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Review of Innocent Blood: Essential Narratives of the Mountain Meadows Massacre

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David L. Bigler and Will Bagley. *Innocent Blood: Essential Narratives of the Mountain Meadows Massacre*. Kingdom of the West: The Mormons and the American Frontier, Vol. 12.

Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark 2008

Reviewed by J. Michael Hunter

The Mountain Meadows massacre is a great human tragedy as incomprehensible today as it was 150 years ago. Since the publication of Juanita Brooks's landmark study of the massacre in 1950, historians have debated this complex and controversial subject through the publication of more than seventy works. *Innocent Blood*, the first documentary history published on the massacre, is one of more than forty historical publications to appear on the massacre since 1990, when the dedication of a new monument overlooking the massacre site produced renewed interest in the subject.¹ *Innocent Blood* is not an attempt at producing a comprehensive documentary history of all documents related to the massacre – which would be a herculean undertaking – but is, instead, a selection of more than one hundred fifty documents that fit within the specific framework of the story the editors want to tell.

As historians and readers of history know, documents do not speak for themselves. Documents are shaped by the complex and varied motives of the individuals who create them. Documents are filtered through the historian's or editor's mind before they are selected and arranged in a documentary history. To avoid personal bias, editors of documentary histories commonly attempt to create an objective selection criteria and a

logical plan for laying the documents before the reader. Guidelines followed by documentary editors in the selection process are generally explained to the readers in a clear statement of principles governing the selection and arrangement of the documents.

Innocent Blood does not adequately provide objective criteria. Its principles of selection are explained to the reader in one sentence: “This volume publishes a selection of the essential documents, many for the first time, that we believe reveal the truth about the Mountain Meadows massacre” (18). For the editors of *Innocent Blood*, the truth is a specific tale of conspiracy among the highest-ranking Church officials who, according to the editors, carefully orchestrated a premeditated plan to murder approximately 140 men, women, and children passing through Utah on their way to California. This interpretation of the massacre will be familiar to readers who have read other works on the subject by the editors of *Innocent Blood*, who declare that they have “definite opinions about how and why [the massacre] happened” (18). These “definite opinions” form the framework into which the documents contained in *Innocent Blood* are placed. The editors state, “In the process, we have tried to keep our editorial comments as few and dispassionate as possible – a task that may be impossible when dealing with such a hotly contested subject” (18).

The task proved to be difficult: the editors tell their conspiracy story in the book’s introductory pages, retell it throughout the commentary in the book’s documentary portion, and recount it again in the book’s conclusion. “We have attempted,” the editors explain, “to assemble this material into a compelling record that presents the key

aspects of the story and the divergent perspectives on it" (17).

In their desire to tell a compelling story, the editors often make bold statements and interpretations with no source documents to back them. For example, they state, "It is now apparent that others who joined the southbound train were dissident Mormons who wanted to escape but were afraid to attempt it on their own after others who had tried were killed at Provo and Springville" (94). Since the included documents lend no support to this statement, the reader would expect a footnote from the editors, but no citation is provided.

Another example of the editors' interpretive style is their treatment of George A. Smith's trip to southern Utah in August 1857. According to the editors, before the Arkansas emigrants even arrived in Great Salt Lake City, Brigham Young was plotting their murder. To accomplish his plan, Young dispatched his trusted counselor, George A. Smith, to southern Utah with secret orders for the leaders in that region to orchestrate the killing of the emigrants (93, 98, 101, 105, 107, 166, 312, 340 n. 10, 463-464). However, the editors do not supply the reader with any solid documentary evidence to back this scenario. They contribute this "paucity of contemporary records" (130) that support their conspiracy theory to a "disinformation campaign to hide Mormon involvement and blame the victims" (166).

Relying on circumstantial evidence, the editors infer much in the timing of events. For example, they emphasize that George A. Smith left Great Salt Lake City at daybreak on August 3, the same day that the Arkansas emigrants arrived in the city (presumably later that day). For the editors, there was something sinister behind Smith's departure.

They write that Smith “took off” or “jumped off” in a “hurried departure” on a “flying trip” and a “hasty tour” in which he “raced” and “scurried” to the southern settlements where he gave “verbal ‘instructions’ to the local leaders who carried out the killing” (93, 98, 166, 463, 465). The key word here is “verbal” since no written documents have ever been found containing such orders. The editors do not mention other sources that indicate Smith had been planning a trip to southern Utah to visit family since he had returned from a year-long trip to the East. Smith’s departure was not as sudden as the editors make it sound.²

The editors find it significant that the Church’s Journal History “reported the arrival of the Baker-Fancher train on August 3, but oddly neglected to mention the hurried departure of George A. Smith from Great Salt Lake City that same day” (96). They accuse Andrew Jenson, who began compiling this day-by-day scrapbook around 1896, of a cover-up because he had “an opportunity to alter information or reject any troublesome material altogether” (96). Actually, the Journal History does not report “the arrival of the Baker-Fancher train,” but rather the arrival of a “company of emigrants” with “a large herd of cattle.” Trains with similar descriptions in the Journal History arrived on July 20, 25, and 27, as well as August 4 and 5.³

Many current historians rely on a deposition made by Malinda Cameron Scott Thurston in 1911 to the U.S. government to ascertain the August 3 arrival date. An 1877 affidavit by Cameron stated the train arrived “on or about the first of August.”⁴ It is likely that Jenson did not know the exact arrival date of the party, and in compiling some sixty years of history in the late 1890s, he did not connect the generically labeled

August 3 company with the Baker-Fancher train. If Jenson was trying to distance George A. Smith's trip from the massacre, as the editors contend, he should have left out the discourse that Smith gave on September 13, after he returned to Great Salt Lake City. This discourse appears in the Journal History just pages after an account of the massacre and comprises a full account by Smith of his trip, including mention of the day he departed and an account of his war sermons, which likely had unintentionally more to do with the massacre than a premeditated plan on the part of Smith and Brigham Young.⁵

While the editors rarely have actual documents to back up key elements of their theory of conspiracy, they do rely on one document to bolster portions of their story – John D. Lee's *Mormonism Unveiled* (135, 311–12, 336–37, 371, 456, 464–65, 467, 474).⁶ They use this source even when multiple documents contradict what it says. For example, *Mormonism Unveiled* states that nearly three weeks after the massacre, Lee “gave to Brigham Young a full, detailed statement of the whole affair, from first to last” (135).

Documents show that Lee did leave southern Utah for Great Salt Lake City on September 20. Stake minutes record that along the way he stopped in Provo, where he addressed the Utah Stake on September 27. In his discourse, Lee told elaborate lies, putting the blame for the massacre on the misconduct of the emigrants toward the Indians, which resulted in the Indians—and the Indians alone—massacring the emigrants. Wilford Woodruff recorded in his diary that he was present when John D. Lee finally arrived in Great Salt Lake City and reported the matter to Brigham Young on September 29. The story that Lee told Young and others was very similar to the lies he

told in Provo. Later in November, Lee wrote a letter to Brigham Young in which he recounted essentially the same story, putting the blame on the Indians (131, 138, 160–61).

All of the documentary evidence demonstrates that Lee’s “detailed statement” was nothing more than a fabrication. Yet, the editors write, “The story told in Wilford Woodruff’s journal, purporting to show Lee lying to Brigham Young, apparently reflects a meeting the two men staged for the benefit of other church leaders” (136). Lacking documentary evidence – other than *Mormonism Unveiled* – the editors surmise, “Lee apparently made his first report to Brigham Young that evening [Sept. 28] and then told the story Woodruff recorded the next day” (366 n. 4). The editors attempt to bolster a statement found in *Mormonism Unveiled* that supports their theory, and yet the editors themselves rightly concede that “Lee is not to be trusted: much of his story is told with such compelling detail that it is impossible to tell when he is reporting the facts as he remembered them or when he is weaving an elaborate lie designed to vindicate himself and shift blame for a terrible crime to the victims, the Paiutes, his colleagues and superiors. . . . All of Lee’s many and varied ‘confessions’ are calculated distortions of the truth” (337).⁷

In addition to Lee’s own distortions of the truth, researchers have convincingly shown that Lee’s attorney and editor, William W. Bishop, rewrote Lee’s “confessions” in *Mormonism Unveiled* after Lee died to make the book more sensational and to encourage sales.⁸ The *Innocent Blood* editors themselves call it the “Bishop version” (338).

So why do the editors use Lee's *Mormonism Unveiled* to support their theory? Curiously, they state, "Despite his uncounted lies, Lee's confession helps answer the massacre's most troubling question" (474). The question, of course, is why the Mormons did it, and the answer for the editors is because Brigham Young told them to. Since this explanation fits within the framework of their story, the editors are willing to use this dubious source when it works for them.

Innocent Blood contains some important documents, like the seventeen depositions that consisted of fifty-eight handwritten pages of testimony taken in 1860 from relatives of the massacre victims. Located in the National Archives, these depositions provide detailed information about the composition of seven Arkansas families and their personal property. While the depositions show the magnitude of the property lost by living relatives, they also poignantly express the great personal loss suffered by parents, wives, and children who were left behind to suffer the injustice of not knowing exactly what happened to their loved ones and why (42-55). *Innocent Blood* also contains some of the earliest California newspaper accounts of the massacre, which include important details (32-42, 139-59, 182-85).

However, the editors often use a heavy hand in giving their interpretation of the documents. Most documents come with editorial preambles to direct the reader toward particular interpretations, and a summary then follows each document to make sure the reader does not miss the document's intended purpose in the editors' carefully crafted story. Yet, scholars who can tolerate the editors' interference will find some interesting and important documents in this compilation that they can use to come to their own

conclusions regarding the massacre.

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1. Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1950). For a comprehensive listing of scholarly, historical publications about the massacre, see *Studies in Mormon History*, available online at <http://mormonhistory.byu.edu>. For information on the 1990 monument dedication, see Harold Schindler, "Leaders, Descendants to Dedicate Monument at Mountain Meadows," *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 9, 1990, B3; Art Challis, "Mountain Meadows Now Can Symbolize Willingness to Look Ahead, BYU Chief Says," *Deseret News*, September 16, 1990, B4.

2. Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1892), 1:696; for other sources regarding Smith's departure, see Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 303 n. 62.

3. Journal History of the Church, August 3, 1857; July 20, 1857; July 25, 1857; July 27, 1857; August 4, 1857; August 5, 1857; available on *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), vol. 2, DVD 3. When describing these arriving companies, Jenson was simply taking information from the Historian's Office Journal and transferring it to the Journal History. See Historian's Office Journal, 1844-79, available on *Selected Collections*, vol. 1, DVD 17.

4. See Malinda Cameron Scott Thurston, affidavit in support of H.R. 3945, December 18, 1877,

45th Cong., 2nd sess.; and Malinda Cameron Scott Thurston, deposition, May 2, 1911, *Malinda Thurston v. United States*, U.S. Court of Claims, no. 8479, National Archives, Washington, D.C., available online at <http://www.mtn-meadows-assoc.com/malindathurston.htm>. The 1877 affidavit also states “on or about the first of August.”

5. Journal History, September 13, 1857, 4–6.

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

7. The editors provide fifteen pages for the inclusion of Lee’s “confessions” made to U.S. Attorney Sumner Howard (338–52), which the editors describe—along with all of Lee’s confessions—as “a cunning stew of truth and fantasy” (352). Howard’s version of the confessions did not contain indictments against Brigham Young and other leaders as accessories after the fact to murder, and Howard accused William W. Bishop of falsifying the inclusion of such indictments in his account. The editors of *Innocent Blood* chose to believe Bishop’s version over Howard’s (353).

8. See Richard E. Turley Jr., “Problems with Mountain Meadows Massacre Sources,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 3 (2008): 143–57.