

Book Reviews

WILL BAGLEY. *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002. xxiv + 493 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 hardback.)

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Explaining the violent slaughter of 120 men, women, and children at the hands of God-fearing Christian men—priesthood holders, no less, of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—is no easy task. Biases permeate the sources and fill the historical record with contradictions and polemics. Untangling the twisted web of self-serving testimony, journals, memoirs, government reports, and the like requires skill, forthrightness, integrity, and the utmost devotion to established standards of historical scholarship. Will Bagley, a journalist and independent historian with several books on Latter-day Saint history to his credit, has recently tried his hand at unraveling the tale. Even though Bagley claims to be aware of “the basic rules of the craft of history” (xvi), he consistently violates them in *Blood of the Prophets*. As a result, Juanita Brooks’ *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* remains the most definitive and balanced account to date.

Certainly there is no justification for the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Mormon men along with Paiute allies acted beyond the bounds of reason to murder the Fancher party, a group of California-bound emigrants from Arkansas passing through Utah in 1857. It is a horrific crime, one that Bagley correctly identifies as “the most violent incident in the history of America’s overland trails” (xiii), and it belongs to Utah and the Mormons. Brigham Young, according to the best evidence, aided in the coverup and, at the very least, failed to use his influence to ensure that the perpetrators were

brought to justice. For faithful Latter-day Saints, it is a bitter pill to swallow, while for historians it presents challenges all its own. One of Bagley's central purposes is to explore "how decent men can, while acting on their best and firmest beliefs, commit a great evil" (xiii). It is through fulfilling his "duty as a historian" (xviii) that Bagley seeks to answer this question "as honestly and accurately as possible" (xix).

Bagley's research is extensive and takes advantage of sources not known to Juanita Brooks. His handling of those sources, however, is problematic and at times is manipulated to fit his thesis, and both his prejudices and biases quickly become apparent. Bagley is intent upon implicating Brigham Young in the massacre. To do so, he repaints nineteenth-century Utah with blood. Where Brooks described the massacre as a tragic byproduct of the Utah War and southern Utah Mormons' overzealous response to the impending invasion of federal forces, Bagley sees it as the natural outgrowth of nineteenth-century Mormonism's "culture of violence" (378). For Bagley, the massacre was not an aberration but a "fulfillment" of Joseph Smith's "radical doctrines" (378). As Bagley puts it, "Early Mormonism's peculiar obsession with blood and vengeance created the society that made the massacre possible if not inevitable" (379). Those who participated were doing so as a fulfillment of Mormon temple oaths to "avenge the blood of the Prophets on this nation" (21).

Bagley is a superb storyteller. Yet the manner in which he constructs his story is designed to reinforce the notion that nineteenth-century Utah was a corrupt cauldron of blood, vice, and hypocrisy. Bagley's prejudices and unexamined assumptions permeate the narrative. In countless places, Bagley labels Mormons and anyone with a kind word for them as ridiculous or worthy of dismissal. Brigham Young's concerns about the Army's treatment of immigrating Mormons, for example, are "groundless" (89), and the move south at the end of the Utah War is a "petulant exercise" (205). George A. Smith's red wigs are "ill-fitting" (31); journalist George Alfred Townsend is "probably a hired Mormon sympathizer" (249); and Thomas L. Kane is a "hypochondriac" (198).

Contrast those descriptions with the romanticized portrait Bagley paints of the Fancher company. Here, women "tended lively tribes of offspring, milked cows, churned butter, baked bread and biscuits." The "swarms of children who enlivened the camp" dutifully tended to their chores. The men "swapped lies, and bet on horse races and shooting matches, but many of their number spent their free time in prayer and reflection. After dark the inhabitants of this movable village gathered in clusters of families and friends around large fires, where they made the air ring with fiddles and banjos sounding the high lonesome ballads their ancestors had carried across the

sea" (55). Not once in nearly four hundred pages does Bagley sketch the Mormons with the same sweetness he reserves for the Arkansans.

Nineteenth-century Mormon Indian policy is integral to Bagley's argument. In his mind, Native Americans in general, and the Southern Paiutes specifically, fit nicely within Mormonism's vengeful plans. Citing only "one Nauvoo Mormon" as evidence, Bagley generalizes that "within six months of [Joseph] Smith's murder, the Saints developed a tradition that the Indians would play a key role in avenging their martyred prophets" (27). Even the missionaries Brigham Young sent to visit Indian tribes throughout the United States "were called to prepare the Indians for their role in the impending apocalypse" (36). I suggest that the Native Americans were to become nothing less than "the battle-ax of the Lord" and fight alongside the Saints to usher in the millennium (23–37). While Bagley cites a variety of sources—including Book of Mormon verses, Brigham Young, and other Saints—to make his case, he is selective in his choices and single-minded in his interpretation, and he does not account for the complex and, at times, contradictory nature of Mormonism's Indian policy. For his tale of blood to work, he must pigeonhole Young and the Saints into a monolithic "battle-ax" strategy. In reality, the Saints' stance toward the Paiutes varied in time and space according to changing circumstances and differing personalities.

While touring southern settlements in 1851, for example, Brigham Young commented to Saints at Parowan that he "wished to have sufficient men there to be secure from the children of the Gadianton robbers who had infested the mountains for more than a thousand years and had lived by plundering all the time."¹ Presiding Bishop Edward Hunter, Heber C. Kimball, and John Taylor also linked Great Basin Indians to the Gadianton robbers, the latter doing so from the pulpit of the St. George Tabernacle.² At least some rank-and-file Church members viewed the Indians in the same light. In 1858, for example, one resident of Harmony (John D. Lee's home at the time of the massacre) insisted that "these Indians in these mountains are the descendants of the Gadianton robbers, and that the curse of God is upon them, and we had better let them alone."³ Needless to say, seeking security from the Paiutes, linking them to the Gadianton robbers of Mormon scripture, and letting them alone are far cries from Bagley's insistence that "the Mormons came to regard the Indians as a weapon God had placed in their hands" (37). Certainly, there was more to Mormon-Paiute relations than an inevitable march toward Mountain Meadows.

Bagley's attempt to link Brigham Young directly to the massacre is also bound up in his view of Mormon-Indian relations. Here Bagley does shed new light on the events leading to the massacre, but his desire to implicate Young causes his most egregious manipulation of evidence. Relying upon the

journal of Dimick Huntington, Young's Indian interpreter, Bagley is convinced that the 1 September 1857 meeting between Young and several Paiute leaders from southern Utah amounted to a tacit authorization to kill. As Bagley puts it, Young "encouraged his Indian allies to attack the Fancher Party to make clear to the nation the cost of war with the Mormons" (379). To make his case, Bagley substitutes the word "allies" for "grain" in his quote of the Huntington journal, significantly changing its meaning. Bagley presents it this way: the Paiute leaders "sayd the[y] was afraid to fight the Americans & so would raise [allies] and we might fight" (114). (Huntington actually wrote "& so would raise grain and we might fight."⁴) Bagley changes words with no explanation to the reader in either the text or endnote, a direct violation of the American Historical Association's Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct, which asserts that "historians must not misrepresent evidence or the sources of evidence."⁵ Worse still, with only this entry as support, Bagley concludes that the meeting between Young and the Paiutes "sealed" the fate of the Fancher party (112).

Huntington's journal does reveal that Young, in an effort to secure Indian allegiances in the wake of federal forces marching to Utah, gave the Indians the cattle on the overland trail. However, as Huntington noted in his meeting with the Shoshones, Mormon policy urged caution, even in regard to killing cattle, and makes no mention of attacking emigrants in general, let alone the Fancher party specifically.⁶

Clearly, Bagley's conclusions go well beyond his evidence, yet he is so convinced by his own contortion of Huntington's words that he cannot resist inserting an even more outlandish claim into an endnote: "If any court in the American West (excepting, of course, one of Utah's probate courts) had seen the evidence [Huntington's journal] contained, the only debate among the jurors would have been when, where, and how high to hang Brigham Young" (425, note 42).

Although less blatant, but significant in its cumulative effect, Bagley's manipulation of information is evident elsewhere in the text and requires a careful reading and an awareness of sources. Certainly, as Bagley asserts, reconstructing the Fancher party's interaction with Mormon settlers as it traveled south is challenging. The Fanchers did not survive to tell their side of the story, and Mormon accounts are plagued with contradictions and justifications. As a result, Bagley almost completely dismisses them as filled with "lies, folklore, popular myth, justifications, and few facts" (99). While caution is, indeed, called for in using Mormon sources, Bagley fails to apply the same prudence in relying upon decidedly anti-Mormon accounts.

In reconstructing the Fancher train's passage through Utah, for example,

he relies in part upon Charles W. Wandell. Wandell was not a participant in the massacre but had the misfortune of passing through the meadow shortly after the slaughter. The horrible scene prompted him to conduct his own investigation. He subsequently used the pseudonym “Argus” to publish a series of “open letters” to Brigham Young, attempting to implicate him in the tragedy. Bagley first describes Wandell only as “an embittered Mormon apostate” (98). Three pages later, however, he uses Wandell unquestioningly to describe American Fork Mormons’ refusal to trade with the Fanchers. Bagley does not name Wandell as his source and only footnotes him as “Argus.” Later, he again uses Wandell approvingly and even attempts to establish him as a credible source. Bagley calls him a “longtime southern Utah resident,” as if he were a witness to the bowie-knife-to-the-throat incident that he described (114). He fails to mention that Wandell was not even in southern Utah at the time of the massacre and that Wandell’s information was, at best, “hearsay”—a term Bagley uses frequently to dismiss Mormon accounts. Only after the damage is done does Bagley detail Wandell’s life and acknowledge that his information was “flawed and sometimes suspect” (269) and refer to his articles as “a mix of fact, folklore, and propaganda” (274).

If Wandell really is such a poor source, it is difficult to understand Bagley’s favorable use of Wandell early in his book, especially given his proclivity for excluding Mormon sources on lesser grounds. Even in his description of Wandell’s break from the LDS Church, Bagley subtly changes Wandell’s own version to implicate Young. “When [Wandell] moved to Nevada in July 1866,” writes Bagley, “Young’s ‘creatures’ circulated reports at Pioche [Pioche did not exist until 1869] that Wandell was a veteran of Mountain Meadows, and they later charged that he wrote the Argus articles to exonerate himself” (269). Wandell, however, recalled it differently:

I will state that in the early days of Pioche city, a mining town situated less than 50 miles from the Mountain Meadow, some of his [Young’s] creatures caused the report to be circulated through the Utah teamsters hauling produce to that place that I had been engaged in the Mountain Meadows massacre! And so assiduously and cunningly was this calumny circulated, and kept up with such persistency, that many of the citizens of Lincoln County, Nevada, to-day no doubt believe it to be true. I was in California and had not seen Utah when that massacre occurred. At the time this calumny was first circulated I was County officer for Lincoln County, and finally to defend myself from this clumny [sic] I wrote the “Argus” letters published in the Corrine Reporter.⁷

Wandell, in other words, openly acknowledges that he wrote the Argus letters to defend himself. Bagley, however, again misrepresents his source to suggest that Young’s cronies perpetuated a lie against Wandell. It is an important distinction. It not only provides helpful information in evaluating

the usefulness of Wandell as a source but also provides information on Bagley's use of sources in general.

In some cases, Bagley substitutes unsubstantiated gossip for evidence. He repeats Elizabeth Brittain Knowlton's reminiscence that Mormon traders made fortunes from inducing Indians to steal emigrant stock (25). He does not explain how Mrs. Knowlton was in a position to know that Indians acted upon Mormon instigation, nor does he authenticate the rumor with proof of any Mormon who made his fortune thereby. He similarly cites from a California newspaper the alleged statement of an anonymous Mormon woman from Carson Valley who warns that the last westbound emigrant trains of the 1857 season will not get through Utah (93). He fails to explain how this woman could have known about plots, which, if real, would presumably be planned at Salt Lake City in councils to which she was not privy. Bagley likewise includes an account of apostate C. G. Landon, who staggered into Placerville with a tale of repeated beatings at the hands of Mormons in Salt Lake City. Landon also reported that "Men, women, and children, have been slaughtered by wholesale [along the trail]" (97). Bagley again cites no corroborating evidence. In these and so many other cases, it is impossible to judge the validity of the testimony. The introduction of so much smoke, however, creates the inescapable impression of fire. To Bagley, Mormons are thugs because somebody somewhere said so.

Another troubling tendency of Bagley's is his habit of almost—but not quite—accusing Mormonism of criminal acts for which there can be no answer because no real facts are given. Federal officials "died mysteriously" (39), and Wakara died "probably of pneumonia but perhaps from poison," all following conflicts with Mormons (33). The implication is clear: the Saints were to blame. Similarly, as Bagley writes it, Mormons "used federal largesse" to improve the roads near their settlements while "ignoring" an implied obligation to improve an additional five hundred miles between Utah towns and California (99)—territory which, according to Bagley's own map (74), was beyond Mormon responsibility and had been since the creation of New Mexico Territory in 1850. In southern Utah, according to Bagley, "illegitimate children [were] plentiful" (238), but he cites no evidence and does not explain why such children were so abundant in a culture that supposedly punished adultery with blood atonement.

In fact, blood atonement is the other key to Bagley's thesis. Some of Brigham Young's sermons during the Mormon reformation are problematic. According to Bagley, Mormon scholars suggest the speeches were rhetorical hyperbole, typical of Brigham Young. Bagley believes otherwise. "Like the faithful who sat through his fire-and-brimstone sermons," Bagley asserts, "I believe Brigham Young meant exactly what he said" (xv).

To lump all nineteenth-century Saints into one group and then to pretend that they interpreted Young the same way is a gross overgeneralization that does not reflect historical reality. Closer to the truth, individuals within any given Mormon audience likely adopted a variety of interpretations, each unique to the hearer. No doubt interpretations spread across a wide spectrum, and while some may have understood Young to be speaking literally, others certainly did not. Some Mormon violence was linked to blood atonement; Bagley, however, seems to fallaciously conclude that because Brigham Young preached the principle and murders occurred in Utah, they must therefore be connected.

Blood atonement and its influence upon Mormonism no doubt needs further study. In the meantime, an 1865 incident at Shoal Creek, a ranching outpost in northwest Washington County, about fifteen miles from Mountain Meadows, suggests that there were peaceful alternatives to blood atonement at work among Mormons during the same era Bagley describes as violent.

The winter of 1865 proved particularly cold at Shoal Creek. In the middle of this severe weather, Thomas Fuller died while tending Edw. Westover's sheep herd.⁸ Before long, priesthood authorities from Shoal Creek and St. George investigated Fuller's death and charged Westover for complicity in it. According to the evidence, Westover had not provided Fuller adequate food, shelter, and clothing, leading to Fuller's demise. The presiding authorities chastened Westover, telling him that he had "not done his duty as an Elder in Israel." In consequence, they instructed Westover "to make a confession before this meeting and at some convenient time be rebaptized to restore him to full fellowship with the saints and with the Lord." Westover responded that "the former he could do but the latter he could not do. I dare not be baptized," Fuller said, "for there is no remission of sin without the shedding of blood. So I appeal the case to Bro. Snow."⁹

Here Westover clearly makes a reference to blood atonement, in what appears to be a ploy to dodge his sentence. More importantly, in a case involving death, Bagley's version of leader-dictated murder should apply. To the contrary, it is Westover, not the priesthood authorities, who raises the specter of blood atonement. The leaders focused upon Westover's violation of the standards of care expected of Latter-day Saints and upon Westover's restoration to full fellowship. Their verdict did not include the shedding of blood, as Bagley suggests was typical of Utah during this time period. Westover never had his blood shed, nor was he violated in any other way. In fact, evidence suggests that Shoal Creek Saints continued to show him patience and forbearance.

While reports of violence need to be studied seriously, Bagley overgen-

eralizes nineteenth-century Utah as vengeful. Certainly, if relative violence is determined by comparing the number of violent deaths committed in one area at a given time to another area, then Utah is at a decided disadvantage in the 1850s due to Mountain Meadows. However, it is Bagley's distorted characterization of the massacre as a natural outgrowth of an already merciless society that ignores the complete picture. Perhaps Franklin Buck, a merchant, rancher, and investor of mines at Pioche, Nevada, put it best when he visited among the Saints at several southern Utah towns in 1871. In a letter to his sister, he compared Pioche with what he found at the Mormon towns:

In Pioche we have two courts, any number of sheriffs and police officers and a jail to force people to do what is right. There is a fight every day and a man killed about every week. About half the town is whisky shops and houses of ill fame. In these Mormon towns there are no courts, no prisons, no saloons, no bad women; but there is a large brick Church and they keep the Sabbath—a fine schoolhouse and all the children go to school. All difficulties between each other are settled by the Elders and the Bishop. Instead of every man trying to hang his neighbor, they all pull together. There is only one store on the co-operative plan and all own shares and it is really wonderful to see what fine towns and the wealth they have in this barren country. It shows what industry and economy will do when all work together.¹⁰

"The Devil is not as black as he is painted," Buck concluded.

In the end, Bagley falls short in his "duty as a historian . . . to abide by the rules of my craft" (xviii). His unbalanced use of sources, overgeneralizations, and seeming desire to directly implicate Brigham Young overpower his study. His far-reaching investigation is at times manipulated to fit his thesis. His facts do not support his conclusions. Countless quotations dwell upon blood, vengeance, and anti-government sentiment. Even supposing that Bagley presented such evidence entirely within context, his single-minded focus upon a few harsh ideas, unbalanced by any attempt at a fuller description of Mormonism, unfairly distorts the record and maligns an entire people.

Perhaps the real message in *Blood of the Prophets* is that considering Bagley's extensive research, he could come up with no better evidence than Dimick Huntington's journal to link "Young to facilitating the murders" (378). And to make even that unsustainable claim, he had to put a new word into Huntington's pen.

Notes

1. Journal History of the Church, 16 May 1851, 1, LDS Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt

Lake City, Utah, hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives; also Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–84), 4:26.

2. *Journal History*, 6 April 1853, 3; Heber C. Kimball in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–1886) 8:258; John Taylor in *Journal of Discourses*, 23:17.

3. Elder Marion J. Shelton, Harmony, Washington County, Utah, to George A. Smith, Salt Lake City, *Journal History*, 18 December 1858, 2–3. For a further assessment of Gadianton pronouncements see W. Paul Reeve, “‘As Ugly as Evil’ and ‘As Wicked as Hell’: Gadianton Robbers and the Legend Process Among the Mormons,” *Journal of Mormon History* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 125–149. And for more on Mormon/Southern Paiute relations which concentrates on the post massacre period (1862–1905) see W. Paul Reeve, “Mormons, Miners, and Southern Paiutes: Making Space on the Nineteenth-Century Western Frontier” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Utah, 2002), chapters 4 and 5.

4. Dimick B. Huntington, *Journal*, 1857–1859, 14, LDS Church Archives.

5. <http://www.theaha.org/PUBS/STANDARD.htm#Scholarship>, cited 26 June 2003.

6. Dimick B. Huntington, *Journal*, 1857–1859, 11–12, LDS Church Archives.

7. Charles W. Wandell, Sydney, Australia, to Joseph Smith III, 26 September 1874, 3, Henry A. Stebbins Papers, Community of Christ Library—Archives, Independence, Missouri.

8. I have been unable to determine whether Westover's first name was Edward or Edwin. It appears in the Hebron record only as Edw. It is more than likely Edward, but to be safe I kept it as Edw.

9. Hebron Ward Historical Record, 1862–1867, 3 vols., microfilm, LDS Church Archives, 1:53. For a more detailed account of the Fuller incident see W. Paul Reeve “Cattle, Cotton, and Conflict: The Possession and Dispossession of Hebron, Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 148–75.

10. Franklin A. Buck, *A Yankee Trader in the Gold Rush: The Letters of Franklin A. Buck*, comp. Katherine A. White (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930), 234–36.

