

THE PROBLEM WITH A GUILTY MASS MURDERER

Will Bagley

A response to John G. Turner's "The Mountain Meadows Massacre Revisited"
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-g-turner/mountain-meadows-massacre-revisited_b_1962285.html

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John G. Turner's stellar biography of Brigham Young fills the telling lack of a great biography of the singular theocrat who ruled the Great Basin for two decades. For the first time, a gifted scholar with no personal connection to Mormonism has gained access to Latter-day Saints' archives, long a lockbox of the sources critical to any historian. His book supplants generations of bad work by Mormon historians, whose preposterous pieties and revealing silences about their second prophet's crimes against his own people expose a fundamental dishonesty. Turner looks at the great man warts and all, but too often turns a blind eye to Young's most brutal acts.

In his New York Times review of *Pioneer Prophet*, Alex Beam asked, "Can a biographer be too fair? Perhaps." Beam called Turner's handling of polygamy "squishy in the extreme." Turner is a careful and fair religious historian, but when faced with the hardest questions about Young's pathological violence, he often tows the apologist line. Following the fearless Mormon historian Juanita Brooks, his biography's account of the Mountain Meadows Massacre clearly assigns moral responsibility to Young — everything else is mere detail. His Huffington Post essay, unfortunately, is a testament to squishiness.

Since the Huffingtons decline to post a counter argument and the evidence that contradicts Turner's vindication of President Young, here goes. Turner ignores too many missing documents and known facts about Young's worst atrocity when he concludes, "the existing evidence suggests that Young did not order the crime." As Andrew Hamilton argued at the trial of Peter Zenger in 1735, "the suppressing of evidence ought always to be taken for the strongest evidence," and the documentary record of the massacre is full of missing critical letters, unwritten orders, and journals with the entire year of 1857 torn out. U.S. Attorney Sumner Howard convicted and executed John D. Lee, Young's ritually adopted son and the only Mormon to ever stand trial for the mass murder of some 80 women and children and 30 men. He wrote in 1877, "whatever written communications were sent by Brigham were sent to persons other than Lee and have long since been taken care of by Brigham Young." No one ever accused Young of being either a fool "or so indifferent to his own safety as to allow written evidence of his own guilt to remain in the hands of men over whom he as supreme control."

Most of the evidence that survived this purge comes from the murderers who executed the crime: their accounts are self-serving lies. Lee's version – a bestseller when it appeared – is the most skillful and extravagant. Even Lee concluded that Young's emissary, General George A. Smith, visited Southern Utah "to prepare the people for the work of exterminating Captain Fancher's train of emigrants, and I now believe that he was sent for that purpose by the

direct command of Brigham Young." As horrific as the massacre was, the truth about the murders is probably much worse than the corrupted surviving record reveals.

To argue, "there was no good reason for Young to order a massacre with the potential to focus the full fury of the American government on Utah" is disingenuous. Young, probably America's all-time worst Superintendent of Indian Affairs, had already encouraged his Native wards to plunder wagon trains. Turner ignores a very good political reason: Young orchestrated violence to demonstrate his power to cut communications between the Atlantic and Pacific. If the U.S. sent an army to Utah, he blustered in August 1857, "travel must stop; your trains must not cross this continent." Young boasted only his influence restrained Indian attacks on overland emigration, and if war came, "I will say no more to the Indians let them alone, but do as you please. And what is that? It is to use them up; and they will do it." At Mountain Meadows, Mormons dressed as Indians "used up" an entire wagon train.

As Turner notes, a local militia and religious leader, Isaac Haight, "sent a letter asking Brigham Young for advice. For unclear reasons, local leaders did not wait for the church president's response." That's true as far as it goes – Haight's letter is not among "the existing evidence." What does survive is Young's extremely odd response to Haight, hailed by Turner and others as Young's alibi, which said in regard to civilian wagon trains "passing through our settlements, we must not interfere with them until they are first notified to keep away. You

must not meddle with them. The Indians we expect will do as they please but you should try and preserve good feelings with them.”

Young’s alibi begs several questions: Why did Governor Young have to send orders to the south *not* to 'interfere' with the emigrants? As historian David White concluded, Young's shrewd reply appears calculated to correct a policy gone wrong if it arrived in time and to cover his tracks if received too late. Whatever the letter's intent, it carried a hidden but clear message: make sure the Mormons could blame whatever happened on the Indians.

Mountain Meadows, an atrocity executed by religious fanatics who mindlessly obeyed their religious leaders, says a lot more about modern Mormonism than apologists like to admit. The theocratic police state Young created as the Corporation of the President is still under the control of its sole proprietor, the current LDS prophet. ““I am watching you,” Young boasted in 1855. “Do you know that I have my threads strung all through the Territory, that I may know what individuals do?” Church security stills keeps close tabs on its “lost sheep”: shortly after publishing a brilliant novel about the wives of John D. Lee, Judith Freeman received an invitation from her Los Angeles stake president “to discuss your feelings concerning the Church and what, if anything, should be done about them” with his “presidency.” When my father met with his California bishopric after we moved to California in the late 1950s, these goons told him, “We know a lot more than you think.”

Proving a negative (Brigham Young did not order murders) is impossible,

but for historians, proving anything is hopeless. Archbishop Richard Whately proved as much when he published "Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Buonaparte" in 1819 (Napoleon was still alive) and questioned the very existence of such an outlandish character. But having studied all the evidence about Mountain Meadows for twenty years, the simplest, least convoluted answer to the perennial question, "Did Brigham Young order the attacks that led to a massacre?" is yes. Or hell yes.

The problem with a guilty client, any lawyer will tell you, is he acts guilty. From 1857 till his death, Brigham Young sweated guilt, denying, revising, intimidating, lying, and finally sacrificing his adopted son to justice. Recent evidence confirms the charge. "The Mormons supposed that the U.S. Government was going into war with them, and intended killing all parties who came on to here," Lee's neighbor Peter Shirts told a federal official in 1871. "This was the idea of the leaders in the southern country at least." This was the essence of Young's order.

If you think official histories died with the Soviet Union, you don't live in Utah. During the last decade, the Mormon Church has engaged in a massive effort to refute books by David L. Bigler, John Krakauer, and me and wash the blood off Brigham Young's hands. They won't say how much they spent to publish the officially unofficial "Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy" in 2008, but three church historians and dozens of employees spent eight years researching and writing a book that stops the day after the massacre.

(Volume Two is still keeping a dozen faithful historians busy.) I estimate it cost more than ten million dollars to get the job half done: the Church itself refuses to divulge how much the project cost.

If Brigham Young were truly innocent, I'd have done the job for free.

Will Bagley is the author of more than twenty books on overland emigration, railroads, mining, frontier violence, and the creation of digital search technology. David Roberts called him the "sharpest of all thorns in the side of the Mormon historical establishment." His book with David L. Bigler, "The Mormon Rebellion: America's First Civil War," won a 2012 Spur Award from Western Writers of America and recently appeared in paperback.