

Mountain Meadows

Scholars discuss 3 LDS authors' massacre account

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The much-anticipated book by three senior LDS historians about the Mountain Meadows Massacre is a detailed, thorough exploration of the horrific crime told in a compelling narrative, but it still omits crucial contextual elements of the story and certainly won't end all debate.

That was the conclusion of three historians who have read a version of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* by Ronald Walker, Richard Turley and Glen Leonard, due out later this year by Oxford University Press. The critics presented their views before a packed audience Friday at a session of the Mormon History Association's annual meeting in Salt Lake City.

The heinous events of Sept. 11, 1857 - during which a group of Mormons slaughtered 120 Arkansas emigrants crossing through southern Utah, including men, women and children older than 7 - have been the subject of books, documentaries and, next month, a major motion picture, "September Dawn." But Walker's, Turley's and Leonard's forthcoming volume is the first written with express approval and cooperation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The LDS historians have spent the past six years poring over the church's vast historical holdings as well as documents, journals, trial records and court records available in archives from coast to coast.

"This manuscript rests on a body of evidence that is as factually complete as historical research is ever likely to make possible," said Jan Shipps, professor emeritus of American religion and history at Indiana University/Purdue University at Bloomington, Ind. "Every point that is made is supported not by a single, but by multiple references."

For years after the massacre, Mormon participants denied involvement, blaming it on American Indians. Eventually, parts of the story emerged in the courtroom and one man, John D. Lee, was executed for his role in it.

But the questions remained: Was the massacre the work of southern Utah Mormons run amok, as many Mormons believe, or was it orchestrated by Brigham Young at church headquarters, as authors such as Will Bagley argue? Walker and the others were willing to follow the trail wherever it led, they said, even if it meant laying the blame on Young. But







that's not what they concluded.

"They marshal evidence that directly indicts John D. Lee . . . with the complicity of his immediate ecclesiastical superior Isaac Haight," Shipps said. "With the Lee-Haight duo providing a foundation for local villainy, these authors moved forward to construct an elaborate argument that the massacre was essentially a local affair."

Walker et al worked so hard at being objective, Shipps said, that they neglected the religious aspects of the story. They have failed to paint a backdrop to these events in the decade between 1847, when beleaguered Mormon pioneers arrived in Utah after being driven from their homes in the mid-West, and the 1857 massacre.

"It was a point in time in which Mormonism was most religiously intense - white hot," she said.

Sarah Barringer Gordon, a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania, said the volume signals "a new openness" on the part of LDS historians, "a willingness to share dark times with the world."

How courageous it is, she said, "to admit that even Saints in the 19th century were human in the ugly ways we are all human."

But why was there virtually no mention of polygamy, she wondered. "Polygamy was vital to the religious revival of mid-1850s Utah Mormonism."

U.S. President James Buchanan may have sent troops to Utah to unseat Young as territorial leader, but eliminating polygamy was the political subtext.

"The cover-up of the massacre protected polygamists who, of course, had multiple wives," she said. "Opponents of the Saints connected the open denials of polygamy before 1852 with the denials after 1857 of responsibility for the massacre. What else, they said, could you expect of a bunch of lawless and polygamous fanatics?"

The book is a "page-turner," said Gene Sessions, a history professor at Weber State University. "Even the footnotes are fun to read."

No matter how thorough, objective or well-written the Mormon book is, however, it will never be credible with some readers because its authors are all employed by the church, Sessions said. "Revisionist historians and those suspicious of the church are not going away."

The authors said they would take all the suggestions into account as they make their final revisions.

"This is not even the penultimate version," Walker said. "I am confident we can raise it to the level of something we can be proud of, something significant."

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Glen Leonard

Author