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Abstract Review of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy* (2008), by Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard.

A SCHOLARLY LOOK AT THE DISASTROUS MOUNTAIN MEADOWS MASSACRE

Robert H. Briggs

Review of Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard. *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. xvi + 430 pp., with appendixes, index. \$29.95.

M*assacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy*, the long-awaited history of the 1857 catastrophe at Mountain Meadows by Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, was recently published by Oxford University Press. Ronald Walker has a PhD in history from the University of Utah. Now an independent historian, he was a professor of history at Brigham Young University. Richard Turley has a JD from BYU. He is the past executive director of the Family and Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and current Assistant Church Historian. Glen Leonard has a PhD in history and American studies from the University of Utah. He is the former director of the Museum of Church History and Art. Each of these authors has made significant contributions to Mormon studies. Early reports are that the book is selling briskly and that it went into its fifth printing less than two months after publication.

The volume is 430 pages in length, but the basic narrative is a compact 231 pages consisting of a prologue, fourteen chapters, and an epilogue. About one-third of the remaining 200 pages contains a lengthy acknowledgment and four appendixes identifying the victims and their

property as well as, to the extent known, the participating militiamen and Indians. The remaining nearly 130 pages consist of endnotes and a useful index. The text includes a number of historical photographs of important personages in the narrative, historical woodcuts portraying the massacre, photostats of key documents, and some excellent topographical maps and aerial photographs. The endpapers contain a handsome map of the western United States showing the emigrant trail from northwest Arkansas to Mountain Meadows in southern Utah. The dust jacket—black with the title and authors’ names in pale pink above a dark image of the sagebrush and foothills of Mountain Meadows—may not be to everyone’s tastes, but I found it both handsome and appropriate to the subject matter and tone of the text.

The preface explains the context in which the authors prepared their book and their purposes in writing it. It also reveals the authors’ framework for analysis, theme, and methodology. Quoting Juanita Brooks, the author of *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950), these authors indicate that the massacre is like “a ghost which will not be laid” to rest (quoted on p. ix). This was epitomized in an incident at the 1990 dedication ceremonies of one of the memorials at Mountain Meadows. Some Latter-day Saints suggested that the massacre should be viewed by the living as not merely a tragedy but also as an opportunity for mutual understanding and “a willingness to look forward and not back.” But Roger V. Logan Jr., an Arkansan with family connections to many of the massacre victims, contended that there had to be some “looking back” (p. x). “Until the church shows more candor about what its historians actually know about the event, true reconciliation will be elusive.” The authors agree: “Only complete and honest evaluation of the tragedy can bring the trust necessary for lasting good will. Only then can there be catharsis” (p. x).

Thus thoroughness, candor, and following the evidence to whatever conclusions it might reasonably lead were among their objectives. They also sought a “fresh approach” that considered “every primary source [they] could find” (p. x) They also decided that their history would not be primarily a response to previous historians. This was almost certainly a correct decision. By taking this tack they have

avoided the defensiveness that inevitably pervades histories that contest at great length the conclusions of other historians.

They also attempted to be as exhaustive as their resources would allow in locating relevant source material. They or their associates scoured the archives and repositories of many states in a quest for new sources. Closer to hand they combed the church archives and requested materials from the First Presidency of the church. Here the sources preserved by former Assistant Church Historian Andrew Jenson become important. In the 1890s, Jenson was commissioned by the First Presidency to interview massacre witnesses. The result was a collection of materials from militiamen and others. Some were firsthand accounts in the form of letters or affidavits. There were also third-person accounts, some of which were collected and summarized by Jenson himself. Some of the “Jenson material” has been consulted and described before. For example, in *Camp Floyd and the Mormons*,¹ Donald Moorman and Gene Sessions make occasional reference to it, as does Will Bagley in *Blood of the Prophets*.² But much of the Jenson material is new, particularly that identified in the endnotes as AJ2 (Andrew Jenson 2). The evaluation of new sources that other historians have not yet seen can only be fully accomplished after that material has been made available to other researchers and, ideally, published. But there are good reasons to believe that the new sources contain valuable new information about the massacre and its aftermath.

The wealth of sources eventually led them to conclude that they had too much material for one volume. Thus the current volume narrates the massacre and analyzes its antecedents, context, causes, and conditions. A second volume to be completed by Richard Turley will address the aftermath of the massacre, including the John D. Lee trials of 1875–76.

The authors note the polarized historiography of the massacre, with some past writers seeing the perpetrators as demons incarnate

1. Donald R. Moorman and Gene A. Sessions, *Camp Floyd and the Mormons: The Utah War* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992).

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

while others, mostly within Utah, demonize the victims and attempt to exculpate the perpetrators. The authors have little sympathy for either approach. These approaches ignore “how complex human beings can be” (p. xiii). On the one hand, “nothing the emigrants [made up mostly of women and children] purportedly did comes close to justifying their murder.” On the other hand, most of the militiamen led lives of decency except for “a single, nightmarish week in September 1857” (p. xiii).

This fact led them to a “troubling question”: “How could basically good people commit such a terrible atrocity?” Consulting the growing scholarly literature on mass killings and violence, they found that such violence, especially against racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, was all too common in nineteenth-century America. Since the 1960s, scholars have been probing the regional, national, and transnational sources of American violence. The research has revealed what the authors describe as a “familiar step-by-step pattern” to mass killings and vigilante violence. It also led them to one of the “bitter ironies” of Mormon history: “Some of the people who had long deplored the injustice of extralegal violence became [at Mountain Meadows] its perpetrators” (pp. xiii–xiv).

In consulting the literature on violence and mass killings, the authors make one of their greatest contributions. Simply stated, they have developed an analytical framework that makes the massacre explicable. The process they identify begins with the tendency of one group to classify another as “the Other” (that is, as wholly and radically different from “our” group). There follows a process of “devaluing and demonizing” in which the members of the Other are stripped of their humanity and transformed into enemies. Other factors are an authoritarian atmosphere, ambiguity, peer pressure, fear, and deprivation (pp. xiv). Results can be particularly catastrophic in times of moral crisis or war. Rumors spring to life and proliferate wildly. Threats are misperceived and exaggerated. Predictably, the response is one of gross overreaction out of all proportion to the threat. Genocide studies ranging from the Armenian genocide of 1915 to the Holocaust of the 1940s in Nazi Germany to the Rwandan genocide in 1994 all

bear the stamp of this process, as do many lesser mass killings. The same framework is helpful in understanding many tragic episodes in American history involving the abuse, mistreatment, or murder of Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, Chinese, Irish, and, we may also note, Mormons.

As important as these concepts of “extralegal violence and . . . group psychology” are, however, the authors are not so wedded to “historical patterns or models” as to ignore assessing “institutional and personal responsibility.” “We believe errors were made by U.S. President James Buchanan, Brigham Young and other Mormon leaders, some of the Arkansas emigrants, some Paiutes, and most of all by settlers in southern Utah” (p. xiv).

The authors acknowledge that the massacre has sparked a long history of “charge and countercharge” and no small number of conspiracy theories. For that reason they treat in detail the final days leading to the mass killing. “We hope that readers will see not scapegoats but a complex event in which many people and forces had a role” (p. xv).

The Early Mormon Experience

After a brief prologue, chapters 1 and 2 establish the background and context. Deftly they trace the formation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New York and the Mormon leaders’ fateful decision to move west to the edge of the American frontier. There the Mormons eventually encountered resentment, opposition, and violence in western Missouri (1833–39) and western Illinois (1844–46). Although this is a familiar story, the authors’ treatment seems fresh because of its focus on the initial violence against the Latter-day Saints and some Mormons’ growing reliance on violence to defend themselves. After the assassination of Mormon leaders Joseph and Hyrum Smith and the acquittal of their alleged assassins, many Saints repressed their pent-up outrage. But in the hearts of many Mormons this and other injustices festered. Although their hegira to what became Utah Territory granted them a ten-year reprieve from direct attacks, conflict began brewing in early 1857, when federal officials reported what they perceived as abuses in Utah to newly elected President James

Buchanan. As one of his first presidential acts, Buchanan precipitously determined to send federal troops to Utah—without conveying a word to the acting territorial governor in Utah, Brigham Young. The authors also treat the zeal of the Reformation of 1856–57 in Utah and the elaboration of Mormon thought about “blood atonement.”

The Mormon practice of polygamy is also treated, although I wonder if it doesn’t deserve greater stress. Polygamy must have been a significant cause of the psychic distance between Mormon settlers and the Arkansas emigrants who traversed Utah in 1857. To Arkansans’ eyes the Mormon women living in polygamous relationships must have seemed not much better than prostitutes. One wonders whether the reports that some Arkansans “abused” Mormon women were due to their revulsion at seeing polygamy in practice.

The Utah War Crisis

Chapters 3 through 5 narrate the Mormon buildup, militarily and otherwise, in northern and southern Utah from 24 July to September 1857 to meet the anticipated conflict with the approaching federal army. In the week after 24 July, Brigham Young and other Mormon leaders crafted a strategy to prevent or at least delay the Army expeditionary force from entering Utah. In the first week of August these plans—to save grain, reorganize and train local militias, and reconnoiter the eastern mountains for army scouts or detachments—were couriered to southern Utah where the regimental commander of the Iron Military District, Colonel William H. Dame, set about implementing the orders. Colonel Dame relayed the orders to Majors Isaac C. Haight and John M. Higbee in Cedar City, the heart of southern Utah’s Iron Mission. Haight was also the stake president in Cedar City, and Higbee was his counselor. Although Dame, Haight, Higbee, and Cedar City bishop Philip Klingensmith were Americans, the bulk of the ironworkers in Cedar City were recent working-class European immigrants—mostly English, Scots, and Irish with a smattering of Scandinavians.

Apostle George A. Smith, one of the original founders of the southern Utah settlements, returned to the area in the first week of

August 1857, and the following week he began a tour of all the southern settlements. News of “invasion” had arrived in southern Utah ahead of him, and from Smith we get an important contemporary account of the “alarm” that gripped southern Utah. Smith himself acknowledged that his preaching bore a martial tone, and an observer characterized one of his addresses as “a regular war sermon” (p. 53). No doubt Smith’s sermons on preparedness—including an explicit warning that they should be prepared to abandon their homes to the supposed invaders and retreat to the mountains for survival—increased the sense of alarm verging on panic in southern Utah. Yet it is also true that some of the alarm came from other sources besides Smith. For instance, as Smith advanced from Parowan to Cedar City, then on to Fort Harmony and Washington, it was express riders who advised his entourage to watch for U.S. troops in the eastern mountains. After circling to Fort Clara (present-day Santa Clara), Mountain Meadows, and Pinto, he returned to Cedar City. There he found that rumors were now circulating about an army detachment approaching Cedar City through the eastern canyons. This pattern of rumor proliferation continued as Smith proceeded north to Beaver. The negative impact of the invasion rumors on the fragile sense of security in southern Utah cannot be overemphasized. Tragically for the Arkansas emigrant train, this was the settlers’ agitated psychological state at the time the roughly 140 men, women, and children entered southern Utah early that September.

The Arkansas Company

Chapter 6, “The Splendid Train,” narrates the background and progress of the Arkansas emigrant train. It is chock-full of intriguing details that the authors’ sleuthing has uncovered. The authors paint a colorful portrait of John Twitty Baker, generally known as Captain Jack. Baker was a substantial rancher with a large herd of cattle. Joining the Baker outfits were the Mitchell and Dunlap families, along with (unidentified) drovers to drive the herd. Another of the main family groupings was led by Alexander Fancher. Fancher had a smaller herd than Baker, but he had already made the round-trip to California at

least once. His prior trail experience would have been invaluable. He was joined by immediate and extended family members. Also joining their caravan were members of the Huff, Jones, Tackitt, Poteet, Campbell, and Cameron families. The Baker and Fancher companies experienced the usual assortment of trail misfortunes and stock losses. In addition, traveling at close quarters raised tensions that led to some conflict within the company. The authors also found that some Missourians joined these Arkansas companies. To many Mormons of that period, the term *Missourian* harked back to anti-Mormon persecution and violence.

Chapter 7 treats the atmosphere in Great Salt Lake City in mid-summer 1857. The summer months brought a peak in the annual flow of emigrant trains through the territory. Meanwhile, as Nauvoo Legion commanders continued their war preparations, Brigham Young attempted to forge alliances with as many local Native American tribes as possible. When some tribes ignored these overtures, he dispatched Dimick Huntington, his chief Indian interpreter, to offer further inducements. Eventually Young, through Huntington, offered cattle bound for California on the northern and southern trails to the Indians in exchange for closer ties. This was Young's controversial new Indian policy, a sign of his desperation to make Indian allies. If that failed he hoped at least to induce Indians not to ally themselves with the U.S. Army, whose commanders were also courting their favor.

Chapters 8 and 9 narrate the passage of the Arkansas emigrants through central Utah. Much of this is familiar, although here too the authors provide new details about the Fancher and Baker companies; the later emigrant trains of Nicholas Turner, William Dukes, and Wilson Collins; and the freighters, Sidney Tanner and William Mathews. They document conflicts in several locales over pasture for livestock and personality conflicts between some Mormon settlers and a "Dutchman" traveling with the Arkansas trains (p. 111). But the authors also document a surprising number of nonconfrontational encounters between the Arkansans and some Mormons bound for the south. They also treat at length the encounter at Corn Creek between the southbound emigrants and George A. Smith's northbound party.

A traditional tale told by some Mormon militiamen (but disputed by others) was that at the Corn Creek encounter on 26 August, the emigrants poisoned an ox that they left for the Indians. The tale has had an extraordinarily long life, but the authors convincingly argue that the evidence for poisoning is suspect. The more likely explanation is that the cattle contracted anthrax, a disease that occasionally flared up on the overland trail. Yet the poisoning tale developed legs and soon spread far and wide. For the better part of 150 years it was a common explanation for supposed Native American antipathy toward this party. That story added weight to the account hatched by some militia perpetrators that Indians had attacked and slaughtered the emigrant company to avenge the death of Indians poisoned at Corn Creek.

Yet in the charged atmosphere of 1857, some Mormon settlers accepted as fact the rumor that the emigrants poisoned the Indians. In terms of our modern understanding of the motives for mass killings, this alleged behavior was seen as despicable and furthered the process of “dehumanization of the victims,” a common precursor to mass killings (p. 128).

The Atmosphere in Cedar City

In chapter 10 the scene shifts to Cedar City, the flower of the new Iron Mission. By 1857, however, the quest for high-grade iron in Cedar City had turned “to slag” (p. 129). In the 1850s, the main economic pursuits in Utah were agriculture and livestock, and life was hard. In Cedar City, however, it was doubly so. There didn’t seem to be enough time or manpower to tend crops and cattle, mine iron ore and coal, and make kilns, coke, and blast furnaces. Things might have been different had they experienced success. But instead they felt the acute frustration of their repeated failure to produce commercial quality iron. What resulted was a palpable sense of deprivation and poverty. Thus the authors give credence to reports that the Cedar City settlers watched enviously as these well-provisioned and well-equipped Arkansas companies passed by. But the spark that ignited the fatal conflagration of events was the bitter clash that spontaneously arose between the two sides. The difficulty in ascertaining the truth about

this confrontation is compounded by the conflicting hearsay accounts. Carefully sifting the sources, however, the authors give a credible account of what unfolded. It was a cluster of irritants involving a dispute over trade, abusive language, fighting words, and resistance to the authority of Cedar City's marshal John Higbee.

In ordinary times the fracas would have quickly passed. In Cedar City, however, many believed implicitly the rumors that U.S. troops were poised to "invade" their isolated and exposed settlements. These swirling rumors of imminent invasion, perhaps combined with some emigrant's passing threat, led some Cedar City settlers to conclude that this emigrant train was in league with the hostile U.S. troops. Stake president and militia major Isaac C. Haight played a leading role in what ensued. So did Major John D. Lee in the nearby community of Fort Harmony. Haight's initial suggestion to Colonel Dame that militiamen engage in a punitive action against the supposedly insolent emigrants was rebuffed. Thereafter, Haight, Lee, and others concocted a plan to use local Indians as surrogates to punish the emigrants. The "Cedar City plan," the authors conclude, began as a "harsh response to a minor conflict" but quickly began morphing "into a massacre of men, women, and children" (p. 143). Citing the literature on mass killings, they explain:

"Perpetrators make many small and great decisions as they progress along the continuum of destruction," Ervin Staub observed, and "extreme destructiveness . . . is usually the last of many steps along [the] continuum." According to Staub, "There is usually a progression of actions. Earlier, less harmful acts cause changes in individual perpetrators, bystanders, and the whole group that make more harmful acts possible. The victims are further devalued. The self-concept of the perpetrators changes and allows them to inflict greater harm—for 'justifiable' reasons. Ultimately, there is a commitment to . . . mass killing." (p. 143)

Later, writing about Haight and Lee, the authors conclude:

In retrospect their motives made little sense, but the continuum that leads to mass murder is not a rational process. Both

men were being swept by “powerful forces” into “greater acts of cruelty, violence, . . . [and] oppression.” Both Haight and Lee were quick to make judgments and to execute on those decisions—hallmarks of extralegal justice and unchecked power. (pp. 144–45)

Concurrent with these actions in southern Utah, Brigham Young and Dimick Huntington were meeting with the chiefs and headmen of the Utes, Pahvant Utes, and Southern Paiutes from central and southern Utah. In an attempt to cement an alliance with these Indian bands, Huntington later recorded that he offered them “all the cattle that had gone to Cal the southe rout” (p. 146). Among those present were the Paiute headmen, Tutsegavits and Youngwuds. Tutsegavits’s bands gathered seeds and farmed along the lower Santa Clara River near Fort Clara, while Youngwuds’s bands ranged the region around Fort Harmony. Based upon Young and Huntington’s offer, the authors state,

[Historian Will] Bagley concluded that when Young “gave the Paiute chiefs the emigrants’ cattle on the southern road to California,” he “encouraged his Indian allies to attack the Fancher party.” (p. 146)

But the authors convincingly show that Tutsegavits and Youngwuds did not race their ponies back to southern Utah to lead their bands in an attack on the emigrants. (Indeed, there is little evidence that Southern Paiutes possessed horses until after the 1850s.) Rather, like many American Indians before and since, they spent days touring and exploring the marvels of the white man’s city. There is good contemporary evidence that Tutsegavits was in Great Salt Lake City until at least 13 September, well after the 11 September massacre.³

3. Some members of Tutsegavits’s and Youngwuds’s Paiute bands did participate in the attacks on the emigrant train, but at the independent instigation of Isaac Haight, John D. Lee, and others in southern Utah. There is also evidence that Kanosh and the other Pahvant Ute chiefs and headmen left Salt Lake City ahead of the Paiutes, Tutsegavits and Youngwuds, to return to their traditional summer lands in central Utah. But there is no evidence that the Pahvant Utes participated in the attacks or the massacre at Mountain Meadows. They *were* involved in the fracas with the Turner, Dukes, and Collins companies near Beaver. These trains followed several days behind the Arkansas

The Unfolding Plan to Use Paiute Indians as Surrogates

Meanwhile, in southern Utah, Isaac Haight was presenting his and Lee's plan to other church and community leaders. As chapter 11 explains, this occurred in Cedar City on Sunday, 6 September, at the traditional council meeting held following church services. To Haight's surprise and consternation, not all of the community leaders were in accord, and blacksmith Laban Morrill, a flinty Vermont native, pressed him to promise that he would not act until he had consulted with President Young. Haight reluctantly agreed but then delayed until the next day to send couriers. Monday afternoon he sent an express to Pinto with a message (presumably intended for Lee) to delay further action. At the same time Haight dispatched Englishman James Haslam to Great Salt Lake City on an arduous 250-mile ride.

Throughout their ad hoc campaign, however, southern Utahns were bedeviled by ham-fisted planning and poor communications. The initial plan was to attack the emigrants after they had drifted farther south into Santa Clara Canyon. But for reasons known only to John D. Lee, his Indian allies (probably assisted by some whites) made the attack on Monday morning, 7 September, while the emigrants were still encamped at the southern end of Mountain Meadows.

The Massacre

What follows in chapters 12 through 14 is the depressingly familiar story of how this ill-conceived and poorly executed punitive action degenerated into mass slaughter. The narrative is full of new details, many of them gleaned from new sources, thus giving a fresh view of the sequence and motivation for key events. According to their interpretation of conflicting sources, it was late Monday when Mormon scouts encountered two emigrant horsemen who were out retrieving stray cattle. The militiamen shot at both of them, killing one. But the other—the "Dutchman"—evaded their bullets and raced back to the wagon circle at the southern end of the Meadows. This incident

company. Ammon, the powerful Ute chief who had attended the powwow with Brigham Young on 1 September, helped defuse that crisis (pp. 148, 162, 175–78, 265–70).

would prove fateful. By late Thursday evening a leading faction of the militiamen—probably including the senior Mormon leaders on-site, John Higbee, John D. Lee, and Philip Klingensmith—had concluded that the emigrants were fully aware that Mormons had “interposed” and had either instigated or were actively assisting the Indians in their attacks on the company. With the emigrants in front of them and fearing that the invading U.S. Army was at their rear, the militiamen felt an enormous pressure to silence all witnesses. Otherwise the California-bound emigrants could raise a militia there and the isolated southern Utah settlers would face a two-front conflict. In the end, in their warped and distorted impression of reality, they concluded that it was imperative to silence all credible witnesses. To save their own skins, they hatched a deceptive ruse to lure the emigrants from their defensive wagon circle. Then at the agreed signal, the militiamen and Indians fell upon the unarmed emigrants. Within minutes they had killed all the emigrants except seventeen of the very youngest, who militia leaders supposed would have few credible memories of what they had witnessed. Several escaping emigrants were also hunted down and killed on the Nevada desert.

The authors conclude:

The tragedy at Mountain Meadows played out on several levels. The murdered emigrants lost their hopes, their dreams, their property, and their lives. Some lost their very identity, their names forever effaced from human memory. The surviving children were robbed of the warmth and support of parents, brothers, and sisters. Their first sobbing night at Hamblin’s was just the start of their ordeal. The Paiute participants would bear the brunt of the blame for the massacre, shamelessly used by the white men who lured them to the Meadows. For the militiamen who carried out the crime—as well as their families, descendants, and fellow church members—there was another kind of tragedy. It was the gnawing, long anguish that flows from betrayed ideals. The burdens of the massacre would linger far beyond what anyone imagined on the night of September 11, 1857. (p. 209)

The next morning Colonel Dame and Major Haight, accompanied by staff members, arrived at the death scene. Dame was aghast at the number of victims and was heard to exclaim, "I did not think that there were so many women and children." Then he and Major Haight fell to quarreling about how it should be reported. Dame protested that he had not been informed of the true situation. At one point Haight responded savagely, "It is too late in the day for you to back water. You know you ordered it . . . and now you want to back out" (p. 213).

But Haight was to receive his own surprise the following day when James Haslam returned, exhausted, from his journey to Great Salt Lake City. Haslam arrived in the wee hours of Sunday morning, 13 September, having made his 500-mile round-trip ride in less than six days. After grabbing some sleep, he met with Haight. "Haslam handed Haight the unsealed letter from Young directing him to let the emigrants 'go in peace.' Haight took the letter, read through it, and broke down. For half an hour, he sobbed 'like a child' and could manage only the words, 'Too late, too late'" (p. 226).

Evaluation

How well have the authors achieved their stated purposes? What are the strengths and weaknesses of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*?

Walker, Turley, and Leonard's book is well conceived and well executed. Its single greatest contribution is its skillful use of the salient material from more than four decades of study of American violence. Since the 1960s there has been a flood of scholarship on past and contemporary American violence. *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* is the first monograph to incorporate that scholarship into a framework for viewing the massacre.

Until now many have found the massacre nearly incomprehensible. Yet the studies on violence argue that there is a pattern to many mass killings. Accumulating detail upon detail, the authors skillfully show how the evidence fits this pattern. An indicator of their success is that the farther the 1857 Iron County militia went down the path of violence, the more likely became the ensuing massacre. From the standpoint of American historians, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*'

theoretical framework drawn from the findings of violence studies is its most important contribution.

In the century and a half since the disaster at Mountain Meadows, many have essentially argued an exceptionalist position with regard to the massacre. They view the massacre as being in a class of its own. It is, they claim, so thoroughly unique as to defy meaningful comparison with other mass killings. For them it is *sui generis*. But the authors of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, in grounding their study in the literature on the causes and conditions of American violence, have implicitly issued a challenge to the exceptionalist position. They have presented the patterns of mass killings and shown the similarities that Mountain Meadows has with other massacres. Henceforth, it will not be acceptable for historians to treat the massacre while being wholly ignorant of the broader literature on mass killings, massacres, and genocides. In particular, advocates of the exceptionalist position ignore this scholarly literature at their peril. It also bears mentioning that given the current philosophy and practice of history, most professional historians view exceptionalist claims with great skepticism.⁴ Therefore, those claiming that the massacre was *sui generis* will have a heavy burden of proof.

Within the Mormon community this book marks a sea change in attitudes toward the massacre. For Mormons and Mormon watchers, it is significant that this is a semiofficial acknowledgment of the massacre and a repudiation of the mood, means, and methods that brought

4. Exceptionalism claims that a past event is transcendently good (e.g., Progress, the rise of the American nation) or evil (e.g., Hitler, Nazism, the Holocaust). For extended discussions of the challenges to historical objectivity and “metanarratives,” including American exceptionalism, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994); Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999); and Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000). For rebuttals to these challenges, see Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1996); and Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 1999).

it about. That this viewpoint has been published in the church's flagship magazine, the *Ensign* (that is, in Richard Turley's article on the massacre in September 2007), indicates that the church hierarchy has formally acknowledged the role of Mormons in the massacre. Another indication is the public apology issued by the First Presidency on 11 September 2007, at the sesquicentennial memorial service. In public addresses since then, Turley has argued against employing the old discourse of denying, defending, distorting, minimizing, rationalizing, excusing, or "passing the buck" about the massacre. Instead he has argued that Latter-day Saints should forthrightly acknowledge the massacre and honor its victims. Coming from the Assistant Church Historian of the church, that reflects a significant change. There will undoubtedly be individual Mormons who will continue in defending, excusing, or justifying the massacre. But with this semiofficial acknowledgment, the church leadership and most of the membership will begin abandoning the old viewpoint, if they haven't already.

What are the book's weaknesses and limitations? I have already raised the issue of polygamy and whether it is given adequate stress. Similarly, have the authors sufficiently considered and explained some of the other unique features of frontier Mormon culture? Juanita Brooks and others have cited several features of frontier Mormonism as contributory to the massacre. These include the alleged excesses of the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57, the doctrine of blood atonement, the so-called oath of vengeance, and sanguinary patriarchal blessings. More recently, others have charged Brigham Young with "giving" the livestock of travelers on the overland trail to the Indians and tolerating a climate conducive to extralegal violence. While the authors do not discuss allegedly sanguinary patriarchal blessings, emphasis on the importance of this as a contributing factor seems to have waned. As for the other charges, the authors discuss the Reformation, blood atonement, an alleged oath of vengeance (albeit in a footnote), Young's Indian policy of offering Indians cattle on the overland trail, and the occasional resort to extralegal violence. In a complex event with many contributing causes, the relative importance of individual causes is controversial, and judgments about the adequacy of the authors' responses will vary.

One area that will require further investigation is extralegal violence. Extralegal violence in territorial Utah is a difficult and controversial topic. Some have exaggerated the scope of the problem with sweeping claims about widespread “frontier justice” in Utah during the entire latter half of the nineteenth century. Conversely, many Mormons reject these charges out of hand. Both positions are wrong. There was one notably problematic period, and it corresponds to the time of the Mountain Meadows Massacre during the difficult years of 1857–58. Early in 1857, the party of John Tobin was attacked in southern Utah. In March, the Parrish-Potters murders occurred in Springville. In September, at the outset of the Utah War, the Mountain Meadows Massacre occurred. The following month, Richard Yates, a suspected spy, was executed without due process of law, and at end of the year the Aiken party, also suspected of spying, was killed.⁵

There were other violent episodes in the 1850s. From our twenty-first-century perspective, criminal penalties were applied inconsistently during the early frontier period. In a few cases, harsh punishments were applied extralegally. In others, the punishments meted out seem unusually light. In still others, Mormon leaders failed to punish their vengeful followers at all, creating the impression that these followers could act with impunity. Such incidents created an impression of lawlessness that was to dog the Mormons into the twentieth century. The answer to this broader question is beyond the scope of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* but will require continuing research. The analytical framework used by the authors to understand the Mountain Meadows Massacre will be useful in understanding the other episodes in 1857–58. Moreover, I suspect that a comparative approach applied to Mormons and other Westerners in frontier settings will show many similarities as well as differences.

A perennial issue in historical writing is the reliability of sources and their interpretation. Here we should state plainly that the Mountain Meadows Massacre is one of the most challenging historiographical

5. See generally William P. MacKinnon, ed., *At Sword's Point, Part I: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858* (Norman, OK: Clark, 2008), 77–80 (Tobin), 317–18 (Parrish-Potter), 297–302 (Yates), and 316–19 (Aiken).

problems in the American West. The technical challenges are daunting, exacerbated by missing documents, hearsay accounts, and false accounts. Moreover, in some cases perpetrators or their family or friends were guilty of denying, distorting, or excusing the massacre. In other cases, perpetrators eventually spoke candidly about their roles, but their statements were made decades after the massacre. Thus even when they spoke on topics about which they had no reason to lie, they frequently contradict one another on simple matters of chronology.

All these issues will have to be addressed with the “new” Andrew Jenson sources from the 1890s. But the new material contains much valuable information. Indian interpreters and militiamen Nephi Johnson and Samuel Knight both made statements included in the Jenson materials. But they also made various other well-known statements. A comparison of elements from each source will determine consistent as well as inconsistent elements.

The case of militiaman Elliott Willden presents a different situation. Willden’s only extant written statements are found in the Jenson material. Made some thirty-five years after the massacre, how reliable are they? A basic rule of interpretation is that statements made “against interest” are usually reliable, or as historian Louis Gottschalk said, “when a statement is *prejudicial to a witness*, his dear ones, or his causes, it is likely to be truthful.”⁶ Many of Willden’s statements are confessions of his significant involvement in the massacre, and these statements bear these indicia of reliability. For instance, Willden admits that he and his companions were among the first militiamen sent to the Meadows and that they were ordered “to find . . . something that would justify the Indians being let loose upon the emigrants” (p. 140). Willden informs us that the initial plan was to attack the emigrants farther south, and he admits that he and his companions were at Mountain Meadows to get the emigrants to “move on” so that they might more quickly fall into the trap laid for them (p. 140). Moreover, while many militia accounts emphasize the misbehavior of the Arkansas emigrants, Willden concedes that the emigrants “acted

6. Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Knopf, 1950, rev. 1969), 161.

civil” when he visited their camp (p. 152). He also admits that he and his companions were at the Meadows when they heard the initial attack (p. 159). Finally, Willden informs us that the Lee-inspired attack at Mountain Meadows was “not part of the plan,” an incidental detail about which he had no reason to lie and which is also corroborated by other witnesses (p. 159).

This does not mean that *all* the details are accurate. For example, the sources are inconsistent about the fateful encounter between Mormon scouts and the emigrant riders who had backtracked toward Cedar City in search of stray livestock—the encounter in which one or more was killed but at least one successfully retreated to the safety of the emigrant wagon circle. When did it occur? Relying on Willden’s account, the authors place the event on Monday, 7 September, the evening of the first attack. Yet John D. Lee placed the event on Tuesday or Wednesday evening.⁷ The authors have accepted Willden’s chronology while I, not having access to the Willden source, had provisionally accepted Lee’s dating.⁸ Reviewing the new source material and comparing it with the existing sources will allow historians to continue the process of evaluating this difficult material.

But differences of opinion are to be expected in interpreting difficult source material. With an evidentiary record as challenging as this one, we may expect such controversies to endure as long as people have an interest in the massacre. There are dozens and perhaps hundreds of examples in which the sources are in conflict over basic chronology or other details.⁹ But this problem should not be overemphasized. While

7. Statement of John D. Lee to S. Howard, *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, 28 March 1877, in Robert Kent and Dorothy S. Fielding, *The Tribune Reports of the Trials of John D. Lee* (Higginum, CT: Kent’s Books, 2000), 282; John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled; or The Life and Confessions of John D. Lee* (St. Louis: Bryan, Brand & Co., 1877), 235; Statement of John M. Higbee, February 1894, in Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950, rev. 1962, 1970), 229–30.

8. Robert H. Briggs, “The Mountain Meadows Massacre: An Analytical Narrative Based on Participant Confessions,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 74/4 (2006): 327–28.

9. In the example I cited of the fateful episode in which one of the emigrant outriders escaped Mormon scouts and returned to the safety of the wagon circle, Elliott Willden placed the event on the evening of Monday, 7 September. In John D. Lee’s 1877 statement delivered to federal prosecutor Sumner Howard, Lee said that the incident occurred on Tuesday evening, 8 September. In *Mormonism Unveiled*, Lee’s posthumously published

some of us may quibble about particular details, I believe that the broad picture the authors have derived from the sources is essentially correct. The date on which the encounter occurred as described by Willden, Lee, and others is of minor importance. What is important is that Mormon sentries attacked a small party of emigrant riders, killing one or more. One escaped and returned to the emigrant camp to spread the word that the Mormons had “interposed.” This was a fateful event that inexorably led the militiamen, under the delusion that they were being invaded by the U.S. Army, to conclude that silencing the party was their only viable option. While the exact chronology of the event may have been muddled, the significance of it became crystal clear at the Thursday evening militia council. According to Lee and others, the discussion in the militia council of the emigrants’ supposed awareness of Mormon involvement played a pivotal role in the horrible decision to silence them.

This is hands down the most exhaustively researched history of the massacre since it occurred. Is *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* an instant classic? Yes, in the sense that it will be required reading for every present and future student of the massacre. But is it a classic in the sense that it has put to rest the controversies concerning the massacre for the current generation of scholars? No. The massacre’s hold on the public imagination is great. Like Custer’s Last Stand, it has entered the historiographical pantheon of the American West. Many see it as a powerful case study of how religious excess can go terribly awry. For these it has become a potent mythic symbol of religious fanaticism. Others are both attracted and repelled by its ghastly violence. Many will be drawn by the challenges of this iconic event to add their own interpretations.

Thus this is not the final word on the massacre, nor will it silence debate about many of its details. But in bringing the conclusions of violence studies to bear on the massacre, Walker, Turley, and Leonard

autobiography, Lee maintained that it occurred on Wednesday evening, 9 September. Thus, the event happened on Monday evening, Tuesday evening, or Wednesday evening, depending on which of the sources one chooses to accept. The sources are rife with similar chronological issues.

have opened a new chapter in the study of Mountain Meadows. Furthermore, faced with a historical record laced with maddening contradictions and challenges, the authors of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* have succeeded in interpreting the essentials of the massacre correctly. This may seem like damning with faint praise. But given the enormous difficulties that historians of the massacre face, the fact that Walker, Turley, and Leonard got the essential details of the picture right while placing them in such a new and illuminating frame is high praise indeed.