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Shannon A. Novak. *House of Mourning:
A Biocultural History of the Mountain Meadows Massacre.*

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008

Reviewed by Joel C. Janetski

Why another book about the Mountain Meadows Massacre? The topic has been thoroughly scoured in recent¹ and past² books, with another³ now available since August 2008 (see the reviews of Brian Q. Cannon and Jared Farmer in this issue). What new does Novak bring to the discussion of this most horrific event in Utah's past? The answer is a unique data set: a sample of the skeletal remains of the victims. How she came to have access to these remains requires some explanation.

In February 1999, Glen Leonard, then director of the Museum of Church History and Art, contacted the Office of Public Archaeology (OPA) at Brigham Young University regarding the construction of a new monument at the Mountain Meadows Massacre site by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁴ Construction of the new monument required some ground disturbance, and the archaeologists' task was to make every effort to avoid disturbing human remains. To accomplish this they employed state-of-the-art techniques (ground penetrating radar, infrared aerial photography, soil chemistry testing, and others) as well as a thorough walk-over of the area. Despite these efforts, backhoe work exposed a shallow mass grave near the old monument. Following the requirements of their state antiquities permit, OPA archaeologists carefully removed the bones and obtained the services of a qualified anthropologist to perform basic analysis; that anthropologist was Shannon Novak.

Novak is well qualified for such a task. She holds a doctorate in physical anthropology from the University of Utah and had excellent training and experience in forensics prior to this study (see preface). The analysis was basic, focusing on stature, pathologies, evidence for violent trauma, age, and sex. She was given one month to complete the work, a very tight time frame. Although initially unaware of the extreme sensitivity of her data set (xiii), she soon realized these bones represented more than just another project. The analysis eventually became what she terms "an

extraordinary experience that engaged issues of social identity, history, and power” (xv). She has presented her experience and findings not only in her book but also in two journal articles.⁵

House of Mourning is a scholarly work, well documented and well researched. In it Novak presents an anthropological perspective of the Mountain Meadows event by culturally and physically contextualizing the individuals whose remains she studied. Most historians have focused on the Utah residents involved in the killings and the historical context of the 1850s in Utah. Novak takes a different tack—she focuses almost exclusively on the Arkansans. To be sure, the remains recovered are but a sample of those who died in September 1857 as her study includes just 28 of the estimated 120 who died at the site. Nonetheless, the goal is ultimately to provide a palpable identity to those who died. To accomplish this, Novak turns to Arkansas and individual histories of those known to be on the wagon train. Who were these people? What were their lives like? What was their socioeconomic position in society and why were they moving west? What kind of people were they? Ultimately, the project’s temporal and analytical constraints as well as the incomplete nature of the remains made positive identification impossible, although Novak makes some educated guesses.

Chapter 1 scans the Arkansas landscape, focusing on the regions eventually settled by the several Fancher-Baker train families before they migrated west. In chapter 2, the author describes the migration streams that characterized the western movement and places the families within those streams. The result is a sense of the dynamic nature of the frontier in the mid-1800s when masses moved, leapfrogging to the next new place. Here Novak details the composition (age, sex, kin relationships) of the primary families known to be in the party to confront the question of who died.

Chapter 3 is titled “Nourishment” and lays out probable diets of the Arkansas emigrants given their estimated socioeconomic status. The author uses data from the remains to characterize the emigrants’ health. She concludes that those on the train (at least those in her sample) were in decent health and, in some ways, in better health than might be expected. Evidence of anemia and dietary deficiency is present, and, although dental health was poor by modern standards, it was “about average” for the day (84). In a related discussion, chapter 4 focuses on and largely dispels accounts that the victims were “diseased” (88). This section includes a useful and interesting discussion of cultural and medical notions of disease and its causes in the mid-nineteenth century. Also related to health, chapter 5, “Domains,” reviews gender roles, social networks, work habits,

and physical consequences of the same, including reasons for accidental deaths (129) among rural southern families. This overview provides a context for a discussion of joint disease and traumas evident in the Mountain Meadows sample.

Chapter 6, “Epitaph,” presents current attitudes regarding death prior to confronting the circumstances of the massacre. Here Novak details the grim evidence confirming the violent deaths at the hands of the perpetrators. To make the point, she includes multiple photos of bullet holes in crania and other damage caused by shooting at short range as well as blunt force. In this she corroborates many historical accounts of how the victims met their demise, although other accounts are not supported. For example, there was no evidence of scalping, arrow wounds, or throat cutting (173)⁶ despite several accounts describing Paiute involvement.⁷ This chapter concludes with comments on Mormon behavior and their unique perspective on Native Americans stemming from the Book of Mormon. Like Indians, Mormons were sometimes perceived as “‘beyond the pale’ (literally *outside the boundary*)” given their clannishness and “mysterious ritual of baptism and communion with the dead” (175, italics in original). Novak addresses the ultimate historical and anthropological question—why did this massacre occur?—with a discussion of Mormon identity. She proposes that Mormons masquerading as Indians (similar to Boston Tea Party participants) struck a blow against persecution and an unfriendly government through this violent act (176–77).⁸

Novak presents her story and her data in a scholarly yet engaging style; for the most part, she maintains an objective stance. The politically hot issue related to the massacre—did Brigham Young order the attack?—is not pursued, nor could it be with her data. Nor could she make any statement about how many died.

There are some minor concerns in the book. For example, the absence of scales in the photos is an oversight, and figure 6-17, which is presented as evidence of carnivore damage on a long bone, appears more likely to be damage from smaller animals, like rodents.

The massacre at Mountain Meadows is a dark moment in Utah’s past. Reading about it is difficult; understanding it is more difficult. Dr. Novak brings a unique data set, a different perspective, and, I believe, useful insight into this tragedy. I recommend the text to those searching for more understanding but through a different lens.

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Utah, Texas, and Jordan. Most recently he has focused efforts in the Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument in southern Utah, where he is now investigating 10,000-year-old Paleoarchaic occupations at North Creek Shelter near Escalante, a project funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). He is also collaborating with colleagues at the University of Utah on another NSF-sponsored project to chemically determine the diets and burial patterns of the Basketmakers (the earliest Anasazi) in Grand Gulch, Utah.

1. Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002); Sally Denton, *American Massacre: The Tragedy at Mountain Meadows, September 1857* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

2. For example, see Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1950).

3. Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

4. For more information see Shane A. Baker, Richard K. Talbot, and Lane D. Richens, “Archaeological Remote Sensing Studies and Emergency Data Recovery at 42WS2504, Washington County, Utah,” Museum of Peoples and Cultures Technical Series No. 03-8 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2003); and Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets*, 372–74.

5. Shannon A. Novak and Derinna Kopp, “To Feed a Tree in Zion: Osteological Analysis of the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre,” *Historical Archaeology* 37, no. 2 (2003): 85–108; Shannon A. Novak and Lars Rodseth, “Remembering Mountain Meadows: Collective Violence and the Manipulation of Social Boundaries,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 62 (Spring 2006): 1–25.

6. See also Novak and Kopp, “To Feed a Tree in Zion,” 97.

7. For example, see Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 156–58.

8. See also Novak and Rodseth, “Remembering Mountain Meadows,” 7.