Mormon ghosts

By Matthew Avery Sutton in the December 30, 2008 issue

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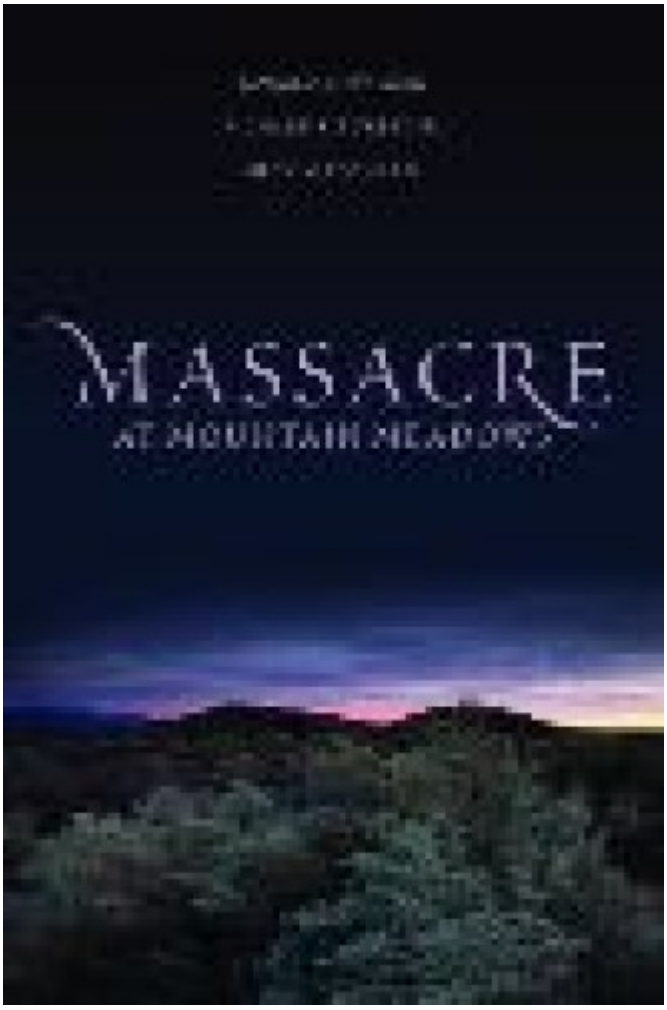

Massacre at Mountain Meadows

Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley and Glen M. Leonard
Oxford University Press

On September 11, 1857, over 120 migrants on their way from Arkansas to California hid in a haphazardly constructed wagon fort in southern Utah. They feared that local

Paiutes were going to renew attacks against them. Having spent four days under siege, they were relieved by the sight of Mormon leader John D. Lee, the “spiritual son” of Brigham Young, and four dozen local militiamen approaching their fort. Waving a white flag of truce, Lee promised the migrants safe passage out of Utah. Salvation seemed close, at least until they heard Lee’s terms. In return for the militia’s help, Lee asked the migrants to leave behind their cattle and other belongings, pile all of their weapons into a wagon and march out with the women and children in the lead and the men following behind. Although the migrants feared a trap, they had little choice.

The militiamen marched the migrants about a mile up the road to where they had arranged for Paiute warriors to hide in the brush. On the signal of a Mormon leader, the Indians attacked the women and children at the front of the procession while the militia killed every one of the unarmed men at the rear. Guns, knives, stones and clubs were all used to carry out the devilish deed. Only 17 children were spared; it was believed that they were too young to remember what happened.

In recent years the story of the massacre has received a lot of attention from authors, filmmakers, journalists and even the descendants of the migrants, forcing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to address the event. After years of silence and evasion, three Mormon scholars with close links to the church (one is an assistant church historian and another is a former director of the LDS Museum of Church History and Art) have tackled the story in *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*. Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley and Glen M. Leonard faced a number of challenges from the outset. How do you tell a story of mass murder when it involves your own religious community? How do you speak after a century and a half of silence? And most important, can you honestly deal with the fact that your church’s own prophet may have been an accessory to murder—or at the very least likely covered up a violent crime?

According to the authors, the events leading to the massacre began long before September 1857. Walker, Turley and Leonard’s story opens with a history of the violence that dogged the Mormons from their earliest days. Indicative of the authors’ approach, just a few pages into the book they include an illustration of Mormon prophet and founder Joseph Smith being murdered. This allows the authors to paint the Saints as a persecuted minority, often confronted with violence, who sought little more than the freedom to live their lives in peace as God dictated. After Smith’s death the Saints faced further persecution until Brigham Young led them on an

exodus to their new Zion, the Great Salt Lake Basin.

In Utah, Young used his role as territorial governor to build a powerful church hierarchy that controlled just about every aspect of life in the region, from the militia to local law enforcement to the courts. But by the mid-1850s, the Saints' dreams of a peaceful and separate existence were beginning to crumble. More and more gentiles (non-Mormons) were settling in and near Utah, thousands of migrants were moving through Mormon country on their way west, and the new Republican Party had made eradicating the Mormon practice of polygamy one of its major goals, along with ending slavery. In the summer of 1857, President James Buchanan dispatched the army to Utah with orders to end the Mormon "rebellion" and to replace Young with a territorial governor who would enforce American laws. Young began preparing the Mormon people for war. "Woe, woe to those men who come here to unlawfully meddle with me," he declared. He instructed the Saints to stockpile weapons and cease trading with migrants, and he warned that Indians would be free to attack wagon trains.

Meanwhile, a wagon train from Arkansas was making its way west through southern Utah. According to massacre participants, among the migrants were a number of rough characters who had insulted and threatened the Mormons. Church leaders in Cedar City decided that the wagon train had to be stopped (though their motives are still a point of heated debate). First they dispatched their Paiute allies to kill the male migrants and to steal their cattle, hoping that no whites would be implicated in the action. Although caught off guard, the migrants repelled their attackers, circled their wagons and prepared for a siege. From there things unraveled quickly for the Mormons. A few migrant men had escaped, and the Saints feared that their role would be discovered. So they hatched a plan to finish the job. The result was the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

Ever since, scholars and laypeople alike, both Mormon and gentile, have sought to understand how this horrific event could have happened and who was responsible. Some point to evidence suggesting that Young may have ordered the massacre; others believe that he was an accessory after the fact who shielded the killers. Although dozens of people were involved in the tragic event, only a few faced grand jury indictments, and only John D. Lee was punished. He was tried and found guilty almost 20 years after the massacre and was executed by the U.S. Army in 1877 at Mountain Meadows.

Lee was the scapegoat in 1877, and he has reprised that role in Walker, Turley and Leonard's telling of the story. They conclude their book with the line: "At exactly 11:00 a.m., five balls tore through Lee and left a skipping pattern on the grass behind." These scholars left their own skipping pattern behind as well. I had hoped that they would take on some of the recent scholarship on the massacre. Two fairly new books, by Will Bagley and Sally Denton, place the blame for the massacre squarely at the feet of Brigham Young, and both studies are critical of the Mormon hierarchy and the way that it has dealt with its complicated past. Walker, Turley and Leonard ignore one of the major issues that Bagley and Denton raise: Brigham Young's response to and cover-up of the massacre.

"We concluded, reluctantly," Walker, Turley and Leonard write, "that too much information existed for a single book. Besides, two narrative themes emerged. One dealt with the story of the massacre and the other with its aftermath—one with *crime* and the other with *punishment*." They deal solely with the crime, ignoring what they call the punishment, which was in fact a horrifying lack of justice in Young's Mormon-dominated Utah and gravely inadequate efforts by the church in most of the decades since to deal forthrightly with the controversy.

Massacre at Mountain Meadows provides a good narrative of the events leading up to September 11, 1857, and makes a compelling case that Young did not order the massacre. But it does not delve into the Mormon response to the massacre and how that response should impact our understanding of Young, Mormon leaders or the Saints' understanding of their own difficult history.

Despite my disappointment, I do sympathize with the authors. Like most scholars of religion who study their own traditions, they found themselves in an impossible situation. They are certainly good historians, but they are also faithful Mormons. They probably could not find any way to tell the rest of the story without sacrificing one of these two commitments—either they would compromise historical integrity or they would anger their church.

Scholars of religion constantly have to make difficult choices. They are often drawn to studying their own faiths, and they often write much better histories than do outsiders since they understand their own traditions better than anyone else. Yet they also have to struggle far more than outsiders with the most negative aspects of their religion, especially since church leaders never make it easy for such scholars to explore the dark sides of faith. *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* had the potential to chart a new path in Mormon history by dealing honestly with the past—all of it—but

it did not. This is unfortunate for readers and for Mormons themselves, because if Walker, Turley and Leonard cannot tell us the entire story, we are forced to rely on the scathing accounts written by skeptics. As a result, everybody loses.