the Mountain Meadows massacre so difficult for Latter-day Saints to discuss even today is that it is still amazingly divisive *within* the LDS community. It is the closest thing we have to a family feud. There are still strong partisan positions among the descendants of Brigham Young, George A. Smith, Isaac C. Haight, John D. Lee, Jacob Hamblin, Samuel Knight, Samuel McMurdy, and Nephi Johnson, to name only a few. Each of these individuals now has thousands of descendants. The descendants of the much-married John D. Lee probably now number in the tens of thousands, many of whom are faithful members of the Church of Jesus Christ. In discussing the motives and actions of John D. Lee as contained in *Mormonism Unveiled* and the Lee-Howard statement, I do so to illustrate the results that can be obtained by applying a rigorous method that distinguishes between confession, incidental detail, and exculpatory statement. I do not mean to cause pain to Lee's descendants, although I appreciate that the process may be painful nonetheless. But since *Mormonism Unveiled* forms a key part of Denton's *American Massacre*, analyzing this alleged work of John D. Lee is unavoidable.

- He was seen by the emigrant camp at a distance and by two emigrant boys at close range.
- During the night before the main massacre, Lee was present in the militia council at Mountain Meadows that developed the massacre plan.
- On the day of the main massacre, Friday, 11 September 1857, Lee went to the emigrant camp and delivered deceptive terms of surrender to decoy the emigrants from their protective enclosure.
- He was selected to convey to Brigham Young an account of the massacre.
- In his role as Indian farmer, he made a false financial report of expenses for Indians involved in the massacre.

Implicit in Lee's confession is his position as the senior militia officer with operational command and control of the militia in the field at Mountain Meadows. Thus, the John D. Lee of *Mormonism Unveiled* admitted his criminal involvement in key aspects of the massacre and its aftermath. Since many of these elements are also verified by other sources, they are highly reliable.<sup>16</sup>

At the opposite end of the reliability scale are the elements of *Mormonism Unveiled* containing Lee's self-justifications or accusations against others. They include:

- At the outbreak of the Utah War in late summer 1857, when Mormon leader George A. Smith toured the southern settlements, Smith discussed with Lee measures against overland emigrants, not U.S. expeditionary troops.
- In a militia planning council in Cedar City in early September 1857, Lee acted under compulsion, not voluntarily, when he assumed the role of leading the Paiutes at Mountain Meadows.
- Lee arrived at the Mountain Meadows after the first attack but was not present for any part of it.

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16. Robert H. Briggs, *The Tragedy at Mountain Meadows Massacre: Toward a Consensus Account and Time Line* (St. George, UT: Dixie State College, 2002), lecture delivered 13 March 2002 for the Juanita Brooks Lecture Series in St. George, Utah.

- After the first attack, Lee discouraged rather than encouraged further Paiute attacks on the emigrant company.
- In the militia council at Mountain Meadows the night before the main massacre, Lee was the lone voice pleading that the emigrants be released unharmed.
- On the day of the massacre, Lee acted under orders, not on his own initiative as a leading militia field officer, when entering the emigrant camp.
- During the massacre, it was his fellow militiamen, not Lee, who killed the wounded men and women riding near Lee.
- In his meeting with Mormon leaders in Great Salt Lake City some weeks later, Lee disclosed fully the role of the Iron County militiamen in the massacre, including his central role, rather than suppressing these facts.

As contained in *Mormonism Unveiled* and the Lee-Howard statement, Lee's defense is to blame others. Therefore, unless verified by other reliable evidence, we should be skeptical of these accusations.

Where Denton goes awry, then, is in her nearly exclusive use of *Mormonism Unveiled* for eyewitness observations and her failure to use any discernible critical method in interpreting it. Before relying on the unsubstantiated portions of *Mormonism Unveiled*, serious students of the massacre must grapple with the reliability issue. This Denton fails to do.

### The Larger Issue—Bias in the Nineteenth-Century Counter-Mormon Canon

Besides John D. Lee, Sally Denton cites the nineteenth-century works of the Stenhouses, *Rocky Mountain Saints* and “*Tell It All*,” some sixty times.<sup>17</sup> Next, she cites the most virulent anti-Mormon nineteenth-

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17. The editions cited by Denton are T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints: A Full and Complete History of the Mormons, From the First Vision of Joseph Smith to the Last Courtship of Brigham Young* (London: Ward, Lock, and Tyler, 1871); Mrs. T. B. H. Stenhouse, “*Tell It All*”: *The Story of a Life's Experience in Mormonism, A Thrilling Record of Woman's Life in Polygamy* (Hartford, CT: Worthington, 1874).



century Utah newspaper, the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune* some thirty-six times.<sup>18</sup> Denton cites other works in the same mold: C. V. Waite, *The Mormon Prophet*; C. P. Lyford, *The Mormon Problem*; Ann Eliza Young, *Wife No. 19*; Bill Hickman, *Brigham's Destroying Angel*; Nelson Winch Green, *Fifteen Years among the Mormons*; B. G. Parker, *Recollections of the Mountain Meadow Massacre*; Josiah F. Gibbs, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*; and Frank J. Cannon, *Brigham Young*.<sup>19</sup>

These works are representative of a larger body of literature that we may term the nineteenth-century counter-Mormon canon. It is not that these works are wholly unreliable. If nothing else, singly and collectively, they remind us of the virulence of the period. In addition, they contain perceptions and interpretations of past events useful to the historian. But to illustrate the problem of both patent and latent bias in these early sources, let's briefly examine a similar problem in another context: the problem of bias in Euro-American sources of Native American peoples.

Beginning five hundred years ago, the Indians of North America were uprooted, first by Europeans and then by Euro-Americans. Not surprisingly, the history of these successive eras has largely been written by Euro-Americans. By and large, what survives from that long period of colonization is European and Euro-American source materials. These sources contain the unconscious biases, prejudices,

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18. As noted above, many of these references are to the Fieldings' *Tribune Reports of the Trials of John D. Lee*, an edited version of the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune's* running series of reports on the progress of the criminal proceedings against Lee from the beginning of Lee's first trial in summer 1875 through his execution in March 1877.

19. Denton's bibliography cites these works as follows: Catherine V. Waite, *The Mormon Prophet and His Harem* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1866); C. P. Lyford, *The Mormon Problem: An Appeal to the American People* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1886); Ann Eliza Young, *Wife No. 19* (1875; reprint, New York: Arno, 1972); William A. Hickman, *Brigham's Destroying Angel: Being the Life, Confession, and Startling Disclosures of the Notorious Bill Hickman, the Danite Chief of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Shepard, 1904); Nelson W. Green, *Fifteen Years among the Mormons* (New York: Dayton, 1859); B. G. Parker, *Recollections of the Mountain Meadow Massacre* (Plano, CA: Reed, 1901); Josiah F. Gibbs, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Tribune Publishing, 1910); Frank J. Cannon and George L. Knapp, *Brigham Young and His Mormon Empire* (New York: Revell, 1913).

and assumptions of the Euro-American colonizers. Similarly, the majority of the Euro-American histories of Indian peoples have unconsciously received and reflected the biases and presuppositions in the sources.

Now, however, new historical aims and methods have changed the field. Part of these new approaches involves a self-conscious effort to shed past prejudices against native peoples. Of course the old, biased sources are still used. But now the historian or ethnohistorian makes conscious efforts to shear away the blatant prejudices and even the hidden biases of the past. Used consistently, this interpretative method is a means to achieving a sympathetic treatment of Indian peoples and cultures, one that reflects their own self-understanding rather than a Euro-American one.<sup>20</sup>

Robert M. Utley's 1984 study, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890*, illustrates this approach and makes an additional point. In the foreword, distinguished Western historians Howard R. Lamar, Martin Ridge, and David J. Weber comment on one of the "arresting themes" in Utley's study: "that two thought worlds existed neither of which ever understood the other."<sup>21</sup>

This observation is equally true of Protestants and Latter-day Saints in nineteenth-century America. Both strove to be the Christian light on a hill to the world. Both made exclusive claims to be God's chosen. This made their positions irreconcilable. Further, more than is generally recognized, many Protestant reformers pursued the moral and political crusades of the nineteenth century in the hope that America would be established as a Protestant nation. Abolitionism, Southern reconstruction, antipolygamy, prohibition, and Sunday closing laws were among the most prominent of these crusades.

Focusing on the antipolygamy crusade, we are shocked even today by its energy, zeal, and excesses. We need only recall that the anti-

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20. For a discussion of this and many other issues facing historians of the New Indian History, see the essays in Donald L. Fixico, ed., *Rethinking American Indian History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

21. Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), xv.

polygamy legislation, from Morrill (1862) to Edmunds-Tucker (1887), eventually criminalized the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members, including law-abiding monogamists. Thus, to vote in Idaho, each male of legal age had to deny affiliation with the church, even if, like most of the Saints, he was monogamous. The effect was to disenfranchise all Mormon males. In *Davis v. Beason* (1890),<sup>22</sup> the United States Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, upheld the government position, noting that the free-exercise clause was bounded by the concept of “general Christianity” and the recognition that legislatures could criminalize those acts “recognized by the general consent of the Christian [i.e., Protestant] world in modern times as proper matters for prohibitory legislation.”<sup>23</sup>

American courts began the nineteenth century by reading the common law as protecting or privileging general Protestantism. They concluded the century by reading constitutional law in a similar light: they viewed the United States Constitution as incorporating and protecting general Protestantism. The Latter-day Saint position was swept aside by the *assumption* that the Constitution protected general Protestantism, which in turn could define those acts to criminalize under the law. In keeping with Protestant assumptions, the penal law criminalized bigamy and, by extension, polygamy. Thus it was impossible that there could be a valid constitutional basis for the plural marriage system under the First Amendment free exercise of religion clause. Why? Because general Protestantism, not the upstart Church of Jesus Christ, defined and dictated the limits of the free exercise of religion.<sup>24</sup> Ipso facto, the Latter-day Saint position was beyond consideration.<sup>25</sup>

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22. *Davis v. Beason*, 133 U.S. 343 (1890).

23. Analyzed and quoted in Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 227.

24. Gordon’s treatment of these complex political, religious, and constitutional issues in *The Mormon Question* is excellent.

25. Postcolonialism offers an even more provocative example. Postcolonial studies focus on West versus East; European colonizers versus the non-European colonized; Eurocentric assumptions and European domination; and cultural imperialism, political control, and intellectual-cultural hegemony through controlling the content and transmission

What does this have to do with the Mountain Meadows massacre and its sources? Everything. It means that, like whites and Indians, Protestants and Latter-day Saints constituted “two thought worlds. . . neither of which ever understood the other.” It means that whatever the theological differences over the Godhead, the Christian canon, or religious authority, it was polygamy that antagonized the Protestant majority. It was polygamy that made the Saints seem more “Asiatic” than American to most Protestants. It was the direct challenge that Mormon polygamy hurled at Protestant public morality that caused late nineteenth-century Protestants to view the Church of Jesus Christ as a counter-Protestant, if not anti-Protestant, religion. And it was polygamy that galvanized widely divergent Protestant denominations into a united politico-moral crusade against the church. The resulting clash produced bitter hostility among the antagonists. That virulence of feeling is reflected as a blatant anti-Mormonism in most late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature on the Saints, including the sources and literature dealing with the Mountain Meadows massacre. Of course, the Saints had both patent and latent biases, too. But in the historiography of the massacre,

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of texts. Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis?: Recent Directions in Historiography* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 125–36. Analogizing to the Mormon experience in nineteenth-century Protestant America, are there any interesting points of comparison? We may need to reevaluate the manner in which Protestant America dominated Mormon Utah, its subservient colony. While the Protestant antipolygamy crusade failed to crush Mormonism, it did succeed in establishing Protestant hegemony on the issues of Mormon marital practices and direct church involvement in politics and economics, a substantial exercise of control. Moreover, as Protestant elites in all three branches of the federal government oversaw the criminalization of the Church of Jesus Christ and forfeiture of most of its assets, leading Protestant denominations (e.g., Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others) increased their “colonizing” efforts in Utah. The period is commonly called the “Americanization” of Utah. But was it not in fact an overt attempt to “protestanticate” Mormonism through compulsive means? The larger implications of the analogy are beyond the scope of this review. But cultural imperialism or dominance over the colonized through control of texts is not. The Mountain Meadows massacre occurred nearly one hundred fifty years ago. It was an awful disaster and should never be forgotten. But what of the virulent anti-Mormon treatments of it that have continued unabated for a century and a half? Are these not continuing attempts at cultural dominance through control of texts—texts here meaning, or at least including, history texts?

historians have been aware of an LDS bias in the LDS sources, yet not always fully aware of anti-Mormon bias in the non-Mormon sources.

An interesting example is the Fieldings' *Tribune Reports* on the trials of John D. Lee. In their commentary, the Fieldings do not consider whether the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune* might have been slanted toward the anti-Mormon political propaganda objectives of the Liberals. Unconsciously they accept the Liberal party line and are oblivious to bias in the *Daily Tribune's* reporting. Thus, the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune's* series on the Lee trials reflects nineteenth-century anti-Mormon prejudice while the Fieldings' commentary reflects how that prejudice is perpetuated in the twenty-first century. The *Salt Lake Daily Tribune* was known for its bitter hostility and antagonism toward the "Mormon priesthood." Even among other anti-Mormons of Utah, the *Daily Tribune* distinguished itself as "ultra" anti-Mormon. It was the political organ of the Liberal Party in Utah, whose platform was the expansion of gentile interests and influence in Utah's political and economic spheres and the diminishment of Latter-day Saint influence. Considering the political balance of power in Utah, they recognized that statehood would further entrench LDS influence. Thus, they aggressively opposed LDS initiatives for statehood. Their main lobbying tools against the Mormon priesthood were polygamy, Mormon "meddling" in political and economic matters, and Mormon "lawlessness." Mormon violations of the antipolygamy laws and the Mountain Meadows massacre were for them prime examples of this lawlessness. In reporting on the Lee trials and casting light on the massacre nearly two decades before, the Liberals and the *Daily Tribune* had a political ax to grind.

That prejudice, in short, is what makes the Mountain Meadows massacre such a vexing historiographical problem. That is what requires the interpreter of this awful event to develop a sophisticated method for shifting the sometimes maddeningly contradictory source material. That is what demands that the historian consistently and rigorously apply his or her interpretative method to all source material.

What Sally Denton has done is interpret the Mountain Meadows massacre from *Mormonism Unveiled* and similar works from the

nineteenth-century counter-Mormon secondary sources. Shunted aside are many dozens of other eyewitness accounts, the majority of them not known to Juanita Brooks a half century ago (see appendix below). In them lies the genuine history of the great calamity at Mountain Meadows.<sup>26</sup> Even for a journalistic treatment like *American Massacre*, Denton's decision to jettison the new source material in favor of antiquated nineteenth-century anti-Mormon secondary sources was an unfortunate choice. It's a shame, too, because she has obvious talent as both a synthesizer of complex material and a prose stylist. In the final analysis, the deepest disappointment is this: In finding a Danite under every cedar and sage in frontier Utah, Denton unwittingly robbed *American Massacre* of the fascinating complexity of authentic history.

## Appendix

### Eyewitnesses and Sources to the Mountain Meadows Massacre

This bibliography lists eyewitnesses to the massacre or to important events in its aftermath. Where a position in a militia unit is identified, these are from the 1857 muster rolls of the Tenth Regiment or Iron Military District.<sup>27</sup> This district covered the Mormon villages of

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26. Although some of the new sources show that Juanita Brooks's view of the massacre needs updating, they also show that she was not far off in her landmark study, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*. Further, these sources reinforce the insight that she emphasized in later editions of her book: that the massacre "could only have happened in the emotional climate of war." Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), vi. I'm sure that many of the new details concerning military matters—from the Iron Military District muster rolls to the threat southern Utahans perceived of military invasion from Texas or California; from the role of militia couriers and communiqués to the reliable chronology that Private Joseph Clews affords of "massacre week"—all these and more would have fascinated Brooks.

27. Utah Territorial Militia (Nauvoo Legion), 10th Regiment Battalion and Company Muster Rolls, 10 October 1857, Utah State Historical Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah. This roster reflects the militia positions or offices as of September 1857 and has some slight changes from the previous militia roster in June 1857. The June 1857 Iron County Militia Roster is archived as MSS 801, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Beaver, Parowan, Paragoonah, Cedar City, Washington, Pinto, and Gunlock and the small “fort” villages of Fort Johnson, Hamilton Fort, Fort Harmony, and Fort Clara. The regiment consisted of nine companies in four battalions. Each company had four to five platoons, but for simplicity’s sake the platoons are omitted.

Anonymous militiaman, witness, or participant at Mountain Meadows—  
interview, 1859

Anonymous Ute Indian, witness, central Utah—interview, 1857

Arthur, Christopher J., adjutant to Captain Edwards, Co. G, 3rd Bat.—  
interview, 1892

Ashworth, William B., witness—autobiography, undated

Barton, William, 2nd lieutenant, Co. C, 1st Bat.—interview, 1892

Bradshaw, John, private, Co. F, 3rd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875

Bringhurst, John B., witness, Toquerville, 1873–74 (observations of  
Isaac Haight)—statement, 1928

Call, Anson, witness, Bountiful, 1857 (observations of J. D. Lee)—  
affidavit, 1877

Chatterley, John, private, Co. F, 3rd Bat.—statement, 1919

Farnsworth, Philo T., captain, Co. A, 1st Bat.—Lee trial testimony,  
1875

Campbell, Mary Steele, witness, Cedar City—interview, 1892

Clews, Joseph, private, Co. F, 2nd Bat.—statement, 1876

Edwards, William, private, probably attached to Parowan unit—  
affidavit, 1924

Fish, Joseph, private, Co. C, 1st Bat.—autobiography, undated

Hakes, Collin R., witness, Beaver and Mountain Meadows (Lee execu-  
tion)—affidavit, 1907; statement, 1914; affidavit, 1916

Hamblin, Jacob, 2nd lieutenant, Co. H, 4th Bat.—journal, 1857; inter-  
views, 1859; affidavits, 1859; statement, 1871; Lee trial testimony,  
1876

Hamblin, Rachel, witness, Mountain Meadows—interviews, 1859

Hamblin, Albert, witness, Mountain Meadows—interview, 1859

Hamilton, John, Sr., private, Co. F, 3rd Bat.—Lee trial testimony,  
1875

- Hamilton, John, Jr., 2nd lieutenant, Co. F, 3rd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Hancock, George W., witness, Payson—interview, 1857
- Haslam, James H., regimental fifer—Lee trial testimony, 1876; affidavit, 1885
- Henderson, John H., private, Co. C, 1st Bat.—interview, 1892
- Higbee, John M., major, 3rd Bat.—statement, 1894; statement, 1896
- Higgins, Henry, sergeant, Co. G, 3rd Bat.—affidavit, 1859
- Hoag, Annie Elizabeth, witness, Fort Harmony—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Hoops, Elisha, private, Co. A, 1st Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Jackson, Samuel, private, Co. F, 3rd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Johnson, Nephi, 2nd lieutenant, Co. D, 2nd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1876; interview, 1895; affidavit, 1909?; statement, 1910?
- Kershaw, Robert, private, Co. A, 1st Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Klingensmith, Philip, private, Co. D, 2nd Bat.—affidavit, 1871; Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Knight, Samuel, private, Co. H, 4th Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1876; interview, 1892; interview, 1895; affidavit, 1896?
- Macfarlane, John M., adjutant to Major Isaac C. Haight, 2nd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Macfarlane, Daniel, adjutant to Captain Joel White, Co. D, 2nd Bat.—affidavit, 1896
- McMurdy, Samuel, sergeant, Co. E, 2nd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1876
- Martineau, James H., regimental adjutant to Col. William H. Dame—statement, 1890; statement, 1907
- Morrill, Laban, private, Co. D, 2nd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875; autobiography, undated
- Morris, Elias, captain, Co. E, 2nd Bat.—interview, 1892
- Nowers, Willson Gates, sergeant or private, Co. A, 1st Bat.—interview and statement, 1892
- Pearce (Pierce), James, private, Co. I, 4th Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875



- Pete, Indian boy, witness, Pahvant camp near Beaver—interview, 1857
- Pitchforth, Samuel, witness, Nephi—diary, 1857
- Platt, Benjamin, private, Co. H, 4th Bat.—autobiography, undated
- Pollack, Samuel, sergeant, Co. E, 2nd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Riddle, Isaac, private, Co. H, 4th Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Roberts, William, private, Co. B, 1st Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Robinson, Richard, 2nd lieutenant, Co. H, 4th Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875; interview, 1892
- Rogerson, Josiah, court reporter, Beaver and Mountain Meadows (Lee trials and execution)—stenographic record, 1875, 1876, 1877
- Shelton, Marion Jackson, witness, Fort Harmony—diary, 1858–59
- Shirts, Don Carlos (Carl), 2nd lieutenant, Co. H, 4th Bat.—interview, 1859
- Smith, Silas S., captain, Co. B, 1st Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Smith, Jesse N., captain, Co. C, 1st Bat.—journal, 1857; Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Spoods, Ute Indian, witness, southern Utah—interview, 1857
- Thompson, Edward W., 2nd lieutenant, Co. A, 1st Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Tullis, David W., private, Co. H, 4th Bat.—interview, 1859; interview, 1892
- White, Joel W., captain, Co. D, 2nd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875 and 1876
- White, Mary Hannah Burton, witness, Hamilton Fort—interview, 1892
- Willden, Elliott, private, Co. F, 3rd Bat.—interview, 1892
- Willis, John Henry, 2nd lieutenant, Co. G, 4th Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Willis, Thomas T., private, Co. G, 3rd Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875
- Young, William, private, Co. I, 4th Bat.—Lee trial testimony, 1875