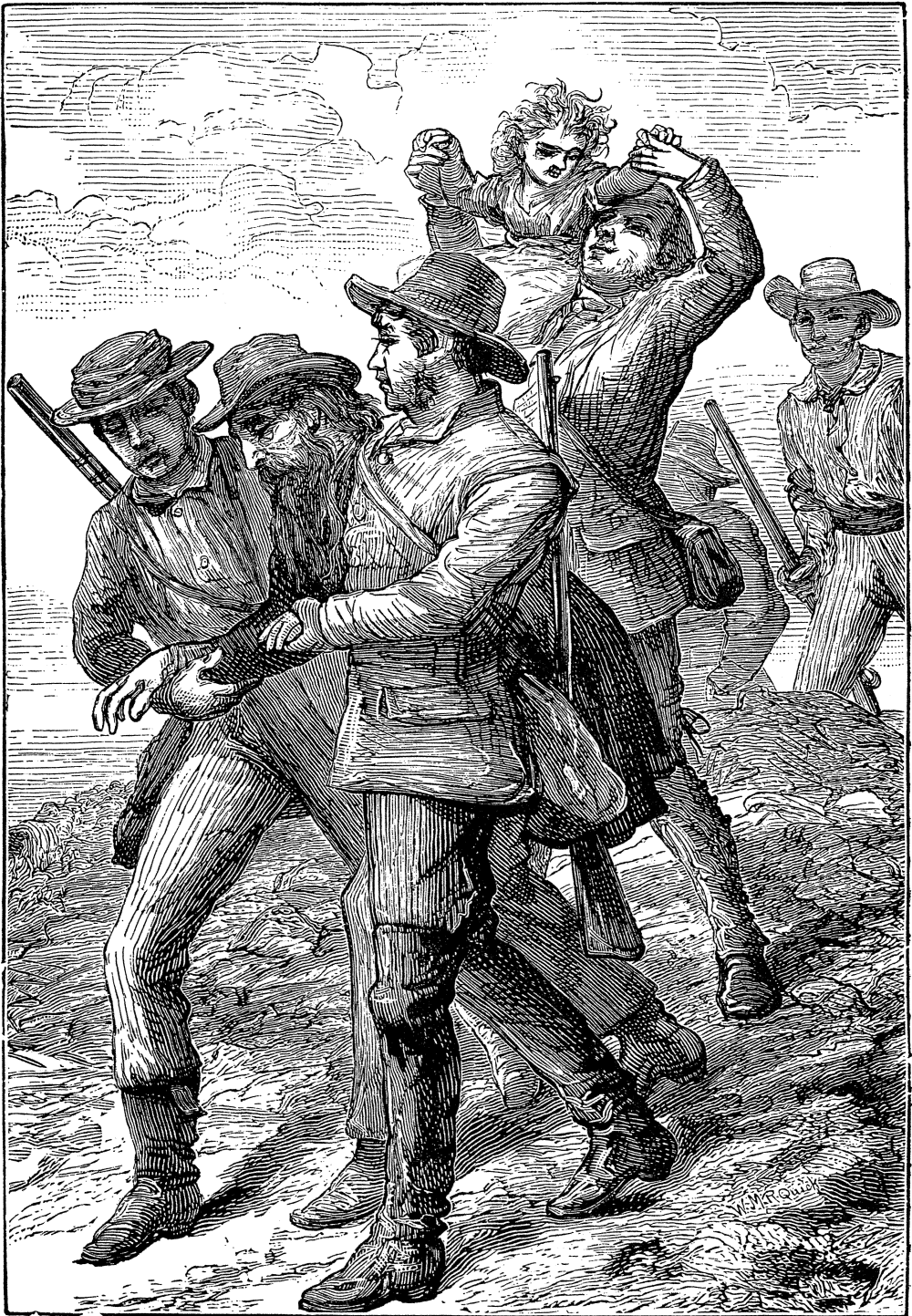


A TANGLED SKEIN



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**A Companion Volume to
The Baker Street Irregulars'
Expedition to
The Country of the Saints**

Edited by Leslie S. Klinger

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Conan Doyle Was Right

DANITES, AVENGING ANGELS, AND HOLY MURDER IN THE MORMON WEST

WILL BAGLEY

“Who controls the past,” ran the Party slogan, “controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered. Whatever was true now was true from everlasting to everlasting. It was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory.

— George Orwell, 1984.

AS a native-born son of Utah and a fifth-generation Latter-day Saint, I am honored to welcome the Baker Street Irregulars to our fair city on the Great Salt Lake and to the hallowed halls of the Alta Club. While I always strive to be a gentleman and a scholar, I am going to relax my usual meticulous erudite standards in this paper in the hope of sharing some of the fun I have with Utah history. I am also going to take off the gloves and engage in some historical hand-to-hand combat.

As my friend and colleague — and your fellow Irregular, “Enoch J. Drebber,” has pointed out so effectively in his paper later in this volume, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle visited Utah for the first time in 1923 to share his religious convictions with the Mormons, a population whose deeply held faith was as controversial and unorthodox as his own. The “eminent British psychic” spoke of “his long-time efforts to obtain tangible proofs of communications with ‘those who have departed from this mortal sphere’” with an enthusiastic audience that almost filled the Salt Lake Tabernacle, where fifty years earlier Brigham Young had made its arched ribs echo with his colorful and often-crude diatribes. Sir Arthur praised the Mormons for the “pioneer pluck” of their forebears, who reminded him of the Boers he had met as a young man in South Africa: “rugged, hard-faced men, [and] the brave and earnest women who look as if they had known much suffering and hardship.”¹

The next day a luncheon held in this venerable Kyune sandstone and Montana limestone fortress, located kitty-corner from the Lion House of Brigham Young,

A TANGLED SKEIN

honored the author.² In this very room, Conan Doyle addressed forty prominent Utahns. As we honor his memory at this celebration of the BSI's *A Study in Scarlet* Expedition to the City of the Saints, I would like to point out that our honored fellow Sherlockians are sharing in a common experience of modern visitors to Utah, including Sir Arthur, who encounter only one of the two versions of the predominant local faith, Mormonism. Many of the people you meet in Salt Lake are members of a modern, twenty-first century religion noted for its button-down conservatism and patriotism. Except for a few architectural artifacts and oddly dressed polygamous wives, the original, rough-and-tumble frontier version of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the religion's official name, abbreviated as LDS) visitors to Utah saw 150 years ago has vanished entirely. The contrast between the two religions is as striking as it is dramatic, but it is best seen as a case study of how a new faith begins as a revolutionary religious movement before rapidly transitioning itself into an institution embodying everything it originally sought to destroy.

Sir Arthur came to Utah, at least in part, to bury the hatchet. As historian Michael W. Homer has argued, Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* not only introduced the most popular character in world literature, but for more than a century the novella has had the greatest worldwide impact on the public image of Mormonism of any work ever published. Doyle's thrilling portrait of this frontier religion in *A Study in Scarlet* deeply offended many Utahns, who felt the author should express his regret "at having propagated falsehoods about the Mormon people."

The Mormon assault on Conan Doyle and his reputation soon sharpened and took on an official cast. "The elders of the Mormon Church considered seriously before allowing Conan Doyle to speak in the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City," wrote Presiding Bishop Charles Nibley, a powerful sugar tycoon and the "general authority" who administered the church's property and investments. "Rather than be called narrow and intolerant, we permitted his lecture, and Sir Arthur left Salt Lake City several thousand dollars richer. I think he had a lot of gall to take Mormon money when he attacked us so bitterly in his book, *A Study in Scarlet*," Nibley grouched. "I do believe that he is successful in raking in the shekels." The bishop even ridiculed the author's religious beliefs: "To Sir Arthur and his ectoplasm, the product of dimly-lighted seances, I answer that the only light that he has discovered was born in darkness and is not light to me."

Sir Arthur responded graciously, pointing out he was never paid for his lectures on spiritualism. "I have great respect for the Mormons, who treated me very liberally in allowing me to use their hall, and, therefore, I am more sorry that one who is a bishop among them should utter such an uncharitable and false statement." He asked the "ill-informed and uncharitable" bishop for an apology, which he never got.³

In his memoir of his second American adventure, Sir Arthur recalled the generally supportive reaction to his Utah visit was all the more magnanimous because the last half of *A Study in Scarlet* contained "a rather sensational" evocation of Mor-

mon history.⁴ Historians such as Michael Harrison have seen fit to censure Conan Doyle for what William S. Baring-Gould called “these slanders on the Mormons.”⁵ But a statement is slander only if it is not true.

The purpose of this paper, or its “agenda,” to use a term favored by my many faithful critics, is to examine the portrait Conan Doyle painted of frontier Mormonism and defend Sir Arthur’s refusal to apologize: “All I said of the Danite Band and the murders is historical so I cannot withdraw that Tho it is likely that in a work of fiction it is stated more luridly than in a work of history,” he wrote. “It’s best to let the matter rest. I write and draw the Mormons as they now are.”⁶ This presentation, I hope, will introduce you as outsiders to the “Forgotten Kingdom” of early Mormon history and compare specific incidents in *A Study in Scarlet* to see how they reflect specific atrocities and policies current in Utah Territory during Brigham Young’s reign of terror.

In addition to Conan Doyle’s historically clueless critics, a host of offended Mormon chroniclers have decried *A Study in Scarlet’s* charge that neither “the Inquisition of Seville, nor the German Vehmgericht, nor the secret societies of Italy, were ever able to put a more formidable machinery in motion than that which cast a cloud over the state of Utah.” However florid the Victorian phrasing sounds to modern ears, from the perspective of a growing number of historians the only error in that sentence is that Utah was a territory in 1887, not a state.

First, some background. I am the product of many generations of Latter-day Saints: my great-great-grandmother, Julia Grant Bagley, died in the same cholera disaster in 1855 that killed Michael Homer’s great-great-grandfather, Jean Bertoch. Although I am a committed agnostic “Jack Mormon” with strong atheistic sympathies and a deep sympathy for Voltaire’s truism that “Religion began when the first knave met the first fool,” I am still officially a member of the LDS Church, even though I regard Mormonism as about the silliest collection of absurdities this side of Scientology. Yet I am fiercely proud of my Mormon heritage, and I deeply appreciate the way the religion helped me develop several talents and acted as a positive influence on my ethics.

I am also the author of *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, an account of the largest massacre of white folks in the history of the American West—and second only to polygamy as the LDS Church’s least favorite historical subject. *Blood of the Prophets* won best book awards from the Western Writers of America, the Denver Public Library, Westerners International, and the Western History Association. The highest praise for the work came from Brigham D. Madsen, the dean of Utah historians, who wrote, “While the word ‘definitive’ is often overused, this account of the killings merits that distinction.”⁷

Mormon historians did not react as positively to the work. The study and the history it describes is simply too much of a challenge to their faith, and, I believe, they simply lack the historical imagination to understand that the benign religion they know and love could have once been a radical authoritarian movement with a

A TANGLED SKEIN

committed certainty that the end justified the means—and that early Mormon leaders were not joking when they said, “The Kingdom or nothing. The Mountain Meadows massacre poses an enormous problem for anyone trying to dismiss or minimize the extent of religious violence in the Mormon West. Somehow, it is hard to believe that local church leaders would commit such a mass murder without explicit orders: it is impossible to believe, as the new party line goes, that a handful of “renegade Mormons” in Southern Utah would disarm and brutally slaughter some 120 people, most of them women and children, in defiance of Brigham Young’s will. And no matter how desperately Mormon apologists might try to justify the event or explain it away, “the fact remains that the entire company was betrayed and murdered,” wrote the great and fearless Juanita Brooks, “an ugly fact that will not be downed.”⁸ The atrocity “came close to being the only recorded instance of a perfect crime of mass murder,” historian Dale L. Walker observed. “The only white witnesses were the perpetrators and they were not talking, nor were the Indians, who, for a long time, were accused as the sole culprits.”⁹ I confess I find it flattering that the book inspired the LDS Church to spend seven years, countless hours, and untold millions of dollars to write their own book about “one of the darkest events in Mormon history.”¹⁰ But I do not appreciate having the concerted effort of the church’s loyal scholars try to blacken my reputation or the attempts of the public relations arm of a multibillion-dollar religious conglomerate to silence me.¹¹

Half Emasculated: Mutilation

Before examining Conan Doyle’s descriptions of Mormon society in the novella that launched the career of Sherlock Holmes, the following two vignettes provide a useful introduction to the extreme nature of violence in the Mormon West.

In 1858 Hosea Stout was speaker of Utah’s territorial assembly and had been one of the original “Sons of Dan” or Danites twenty years earlier: Stout had also served as chief of the Nauvoo Police and was a charter member of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith’s ultra-secret “Council of Fifty,” which “ordained” Smith “Prophet, Priest and King” of the earth in April 1844.¹² Stout described an incident that took place on February 27, 1858, in Great Salt Lake City (as it was known until 1868), in the middle of what is now called “The Utah War.” Stout’s diary, one of the great records of frontier Mormonism, reported, “This evening several persons disguised as Indians entered the house of Henry Jones, and dragged him out of bed with a whore and castrated him by a square & close amputation.” Twelve days later, Stout referred to Mormon “hardcases” Howard Egan, Porter Rockwell, Ephraim Hanks “and several others of the Be’hoys,” using a popular piece of American slang that referred to a gang or, more explicitly, any organized group of thugs.¹³ A disillusioned Mormon later charged that Porter Rockwell had castrated Jones for sleeping with his mother, but Stout’s description is vivid enough to suggest he was an eyewitness.¹⁴ Nathaniel Case swore out an affidavit for a federal court in 1859 as-

ARTICLE TITLE

serting that two months later, Bishop Charles Hancock of Payson and four men murdered Jones and his mother and then pulled down the dugout they called home over their bodies.¹⁵ Federal Judge John Cradlebaugh was unable to get a Mormon grand jury to indict anyone for the Jones murders, while during the six years he served as U.S. attorney for Utah, Hosea Stout never brought indictments for the Jones atrocity or any other religiously motivated crime.

The third governor of Utah Territory, John Dawson, had an equally grotesque encounter with Mormon frontier violence. Shortly after he arrived in December 1861, Brigham Young called Dawson “a Jackass” when Abraham Lincoln’s representative vetoed a popular scheme to win statehood for Deseret—the term Mormons used in preference to Utah, a Congressionally imposed name they considered an insult since it derived from the territory’s dominant Indian tribe. Not long after Dawson’s veto and his call for Utah to pay \$26,982 in federal taxes to help fight the Civil War, someone took five shots at a federal judge in front of the governor’s rooms on Main Street. Local authorities laughed it off, but Dawson got the message. After three weeks in Utah, Dawson said his health “imperatively demanded” he leave, but the Mormon organ, the *Deseret News*, charged he had propositioned a Mormon widow and departed in fear of the consequences, “distressingly insane.”

When Dawson boarded an eastbound stagecoach on New Year’s Eve, a “gang of rowdies” tagged along up Emigration Canyon to Eph Hanks’s station at Mountain Dell. “I was followed by a band of Danites,” Dawson later told Lincoln. That night the crowd at the station got very drunk and inflicted “a most serious violence” on the governor. The be’hoys cut “my head badly in many places, kicking me in the loins and right breast until I was exhausted,” Dawson wrote. Once the governor had been “viciously assaulted & beaten,” and apparently castrated, the hoodlums carried “on their orgies for many hours in the night.” In an editorial denouncing the governor published the next day, but written before news of the assault on Dawson had reached its offices, the *News* charged he had hired bodyguards to “prevent his being killed or becoming qualified for the office of chamberlain in the King’s palace”—that is, made a eunuch. Apparently, someone had identified an appropriate punishment for Dawson even before the New Year’s Eve attack. Local authorities ordered the perpetrators rounded up, but the ruffians claimed the chief of police had ordered the assault.¹⁶ Within three weeks, two of them were dead at the hands of Orrin Porter Rockwell and the Salt Lake police, while the others were either found not guilty of any crime or fined \$25 or \$50.¹⁷

Dawson never addressed the exact nature of his injuries. Historians handled the issue delicately, using euphemisms for castration such as “mutilated.” Journalist J.H. Beadle wrote that Dawson “received shocking and almost emasculating injuries from three Mormon lads.”¹⁸ Apostle George Q. Cannon, who represented Utah Territory in Congress, shed some light on what happened after an Indiana Congressman “told me laughingly to-day that he was going against Utah because one of his constituents C Dawson C had been half emasculated. I told him the

story in our country was that he was only whipped,” Cannon informed Brigham Young. “He replied that the man who had attended to him as doctor informed him that an operation had been performed. He closed by relating the joke, which I believe I have heard Bro. H.B. Clawson relate, about the preacher who was unfitted for Camp Meeting duties.”¹⁹

Years later, Albina M. Williams, the widow of Thomas S. Williams who Governor Dawson allegedly propositioned, swore, “I am sure that the Mormon leaders had the Indians kill my husband which was done March 18th 1860.”²⁰

When a University of Southern California professor read a manuscript account of Dawson’s plight, he informed me it couldn’t possibly have happened, for if it had, he certainly would have heard about the castration of an American governor. Welcome to Utah history. These incidents are not the only or even the most disturbing accounts of “mutilation” in frontier Utah: in 1857 after the bishop of Manti brutally castrated a young romantic rival, Brigham Young said, “when a man is trying to do right & do[es] some thing that is not exactly in order I feel to sustain him & we all should.” Besides, the day was coming when thousands would be made eunuchs “in order for them to be saved in the kingdom of God.”²¹

As these incidents show, nothing John Ferrier experienced in *A Study of Scarlet* could touch the harsh reality of life in theocratic Utah—and they provide a benchmark against which to judge the claims of Mormon apologists about the mythologically peaceful kingdom of Deseret.

Destroying Angels, Avenging Angels

Now, to the matter at hand: the historical accuracy of Conan Doyle’s portrait of theocratic frontier police state in *A Study in Scarlet*. Lord knows Sir Arthur’s physical description of the American West is a total product of the author’s imagination that could only have been created by someone who had never been there. Its evocation of all the country between the Missouri River and the Sierra Nevada as an “arid and repulsive desert” and “a region of desolation and silence” is as stereotypical as its colorfully drawn “Redskins” and Latter-day Saints. It is impossible to defend the novella as an accurate history, as the author himself admitted when he confessed it drew “a rather sensational and overcoloured picture of the Danite episodes which formed a passing stain in the early history of Utah.” The novella’s historical exaggerations are played out amidst a fantastic geography that, as historian Bernard DeVoto observed, “could not be found in any map outside the Happy Isles.”²²

Conan Doyle derived his limited understanding of Mormonism entirely from a variety of secondary sources, good and bad. One of his main sources, Jules Remy’s *A Journey to Great-Salt-Lake City*, contained “a sketch of the history, religion, and customs of the Mormons, and an introduction on the religious movement in the United States.” A “crowd of boys” besieged Remy and his companions during a visit to a Mormon village in 1855 and “evinced a singular desire to be made ac-

ARTICLE TITLE

quainted with everything concerning us” and “seemed determined to get at our secrets.” The French traveler recommended that all governments that found maintaining a police force too expensive “commit its functions to the impudence of young street scamps; they will be sure to find in them very serious if not very clear-headed agents.” As Michael Homer first noticed, Remy’s account may have provided the inspiration for the “street Arab detective corps” of Sherlock Holmes that first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet*.²³

A key controversy surrounding the novella is its handling of the Danite Band, or as Conan Doyle called it, the Avenging Angels. “The Mormon Church has long and vehemently denied that the Danites or Destroying Angels ever existed,” Utah native Bernard De Voto wrote to Christopher Morley. The Danites had essentially disappeared by the 1880s when they appeared in Sherlock Holmes’s first adventure, and as De Voto noted, *A Study in Scarlet*’s “ecclesiastical trappings are anachronisms.”²⁴ But if Conan Doyle had set the story during Mormonism’s first decade in the Great Basin, its portrait of a theocratic police state would not have been as overdrawn.

In his first comment on Mormonism’s most famous band of enforcers, the Danites, Sir Arthur noted accurately that initially the band’s “vague and terrible power was exercised only upon the recalcitrants who, having embraced the Mormon faith, wished afterwards to pervert or to abandon it.” The implication that these Avenging Angels soon “took a wider range” to remedy the shortfall of adult women needed as polygamous brides was a fantasy, but several apostates who had escaped from Utah during the 1850s “spoke of gangs of armed men, masked, stealthy, and noiseless, who flitted by them in the darkness,” and for whom “the name of the Danite Band, or the Avenging Angels, is a sinister and an ill-omened one.”²⁵

Frederick Loba, a Swiss chemist who converted to Mormonism, lost his wife to cholera as he traveled to Zion in 1854 with two wagons, ten oxen, and six children. Three years later at Ft. Leavenworth, he gave a *New York Times* reporter a wild account of his escape from Utah with his new wife. Loba claimed that early in 1857, to prevent a flood of “apostates” from leaving the territory, Brigham Young “organized a body of 400 men, to whom he gave the name of ‘Wolf Hunters.’ The duty of this band was to assassinate every person who should attempt to leave the Valley without permission of the Prophet.” Loba charged “that Brigham himself was at the bottom of all the clandestine assassinations, plundering of trains, robberies of mail and the exemplar of every other species of wickedness practiced among his followers.”²⁶ A witness who contested some of the article’s claims did note that after Loba’s “hazardous and exhausting journey,” he met the couple at Fort Laramie and “confirm[ed] the fact that Loba and his wife (far advanced in pregnancy) took their flight from Salt Lake, while the snow was on the ground, and walked to Green River.”²⁷

At least one Mormon historian of my acquaintance considers the *Times* Loba articles malicious fiction, but while details such as an “organized a body of 400

A TANGLED SKEIN

men” are overdrawn, Jeanette McClair Hillhouse later described her own encounter with what Loba called “wolf hunters.” Scottish survivors of the Brigham Young’s disastrous handcart experiment of 1856, the Hillhouse family quietly left Salt Lake the next April to join a train of similarly disillusioned converts bound for the States. “The escape of the little band was early learned in the city and a posse of seven mounted Danites started rapidly in pursuit, overtaking them early in the morning several miles into and over the mountains, and almost within sight of the train to which they were eagerly and rapidly hurrying,” a Kansas county history reported in 1903. “The horsemen drew down upon them with drawn revolvers and commanded them to retrace their footsteps under penalty of instant death. Mrs. Hillhouse refused point blank to return, telling them they had starved while there for want of work, and that they were not spies as charged but were to return to Scotland from whence they came.” The enforcers let the mother and children go on, but John Hillhouse “was dragged from his family, returned a prisoner to Salt Lake.” Jeanette Hillhouse made her way to Nebraska and her husband escaped Utah that fall, but he did not see his family again for more than two years.²⁸

Like many such strange tales from early Utah, at least some of Loba’s stories were based on hearsay evidence or can easily be rejected as too fantastic to believe, but unlike *A Study in Scarlet*, Danites were not a historical fantasy. As the so-called “Mormon War” was heating up in western Missouri during early June 1838, Mormon leaders created a secret, oath-bound paramilitary organization initially known as the Daughters of Zion. In his 1857 description of this “death society,” whose object he said “was the punishment of the obnoxious,” apostate John Hyde explained that Micah 4:13 “furnished the first name, ‘Arise, and thresh, O! daughter of Zion; for I will make thy horn iron, and thy hoofs brass; and thou shalt beat in pieces many people; and I will consecrate their gain unto the Lord, and their substance unto the Lord of the whole earth.’” The moniker had obvious problems: “Some ridicule was made at these bearded and bloody ‘daughters,’ and the name did not sit easily. ‘Destroying Angels’ came next; the ‘Big Fan’ of the thresher that ‘should thoroughly purge the floor,’ was tried and dropped.” Ultimately, Genesis 18:17 provided the solution: “Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that the rider shall fall backward.” So, Hyde continued, “‘Sons of Dan’ was the style they adopted; and many have been the times that they have been adders in the path, and many a man has fallen backward, and has been seen no more. At Salt Lake, among themselves, they ferociously exult in these things, rather than seek to deny or extenuate them.”²⁹ Once properly christened, the Danites, also called the Sons of Dan, entered history and legend.

Sorting out the mix is not as difficult as some pretend. Mormon historians are understandably sensitive about the topic. For years they denied the group existed, but now the faithful admit that “over the period of eight to sixteen weeks, a small group of Mormon men met in private homes to plan defensive tactics against ‘gentiles’ and dissenting Mormons,” Rebecca F. Cornwall and Leonard J. Arrington

ARTICLE TITLE

wrote delicately in an article on the Danite “myth.” The society initially targeted Mormon apostates, or as Cornwall and Arrington wrote, “several leaders who, by violating economic or moral codes, had given ‘aid and comfort’ to the enemy, anti-Mormon mobs. A more general purpose for the band then emerged—direct retaliation against the anti-Mormon terrorists.” They conceded the band included “as many as three hundred of the estimated two thousand Mormon men in Missouri,” but historian D. Michael Quinn has argued persuasively that the organization eventually included about half the Mormon males in the state in 1838.³⁰

In typical “the prophet can do no wrong” fashion, faithful historians argue that “Joseph Smith did not have any affiliation or connection with the Danite organization.”³¹ Arrington claimed Smith was a victim of “some secret wickedness” until Brigham Young righteously exposed it:³² less sensitive historians have demonstrated that the Prophet Joseph was in the Danite business up to his eyeballs. Such defenders go on to portray Smith and his successor as peacemakers “dedicated to the religious ethic of forbearance.”³³ As Quinn observed dryly, “documentary evidence shows otherwise”: for example, the 27 July 1838 entry in Smith’s own journal noted “we have a company of Danites in these times.” Young’s own recklessly violent rhetoric, not to mention the mass murder at Mountain Meadows and its subsequent cover-up, discredits the peacemaker argument, while Quinn and others have demonstrated that Brigham Young inserted an oath to “avenge the blood of the prophets” into the Mormon temple ceremony.³⁴

I’d like to pause to acknowledge that Leonard J. Arrington was one of the kindest and most generous men it has ever been my pleasure to meet, and he was probably the greatest historian ever to practice Mormonism. When he learned that Michael Homer was working on Mormonism in Italy, Arrington handed him the extensive files he had assembled on the subject during his long residency in that blessed country. Almost single-handedly, Arrington brought Mormon history out of the dark ages, but in response to his magnificent contributions as LDS Church Historian, the religion’s ruling troglodytes shipped him off to the Mormon equivalent of Siberia and excommunicated his most talented disciples. Yet Arrington’s overwhelming benevolence undermined his ability to deal with Mormonism’s complicated and violent past: he never lost the innocence that was bred into his bones during his childhood on an Idaho chicken farm, and he was simply too decent a man to be able to appreciate the evil that lurks in men’s hearts, even men as exalted as Brigham Young.

Now, back to the frontier. Once its leaders had defected and turned state’s evidence against the prophet and other high Mormon officials in the wake of the disastrous Missouri conflict, Smith and his colleagues had a Homer Simpson moment: “Doh!” The Danite experiment had proven a disaster: they realized that having an organized band of enforcers who swore formal loyalty oaths might not be a brilliant idea. Did the Danites cease to exist, as Mormon historians assert? “The reality, then, behind the supposed secretive, lawless Danites of legend was this renegade band

A TANGLED SKEIN

formed briefly in 1838 in the midst of war,” my friend David Whittaker has argued. “There is no evidence of any such band later.”³⁵ Technically, he is correct: Mormon leaders had learned their lesson and no organized secret police ever existed again in Mormon society—unless, of course, you want to consider the collection of retired CIA and FBI men who now comprise “Church Security” such an organization, and I won’t go that far. But to argue that the Danites disappeared is similar to asserting that Soviet state terror ended when Stalin organized the Committee for State Security and changed the name of Lenin’s NKVD to the KGB.

After the state militia drove the Mormons out of Missouri and Joseph Smith escaped from Liberty jail, legally constituted organizations such as the Nauvoo and Great Salt Lake City police and a group of “ad hoc enforcers” made up of “former Danites, non-Danites, and some trusted criminals on specific assignment against anti-Mormons or apostates” replaced the Sons of Dan. As Michael Quinn observed, they were called “Minute Men,” or “Be’hoys,” or “Brigham’s Boys.”³⁶ Young and others used a host of euphemisms—the dogs, the church police, the boys—to refer to his henchmen, while their public image enhanced their menacing reputation with more colorful designations such as Avenging Angels, Death Angels, Blood Atoners, and Conan Doyle’s own “Angels of Darkness.” Not all of these colorful monikers can be blamed on vicious anti-Mormons: Latter-day Saints themselves used such terms. J. Robert Brown, who came west with Richard Yates’s freight train a year before Bill Hickman murdered Yates during the Utah War, described meeting Hickman, “the leader of the ‘Danites,’ or, as they are called in the Mormon language, ‘Destroying Angels.’ I have heard some most atrocious stories concerning him and his gang of robbers, thieves and murderers.”³⁷ Newspaperman George Alfred Townsend, who gained fame as the youngest newspaper correspondent to cover the Civil War, called Hickman “a Missouri border ruffian, a polygamist, and a human hyena.”³⁸

William Adams “Wild Bill” Hickman, the alleged “Danite Chief of Utah,” provided considerable insight into how religious terror actually worked in Utah.³⁹ As for Danites or Destroying Angels, “There never was such a band here with the duty laid on them of cutting off all persons supposed to be unnecessary to the peace and happiness of the Mormon community,” he told a *New York World* correspondent in 1871; “but Brigham had his ‘confidential men,’ of whom I was one. And whenever any suspicious-looking or acting character appeared in our midst, the president would send for me, or one of the others—Rockwell, Burton, Kimball, and so on—and say, ‘Hickman, take care of that man;’ and he was straightway ‘cared for,’ the ‘job’ reported on and approved.” Such “confidential men” acted separately and alone, Wild Bill claimed, and were “under strict orders to tell no man; so that I have full knowledge of only those crimes in which I took a direct part.”⁴⁰

“None knew who belonged to this ruthless society. The names of the participants in the deeds of blood and violence done under the name of religion were kept profoundly secret,” Conan Doyle wrote, but it is possible to identify some of them.

“The members were bound by their covenants to execute the orders of the priesthood, and when a direct order or intimation was given to ‘use up’ anyone, it was always executed by one or more of the members according to the circumstances of the case,” recalled Robert N. Baskin, an attorney who listened to Hickman’s confession and later served as chief justice of Utah’s Supreme Court. Baskin wrote that the Mormon triggerite gave him “the names of more than a score” of active Danites. “Hickman confessed to me that he personally knew of thirteen persons having been murdered, some of them by him, and others by various Danites.”⁴¹

Among the most notorious of Brigham Young’s boys—Bill Hickman, Howard Egan, Ephraim Hanks, William Kimball, John Kay, Robert T. Burton, Hosea Stout, Orrin Porter Rockwell, John D. Lee, and George D. Grant—only the last four had taken the Danite oath in Missouri. Men called to assist these veterans in crimes such as the botched Aiken murders of 1857 included John R. Murdock, Sylvanus Collett, John S. Lott, Absalom Woolf, Miles Miller, and John Kienke. Lot Huntington, Howard Spencer, and Judson Stoddard were members of the next generation of practitioners of what Utah historian Charles Kelly immortalized as “Holy Murder.”⁴²

Every Man Feared His Neighbour: Spies

“The very friend to whom you communicated your misgivings as to the Prophet and his mission might be one of those who would come forth at night with fire and sword to exact a terrible reparation,” Conan Doyle wrote. “Hence every man feared his neighbour, and none spoke of the things which were nearest his heart.” Brigham Young himself confirmed that this dramatic evocation of a society with a secret police as intimidating as East Germany’s Stazi was not overstated: “I am watching you,” the Mormon prophet told a congregation in 1855. “Do you know that I have my threads strung all through the Territory, that I may know what individuals do?”⁴³ Little wonder “that men went about in fear and trembling,” as described in *A Study in Scarlet*, though in the heart of the wilderness they might have dared to “whisper the doubts which oppressed them.”⁴⁴

English convert Charles Derry drove home the fact that as in history in general, Mormon history reflects the story of those the called the “big bugs”—the rich, the powerful, and the successful, not the story of the poor, powerless, and forgotten. Derry’s “unvarnished but thrillingly interesting” memoir, published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) in 1908, takes a decidedly different view of Utah’s territorial history than the heroic narratives that long dominated the subject. Derry provides a moving look at life under the theocracy from the bottom up, not the top down—and he repeatedly validates claims made about Mormon theocracy in *A Study in Scarlet*. Derry also presents a difficult problem for believing LDS scholars, who happily dismiss any critical account of their early history as being “anti-Mormon”—that is, bigoted and therefore untrustworthy. Derry had no affection for Brigham Young’s authoritarian version of Mor-

A TANGLED SKEIN

monism, for which he had sacrificed so much, but he went on to become an apostle in the church Joseph Smith's son founded, now known as the Community of Christ. To use nineteenth-century Mormon terminology, as a Josephite, Derry might have been an anti-Brighamite, but he was no anti-Mormon.

Derry arrived in Utah in 1854 with two children whose mother had died crossing the plains. He found a job in the public works that paid two dollars a day in kind from the tithing house, which was the central distribution point for much of the food in Utah, "at the price determined by the authorities." He received flour, potatoes, and other vegetables for his labor. "Butter and meat were articles that the poor could seldom obtain. They were great luxuries; but the leaders, who practiced polygamy, devoured these things," Derry complained, while he and his new wife lived on dry bread. He "was willing to make any sacrifice for the building of Zion," but stubborn facts convinced him there was a difference between the service of God, and the impositions of aspiring and ambitious men, and my ardor began to cool." He came to resent that:

My wife had to go to the tithing office for the weekly allowance for the family, and there she saw that only the "big bugs," as some called the leaders, could obtain such articles as butter, meat, eggs... their wives could obtain whatever they asked for, but *she* must be content with a little flour and such vegetables as she could carry home.⁴⁵

Derry found he was \$43 in debt when he finally quit the public works, although by his calculation he was owed \$30. On investigating, "I found they had charged me with articles we had never had, such as silks, groceries, and luxuries." He had to pay the debt anyway.

Charles Derry left one of the most important personal accounts of the "Reformation," a movement church leaders launched in September 1856 to, as Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young's second-in-command, said, "cleanse Israel and qualify and prepare them, for there is going to be a test, A Test, A TEST."⁴⁶ The Reformation, wrote T. B. H. Stenhouse, yet another one-time church spokesman who somehow came to his senses, witnessed an "outburst of the worst elements of fanaticism—a fanaticism at once blind, dangerous, and terrible, but at the same time the natural result of the teachings of the Tabernacle."⁴⁷

The revival quickly degenerated from a religious revival into a political inquisition as "Ward Teachers" provided some of the "threads" the authorities used to pry into the most intimate details of their followers' lives. Derry's comments support Conan Doyle's assertion that to voice "an unorthodox opinion was a dangerous matter in those days in the Land of the Saints. Even the most saintly dared only whisper their religious opinions with bated breath, lest something which fell from their lips might be misconstrued, and bring down a swift retribution upon them."

Another object of the "reformation" seemed to be to discover who were the doubters as to his claim to divine calling as prophet and president of the church of

ARTICLE TITLE

Christ. “This object was manifest when we saw the anxiety of the inquisitors to know in what light we regarded President Young. Woe betide the man who dared to express a doubt as to his claim to divine calling as prophet or president of the church of Christ. He was a marked man. If he was a laboring man he would lose his employment. If a business man his trade would fall off, and these were the least evils he might expect. I was in a meeting called by Lorenzo Farr and others of this inquisition, when every man was called upon to covenant that he would not hear any speak disrespectfully of President Young. And they were told it was their duty to knock such a man down. They were further told that no man would be permitted to leave the Territory, and if they attempted to leave, they must leave their property and their wives and children behind them. I leave it to common sense to judge how far such men, who were stripped of all that was dear to them, would be permitted to go.”⁴⁸

“The victims of persecution had now turned persecutors on their own account,” *A Study in Scarlet* claimed, “and persecutors of the most terrible description.” Derry described the bizarre nature of one of such attack “of the most terrible description” on a Mormon couple who had abandoned their religion:

“Brigham’s minions were always ready to complete their fiendish work. I think it was in 1857 or 1858, that Henry Jarvis and his wife were waylaid in one of the streets in Salt Lake City one night on their returning home from a visit, by a band of these cutthroats and stripped of their clothing and their bodies besmeared with human excrement, and their mouths filled with the same. This man Jarvis was an Englishman, and had spent years of labor in the mission field in England; but after emigrating to Salt Lake Valley his eyes had become open as to the true status of things. In the bitterness of his disappointment he had given vent to his feelings in words not complimentary to the authorities in Utah, and at the crook of Brigham’s finger, the Danites visited this filthy, degrading, and fiendish vengeance upon the poor man and his wife.”⁴⁹

Both Mormon and non-Mormons encountered Brigham Young’s intelligence system. A gallant young artillery lieutenant who spent the winter of 1854–1856 in the territory blamed the theocracy’s “damnable system of espionage—better than that of the old Inquisition or Napoleon’s police” for frustrating his romantic pursuit of young Mormon women.⁵⁰ Brigham Young’s remarkably effective surveillance network extended far beyond the Great Basin. While driving a herd of sheep west in 1853, Dr. Thomas Flint provided a destitute Mormon wagon train with supplies. Open reaching Salt Lake Valley, two men met Flint and asked “if we were Saints or sinners.” After learning his party’s name, they wheeled about and rode toward the city. Two other men soon returned. “We know who you are,” they said. “You are the ones that assisted our people on the plains.”⁵¹ During the U.S. Army’s march to Utah in 1857, “The system of espionage practiced toward this expedition by the Mormons has been complete and successful,” correspondent A. G. Browne reported. “Not a single detachment of troops, nor a train, nor hardly even a party

A TANGLED SKEIN

of civilians traveling across the plains either on business or for pleasure, left the Missouri border during the Summer without being accompanied by a Mormon spy in some subordinate capacity, such as teamster or cook.”⁵²

A disillusioned convert gave one of the most eloquent denunciations of Brigham Young’s spy system and the “ward teachers” it sent to visit and report on every Mormon family once a month: “Men are afraid that their neighbors should know anything about their discontent, lest they tell the [ward] teachers; and men’s wives are spies on their husbands,” this “shrewd and honest” Scot told an old friend in Dundee. “Is it holiness,” he asked,

to say that the end justifies the means, and that the big men are the only judges of right and wrong, as is always done? Is it holy to have plenty and see your brethren bordering on starvation and not help them, on the hard-hearted plea that it is good to try their faith in this way, as is sometimes? To have every one a spy upon another, not for the purpose of preventing him from over-reaching his brother, but that he might not breathe even to a friend of his crushed hopes, which might in time by accumulation get up such a revolution that would hurl the chiefs and prophets from their thrones, and show the poor and honest fanatics how they have been imposed upon? To break up letters at the Post-office, so that they might know all your communications with the outer world, and make it all but impossible to leave the territory if you were dissatisfied?

“The fruit of Mormon theocracy,” he wrote eloquently, “was that ‘the poor are at the mercy of the rich, and dare not complain; men’s wives are to be ‘consecrated,’ and they have no power to leave Zion; men are not permitted to discuss anything that the chiefs object to, and no one is sure that his wife is his own if she is worth the attention of some Brother in higher authority.”⁵³

Defenders of the Faith

Since the Soviet Union went out of business, there has not been a band of true-believing historians more devoted to defending their own version of reality, no matter what the contradictory evidence, than the legion of antiquarians in the employ or thrall of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). This is as true today as it was when Conan Doyle visited Utah in 1923—although back then great Mormon historians such as Brigham H. Roberts forthrightly addressed a host of topics that today’s apologists prefer to paper over or ignore completely. As their chorus of attacks on *Blood of the Prophets* demonstrated, these Defenders of the Faith are master sophists who specialize in demolishing strawmen and making “arguments against the man.” That said, I count many Mormon historians among my best friends: my disagreements with them are historical, not personal. No matter how absurd their beliefs appear to the vast majority of Americans, I recognize that they are absolutely devoted to their faith and sincere in their beliefs.

I want to be scrupulously fair in presenting their views of *A Study in Scarlet* and

their arguments about violence in the Mormon West. I have no intention of engaging in the despicable character assassination that many minions of the LDS Church have long resorted to in seeking to destroy those it views as “enemies.” Even knowing it is a logical fallacy, I’d like to try something entirely new in Mormon history: an *argumentum pro hominem*. I have a high regard for the religion’s sincere defenders, while at the same time I disagree profoundly with them on a host of issues.

The lengths to which these defenders of the faith will go does them no credit. I am entirely out of sympathy with their compulsion to justify or defend the most reprehensible and disgusting behavior of the men they believe are the “Lord’s anointed.” In his recent biography of the Mormon prophet, Columbia University professor Richard Bushman’s apologia for Joseph Smith’s sexual predations would be comical if it were not so disturbing. According to one of Smith’s intimate friends, who the prophet appointed to the super-secret Council of Fifty and who served as adjutant in the prophet’s private army, the Nauvoo Legion, Lieutenant General Smith once boasted that “from the commencement of his career [he] had seduced 400 women.”⁵⁴ Recent scholarship has documented the youthful prophet’s thirty-three “marriages,” including eight to women with living husbands and “celestial” relations with female children as young as fourteen. Smith told many of them an angel with a drawn sword had ordered him to marry them or face death. “Like Abraham of old, Joseph yearned for familial plentitude,” Bushman would have us believe. “He did not lust for women so much as he lusted for kin.” Then Bushman played the “prove it” card: “There is no certain evidence that Joseph had sexual relations with any of the wives who were married to other men,” or any of those barely nubile teenagers, either.⁵⁵ Bushman is a brilliant and respected scholar, but his unlikely interpretation of Smith’s sexual antics calls to mind Eliza Snow’s response when Heber C. Kimball remarked that he thought she had been the prophet’s wife in name only, and not in the biblical sense: “I thought you knew Joseph better than that,” she said.⁵⁶

The Petrified Truth: Deseret as a Theocratic Dictatorship

In their attempt to discredit realistic perspectives on religious violence in Utah, Mormon apologists are undeniably correct on one point: Deseret was a remarkably peaceful place, especially given its frontier setting. After an 1871 visit to the southern Utah communities that had furnished the manpower for the Mountain Meadows massacre, frontier trader Franklin A. Buck marveled at the contrast with his own rough and tumble mining community just across the border in Pioche, Nevada, where there was “a fight every day and a man killed about every week” and half the town consisted of saloons 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,” he wrote to his sister. “All difficulties between each other are settled by the

A TANGLED SKEIN

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," Buck marveled. "The Devil is not as black as he is painted."⁵⁷

Many of its adherents found frontier Mormonism delightful. There can be no debating Buck's observations: hundreds of the early visitors to the Great Basin came away impressed at the social harmony they found in the Mormon settlements. The population of Salt Lake was "living peacefully and in comparative contentment, although suffering many hardships and privations, having, according to their own, subsisted a considerable portion of the time on milk and roots," J. B. Witt wrote after a visit to Salt Lake in July 1849.⁵⁸ "I am very much surprised at the good order and regulation of the city, and evident satisfaction with their peculiar institutions and religion, as I had been led to believe in a very different state of things," stagecoach passenger John R. Robinson wrote as an American bloodbath was beginning in 1861. "Apparently a more orderly, quiet, sober, industrious, and thriving people I have never seen."⁵⁹

That said, as I write this the Olympic torch is passing through North and South Korea. "An attentive and peaceful crowd of thousands watched the start of the relay in Pyongyang," the Associated Press reported from North Korea.⁶⁰ In contrast, riot police in Seoul had to control hundreds of pro-Chinese demonstrators who "charged toward a flatbed truck holding about 30 people protesting China's actions in Tibet and its repatriation of North Korean refugees."⁶¹ What do the peaceful kingdoms of Deseret and North Korea have in common, and what does their quiet good civil order reveal? A common lesson: state terror works.

"More and more I come to a condition of astonishment at the parallelism in methods between Utah in the early days and any totalitarian state today," a great Western writer wrote while studying nineteenth-century Mormonism as a war waged against fascism in Europe. "The whole thing is there—private army, secret police, encirclement myth, territorial dynamism, self-sufficiency, chosen people, absolute dictatorship operating through party rule, group psychology, esoteric symbols, sacred and distinguishing uniforms (garments), New Order and all."⁶²

Utah Territory provides a textbook example of the effective use of fear to control a population. "The best way to sanctify ourselves, and please God our heavenly Father in these days, is to rid ourselves of every thief, and sanctify the people from every vile character," Apostle Orson Hyde told a congregation in 1853. "It would have a tendency to place a terror on those who leave these parts, that may prove their salvation when they see the heads of thieves taken off, or shot down before the public."⁶³ In an August 1857 sermon with the charming title, "Limits of Forbearance—Apostates," Heber C. Kimball said, "I have no doubt there will be hundreds who will leave us, and go away to our enemies. I wish they would this fall; it might save us much trouble; and if men turn traitors to God and His servants, their

ARTICLE TITLE

blood will surely be spilled, or else they will be damned, and that, too, according to their covenants.”⁶⁴

It does not require a bloodbath to instill a healthy respect for characters such as Porter Rockwell, who once repeatedly interrupted a speech by U.S. Vice President Schuyler Colfax with a drunken boast: “I never killed anyone who didn’t need killing.”⁶⁵ A few effective public murders and mysterious disappearances will do the job. Howard Egan shot a man who had slept with his wife in full view of an entire wagon train in 1851. Apostle George A. Smith successfully defended him employing an extra-legal argument based on “Mountain Common Law.” After that, it was hard to ignore Major Egan’s “counsel.”⁶⁶ And when Bill Hickman turned up as sheriff, prosecuting attorney, and tax collector in Green River County in 1853, even the grizzled veterans of the fur trade obligingly handed over their school taxes to their new Mormon overlords. No wonder Utah Territory struck so many visitors as positively bucolic.

In his famous biography of the Great Man, Leonard J. Arrington blithely dismissed the charge that Brigham Young was a tyrant who used a band of thugs to enforce his will. Instead, we visit a fairyland of efficiency: “As part of the law enforcement system of the State of Deseret, Brigham Young had created a small force of Minute Men who were prepared to leave at a moments’ notice to pursue Indian or white raiders in order to recoup stolen cattle or horses. So efficient and dedicated were these young men that they began to take on a sinister aspect to those who observed the workings of the Mormon system from afar,” Arrington assured his readers. “Taking some poetic license from the short-lived, non-official Mormon vigilante group in Missouri, they were sometimes referred to as Danites or Destroying Angels. They played and continue to play a major role in western fiction, and many readers have imagined Brigham as a military dictator with a personal army of avengers who carried out his orders to capture, torture, and kill people who crossed him.”⁶⁷

Today, Arrington’s successors have painted an even more imaginative portrait of Brigham Young as a pitiful, helpless giant. The prophet’s critics, they say, “do not understand the limits of Young’s power or the examples of local initiatives, especially in war time,” BYU Professor Thomas Alexander has argued.⁶⁸ “We should understand, also, something about the LDS leadership in the 19th century. For some reason, some historians have concluded that Utah was a totalitarian dictatorship under Brigham Young,” he said later. “Utah was, in fact, a theodemocracy. Brigham Young could propose things to people in Utah, but they didn’t always do what he wanted.”⁶⁹ This was at least true in Young’s long campaign to control every aspect of Utah’s economic life: all but the most devout Mormons had seen the financially inept prophet waste too many hundreds of thousands of dollars in ill-advised schemes to manufacture iron, sugar, paper, and silk to trust him with their money. But those who defied the Mormon prophet’s will did so at their own peril.

Professor Alexander is one of the kindest and politically courageous men I

know, but his rose-colored view of “theodemocracy” is unhistorical. It was not the solidarity of the Mormon people that consistently produced unanimous or near-unanimous elections in Utah Territory: it was the lack of a secret ballot and the ruthless suppression of dissent and the fear it generated. “They delight to call their system of government, a ‘Theo-Democracy;’” wrote Lt. John Gunnison in his sympathetic report on the Mormons in 1852. But its “rules and regulations vouchsafed from the throne of Heaven are fixed and unchangeable,” he pointed out, “so that those holding the revelations of God’s Will, are the ones who make laws according to Truth, and the rulers or executors are clothed in Righteousness, and the end is Peace.”⁷⁰ It was the peace of the graveyard: as Daniel Wells said, anyone who claimed the right to differ with Brigham Young “might as well ask the question whether a man had the right to differ honestly with the Almighty,” he reported.⁷¹

As to whether or not Deseret was a dictatorship, Brigham Young proudly claimed the title: “I sometimes say to my brethren, ‘I have been your dictator for twenty-seven years — over a quarter of a century I have dictated this people; that ought to be some evidence that my course is onward and upward.’”⁷² If there were appropriate limits to his power, they mystified the prophet: “The man whom God calls to dictate the affairs in the building of his Zion has the right to dictate about everything connected with the building of his Zion, yes even to the ribbons the women wear; and any person who denies it is ignorant,” Young said proudly.⁷³ The extent of the Mormon prophet’s power did not escape visitors to Zion: “There is a batch of governors, and judges, and other officials here, shipped from Washington, and they maintain the semblance of a republican form of government,” telegraph contractor James Street told Samuel Clemens in 1861, “but the petrified truth is that Utah is an absolute monarchy and Brigham Young is king!”⁷⁴

Our Enemies Never Have Proved It: The Challenge

Not long after notorious St. Valentines Day Massacre, Chicago crime boss Alphonse Capone suspected three colleagues of conspiring against him. He invited them to a lavish banquet on 7 May 1929 at the Hawthorne Inn: when the meal was over, he beat them to death with a baseball bat in front of a roomful of his fellow mobsters. Yet despite the host of witnesses to this brutal crime, and President Herbert Hoover’s orders “that all of the Federal agencies concentrate upon Mr. Capone and his allies,” the only crime the hapless federal government could make stick against the crime boss was tax evasion.⁷⁵

Proof is tough. At the end of his charming description of a benign Brigham Young armored only with his spiritual power, Leonard J. Arrington posed a challenge to those who take a less indulgent view of Danites and Mormon history: “that the Minute Men were anything more than a group willing to undertake arduous labors for their governor and church president has never been demonstrated.”⁷⁶ As a friend wrote more forthrightly in a manuscript about the life of a stalwart Mormon pioneer, “While a number of repugnant killings and mutilations

ARTICLE TITLE

occurred in nineteenth-century Utah, reliable sources cannot be found to lay the crimes at the feet of the Mormon hierarchy.”

Such implicit challenges to “prove it” recall an explicit taunt Brigham Young issued to the world in August 1852, at a time when the LDS Church strenuously denied that it preached the doctrine of polygamy: “Admit, for argument’s sake, that the ‘Elders have more wives than one, yet our enemies never have proved it. If I had forty wives in the United States, they did not know it, and could not substantiate it, neither did I ask any lawyer, judge, or magistrate for them. I live above the law, and so do this people,” he spouted, ending with, “I defy all the world to prove that we have infringed upon that law.”⁷⁷ Of course, Young made the task much easier when, exactly four weeks later, the LDS Church publicly proclaimed “that the Latter Day Saints have embraced the doctrine of a plurality of wives, as a part of their religious faith.” Orson Pratt continued, “It is not, as many have supposed, a doctrine embraced by them to gratify the carnal lusts and feelings of man; that is not the object of the doctrine,” but nobody believed him.⁷⁸

While his previous performance might call his honesty into question about the nature if not the number of crimes he had ordered, Brigham Young repeated the challenge years and dozens of mysterious Utah deaths later: “If any man, woman or child that ever lived has said that Brigham Young ever counseled them to commit crime of any description, they are liars in the face of heaven,” he thundered. “If I am guilty of any such thing, let it be proved on me, and not go sneaking around insinuating that Brigham knows all about it.”⁷⁹

As George Orwell noted in 1984, “The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon.”⁸⁰ And as David L. Bigler wrote recently, “For those who are in full control of all records, the past is whatever they choose to make it.”⁸¹ Mormon officials long held a stranglehold on LDS Church records and the papers of key individuals such as Brigham Young, so they could be relatively confident that if any such “proof” existed, it would remain suitably remote from the unclean hands of unbelievers. Many historians doubt you can prove or disprove anything at all about history and are too smart to try to do so, preferring to let the evidence speak for itself. Certainly few familiar with the remarkable talents of Mormon apologists to explain away the most glaring contradictions or damning evidence would even bother to try to argue that historical documents and not a “burning in the bosom” provide a better standard upon which to judge historical reality.

Recently, however, the religion’s oft-renamed Church Historical Department has dramatically, if not completely, opened up its archival holdings to researchers, and the ice has started to crack. Providing compelling evidence that Brigham Young actually ordered a single murder once seemed as impossible as raising the dead, but remarkably, over the last four years three talented historians—Polly Aird, Ardis E. Parshall, and David L. Bigler—have done just that, while a fourth, William P. MacKinnon, has demonstrated that during the Utah War, the peaceful kingdom of Utah was as bloody as bleeding Kansas.⁸²

A TANGLED SKEIN

What was the actual level of violence in frontier Utah? It was, no doubt, much lower than in the surrounding states and territories, but it was higher than the traditional catalog of atrocities listed in classic critical studies of Mormonism, which apostate Aaron DeWitt listed in a letter to his sister in 1875:

the brutal murder of Yates, the killing of McNiel, the assassination of Borman, the shooting of Brassfield, the slaughter of the Akins party, the emasculation of Jones, and finally the butchering of him and his poor old mother. I would also mention the dead man in the meat market, the three men in the barn, the murder near the Warm Springs, the shooting of Pike in the streets of Salt Lake City in broad daylight, the murder of the Potters and Parishes, of Rhodes and Roberts, and hundreds of others who HAVE BEEN MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD, And robbed to satisfy the avaricious cravings of as foul a man and as false a Prophet as ever disgraced this sin stained earth. These horrible deeds have all been committed in our holy Zion, and not one of the perpetrators ever brought to justice. In fact, there has been no justice in the land.⁸³

A favorite tactic of Mormon apologists is to admit that yes, terrible acts of violence happened in Deseret, but Mormonism's leaders had nothing to do with such crimes and in fact knew virtually nothing about them. This argument did not impress contemporary observers. When Young "declared that he was sorry when he heard that the boys" had attacked a federal judge and an apostate Mormon attorney and destroyed their law libraries, a *New York Times* correspondent scoffed, "the hypocrisy of the declaration is palpable to every man who spends an hour here; it is perfectly evident that 'the boys' would cut their own throats sooner than perpetrate such an act without the cognizance and assured approval of their leaders," James W. Simonton wrote. "Certain it is that BRIGHAM and his fellows have never rebuked 'the boys' in the least for this, or any other of the outrages which they have committed from time to time against the persons or property of Gentiles, or offending 'saints' and which have been heretofore detailed."⁸⁴

The Passing Stain: Conclusions

As this study makes clear, Brigham Young was ready to do *anything* to defend and extend the Kingdom of God and his rule in Utah Territory—and I do mean anything. We may have few written orders to commit Holy Murder, but the Mormon hierarchy's failure to stop the murders and castrations that took place in the territory in the 1850s is enough to indict the entire theocratic system. Brigham Young and his henchmen were directly responsible for a "culture of violence" that terrorized Utah citizens. Faithful historians should reconsider Wallace Stegner's observation: "it would be bad history to pretend that there were no holy murders in Utah and along the trails to California, that there was no saving of the souls of sinners by the shedding of their blood during the 'blood atonement' revival of 1856, that there were no mysterious disappearances of apostates and offensive Gentiles."⁸⁵

ARTICLE TITLE

Conan Doyle's critics can rightfully assert that the Mormon segment of *A Study in Scarlet* contains bad melodrama and worse geography. But they are wrong to claim its "sinister view of Mormon authoritarianism" has nothing to do with the history of Mormonism in the West. In their telling, that history took place in a fairytale kingdom ruled by wise and benevolent religious wise men, and not a hard-scrabble frontier theocracy notorious for its rich rulers and desperately poor population. As Sir Arthur acknowledged, he had painted a rather sensational picture of the Danites and their "passing stain in the early history of Utah," but to deny that such a passing stain existed is to deny reality. Conan Doyle was correct when he wrote, "All I said of the Danite Band and the murders is historical so I cannot withdraw that."

Finally, I would like to recommend a new course of action to my Mormon friends: instead of dissembling about the religion's colorful past, embrace it as my friend Hal Schindler did in his classic biography, *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder*. Hal was completely enamored of the mythical version of the State of Deseret, but while he steadfastly defended the old time religion of Mormonism, when it came to the bloody facts, he let it all hang out. It is long past time for Mormon historians to quit playing games with the facts. They need to put their persecution complex behind them, admit that the leaders who established a thoroughly remarkable and enduring new religious movement were not the embodiment of human perfection, and embrace their colorful if sometimes profoundly disturbing past. Maybe they could start by apologizing to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle for writing a story that first made millions of people throughout the world aware that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints existed.

Notes

1. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 13 May 1923. The sources in this section can be found in Michael W. Homer, *Arthur Conan Doyle: "A Fine Spirit of Tolerance,"* Keepsake to the limited edition of Homer, ed., *On the Way to Somewhere Else: European Sojourners in the Mormon West, 1834-1930* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Co., 2006). See also Homer, "'Recent Psyche Evidence': The Visit of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to Utah in 1923." *Utah Historical Quarterly* (Summer 1984).
2. Harold Schindler, "Conan Doyle's Tale of Mormonism Had Utah Faithful Seeing *Scarlet*," 10 April 1994, *Salt Lake Tribune*, D1. Digital copy at historytogo.utah.gov/salt_lake_tribune/in_another_time/041094.html [18 April 2008].
3. "Bishop Nibley Raps Sir Arthur. Conan Doyle Asks Apology," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 June 1923, CC5.
4. Doyle, *Our Second American Adventure* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1924), 87.
5. William S. Baring-Gould, ed., *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes: The Four Novels and the Fifty-Six Complete Short Stories Complete by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, 2 vols. (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1967), 208n165; and Harrison, *In the Footsteps of Sherlock Holmes* (London: David & Charles, 1971), 114. Harrison also thought Utah was "a state which

A TANGLED SKEIN

has never known unemployment,” when in fact the state’s unemployment rate reached thirty-six percent in 1932, the highest in the nation.

6. G. Hodgson Higgins to Arthur Conan Doyle, 10 May 1923; and Doyle to Higgins, 10 May 1923. These letters are located in the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. For more on Higgins, see “Passing Events,” *Improvement Era* (October 1927), 147
7. Brigham D. Madsen, “Book Review,” *Blood of the Prophets, The Western Historical Quarterly* 34:2 (Summer 2003), 271.
8. Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1950. Reprinted Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962) , 108.
9. Walker, *Legends and Lies: Great Mysteries of the American West* (New York: Forge, 1997), 223.
10. See the publication announcement for this church-funded operation at www.us.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/ReligionTheology/HistoryofChristianity/American/?view'usa&view'usa&ci'9780195160345 [28 April 2008]. Elsewhere on its website, Oxford University Press plugs the book as “The definitive account of the most infamous event in Mormon history, the tragic massacre of overland emigrants at Mountain Meadows, Utah.”
11. During an appearance on a popular PBS and XM Radio talk show in 2004, the producer informed me she had received yet another call from the LDS Church’s PR department pointing out that I do not have a Ph.D.
12. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 124; and Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle*, 122, 129, 154.
13. Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 652–53.
14. Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1966. Second edition, 1983), 255–290n15.
15. “Murder of Henry Jones and His Mother,” *Kirk Anderson’s Valley Tan*, 19 April 1859, 2/3.
16. Will Bagley, “Utah’s Worst New Year’s Eve, Ever,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 30 December 2001, B1/1.
17. Kristopher S. Wray to Will Bagley, 29 Apr 2008. Wray points out that after their trials for assaulting the governor, three of the perpetrators were rearrested for larceny and given prison sentences of six to fifteen months.
18. John Hanson Beadle, *Polygamy, or, The Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism: Being a full and authentic history of this strange sect from its origins to the present time; with a complete analysis of Mormon society and theocracy; and an expose of the secret rites and ceremonies of the Latter-Day Saints* (Philadelphia: National Pub. Co., 1882), 195.
19. George Q. Cannon to Brigham Young, 29 January 1874, Brigham Young Collection, LDS Archives.

ARTICLE TITLE

20. Albina M. Williams, General Affidavit, 30 July 1889, in Thomas S. Williams, Mexican War Pension Application 2674, Family History Library Microfilm 480149.
21. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 5:55, quoted in David L. Bigler, *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847-1896* (Spokane: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1998), 267-68. Bigler's revisionist history, which won Westerners International's best book award, is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand frontier Mormonism.
22. Homer, *Arthur Conan Doyle: "A Fine Spirit of Tolerance."*
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Study in Scarlet." *Beeton's Christmas Annual* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1887), 1-95. For citation purposes, I have used an online version, *A Study in Scarlet* (New York: J. H. Sears & Co, n.d.), 83-84.
26. James W. Simonton, "Utah and the Mormons: Further Statements by Mr. Frederick Loba," *The New York Times*, 7 May 1858, 4/5.
27. "Utah and the Mormons. Frederick Loba's Story." *The New York Times*, 15 May 1858, 1/1. In a later article, Loba claimed that after a party of Danish emigrants fled Utah in March 1855, a friend overheard Heber C. Kimball give "orders to a band of Danites to pursue them in the disguise of Indians, and steal their cattle." Half the stolen cattle were allegedly "sent to 'The Lord's Store House,' and the remainder retained by the Danite plunderers," the story went. "Some of the unfortunates never reached California, having been murdered by the Mormon 'Indians.'"

Simonton, "Utah and the Mormons: Further Statements by Mr. Frederick Loba," *The New York Times*, 7 May 1858, 1/1.
28. "Mr. and Mrs. John Hillhouse," in E. F. Hollibaugh, *Biographical History of Cloud County, Kansas: Biographies of Representative Citizens*. Kansas City?: N. P., 1903, 539-45.
29. John Hyde, Jr., *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* (New York: Fettridge, 1857), 104-05. See also Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell*, 31-32.
30. Rebecca Foster Cornwall and Leonard J. Arrington, "Perpetuation of a Myth: Mormon Danites in Five Western Novels," *BYU Studies* 23:2 (Spring 1983), 147. For Quinn's analysis, see D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), Appendix 3, "Danites in 1838: A Partial List," 478-90.
31. Alexander L. Baugh, in Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan, *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2000), 275.
32. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 65.
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A TANGLED SKEIN

34. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 93.
35. David Whittaker, in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, & Procedure of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Four Volumes*, ed. by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:356–57.
36. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 477.
37. J. Robert Brown, *Journal of a Trip across the Plains of the U.S. from Missouri to California in the Year 1856, Giving a Correct View of the Country, Anecdotes, Indian Stories, Mountaineers' Tales, Etc.* (Columbus, Missouri: For the Author, 1860), 12 August 1856, 76.
38. Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell*, 359.
39. An edited version of Hickman's autobiography can be found in William A. Hickman and J. H. Beadle, *Brigham's Destroying Angel: Being the Life, Confession, and Startling Disclosures of the Notorious Bill Hickman, the Danite Chief of Utah* (New York: Geo. A. Crofutt, 1872).
40. "Brigham Young's Janissary. Interview with Bill Hickman, the Confessed Assassin," *New York World*, 25 November 1871, in William P. MacKinnon, ed., *At Sword's Point: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858* (Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008). As MacKinnon notes, the term confidential men "smacks of the newspaper's New York focus."
41. Robert N. Baskin, *Reminiscences of Early Utah* (Salt Lake City: By the author, 1914), 150.
42. See Charles Kelly and Hoffman Birney, *Holy Murder: The Story of Porter Rockwell* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934).
43. Brigham Young, 8 October 1855, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:122.
44. Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 83.
45. Charles Derry, "Autobiography of Elder Charles Derry," *Journal of History* 1:3 (July 1908), 274–91.
46. Gustive O. Larson, "The Mormon Reformation," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 26:1 (January 1958), 53. Derry believed the inspiration for the Reformation began when "Brigham had received information that the United States Government was about to send an army to enforce the law of the land with respect to polygamy."
47. T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints: A Full and Complete History of the Mormons, from the First Vision of Joseph Smith to the Last Courtship of Brigham Young* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1873), 292.
48. Derry, "Autobiography of Elder Charles Derry," *Journal of History* 1:4 (October 1908), 425. Reprinted as *Autobiography of Elder Charles Derry: The Apostle of Purity* (Independence: Price Publishing Company, 1997).
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ARTICLE TITLE

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A TANGLED SKEIN

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