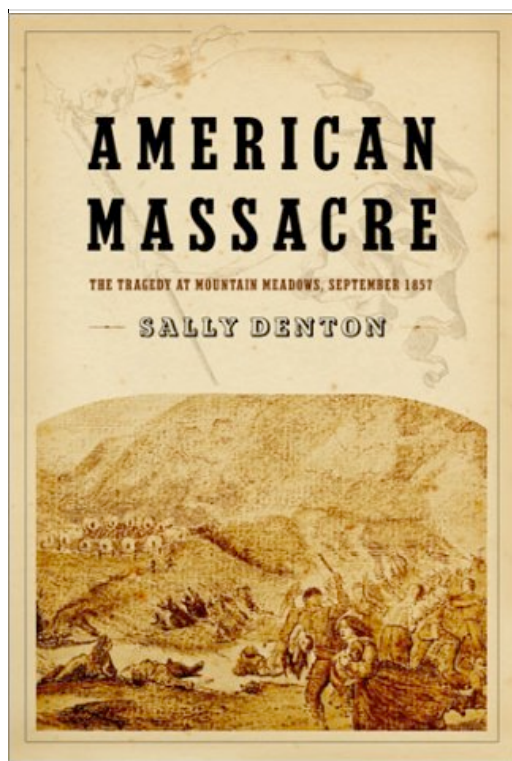


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Wagon Train of The Damned: Of a Crime That Will  
Not Stay Dead and Buried



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American Massacre: The Tragedy at Mountain Meadows, September 1857

Sally Denton

Knopf

Reviewed by Wendy Walker

The story of the Mountain Meadows massacre, which author Sally Denton (*The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America*) tells with dedicated conviction, is as alluring as The Donner Party calamity which occurred only a few years before. A wagon train carrying the Fancher Baker party was passing through Utah territory, on its way to California, when it was attacked in an open field called Mountain Meadows. The siege lasted five days, the final day of which (September 11, 1857) the party suffered its worst losses. Approximately 140 people were brutally murdered. Women were raped, and the throats of innocent children were slit. Only 17 children under the age of eight were spared.

The impetus for Denton's book appears to stem from a discovery made in 1999: the bones of the victims from the massacre were accidentally unearthed in an area not far off Utah Highway 18. Utah governor Mike Leavitt ordered the bones reburied as quickly as possible. Of this, Denton writes, "Before the examination could be completed, it was stopped. For descendants of both victims and perpetrators, for institutions of church and state implicated in what the bones signify, the issue was as volatile and ominous as it had been nearly a century and a half before." As a result, even in the absence of such coveted physical evidence, a latent narrative has emerged, one where Brigham Young sits at the core.

Young, leader of the Mormons and Governor of the Utah territory at the time, placed the blame for the massacre on local Indians. Over ten years later, he altered his position and implicated one of his closest advisers, John D. Lee, a militia leader in southern Utah. To this day, Lee is the only confirmed participant in the massacre that has been held accountable. For many, including Sally Denton, placing the blame for the Mountain Meadows massacre on one man seems altogether absurd. In *American Massacre*, Denton – certainly not the first and probably not the last – threads together the events leading up to the massacre by supplying its rumored key players and orchestrating an altogether complex and riveting account of the slaughter.

Perhaps the strongest portion of Denton's book is how she answers two questions: Why any Mormon, particularly one with such close ties to the religion's leader, or the leader himself, would encourage the slaughter of innocent civilians; and why a crime committed so long ago is still under investigation. In her book, the answer lies both in the fanaticism within the Mormon religion and the condition of the United States at the time of the slaughter.

From the beginning, the Mormons were persecuted by gentiles for their allowance of polygamy within the religion. They also suffered from the extremist behavior of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, particularly in the last years of his life. Smith held radical ideas of taking over the world with his new "Zion," and advertised his thoughts widely. When, in 1844, he was assassinated by unconfirmed perpetrators, his successor, Brigham Young, called upon Mormons for revenge, or what was referred to as "Blood Atonement," against the gentiles. Years later, when the Fancher Baker party made their peaceful journey along the Southern Trail from Arkansas, rumors circulated among Mormons that the party "had been making threats against them" and "bragging of the part they took in helping to kill the prophet, Joseph Smith." There was little or no truth in this. In the end, zealotry and folklore provided the launching pad for a muddled, hateful, and suppressed bloodbath.

Denton reports on a "frail neurotic capable of feats of endurance" named Thomas Kane. Having strong ties to the president, and being a champion of Young's theocratic aspirations, he single-handedly prevented a war between the United States and the Utah Territory. Based on Denton's notes, it is thought that Kane managed to convince President James Buchanan (who was more concerned with a developing civil war between the North and South) to allow a full pardon to all "Blood Atonement" undertakings, including the Mountain Meadows massacre, if Brigham Young agreed to step down as Governor and allowed U.S military safely into the territory to restore order. Young reluctantly cooperated. A war with Utah was thus avoided, sparing the Mormon religion, and leaving any formal investigation into the Mountain Meadows Massacre untouched for another ten years. Then, in 1877, after the first trial ended in a hung jury, a second one convicted and sentenced John D. Lee to death. The judge presiding is reported to have said, "Despite the sympathy growing out of the belief that you have been deserted by the parties and the plotters of the crime, and left to be sacrificed, outraged justice requires [your death]."

Brigham Young's participation (or lack of) has inspired over five books, of which *American Massacre* is the latest. Another, due out in 2004 through Oxford University Press, will attempt to clear his name with a letter reportedly discovered in the Church archives by Latter Day Saint historians that apparently exonerates him from any responsibility in the massacre. While it seems unlikely that a letter, over a hundred and fifty years later, could dispel the controversy, it suggests that, in all likelihood, not even a book could solve this case. Unfortunately for all descendants of the Mountain Meadows massacre (on both sides of the slaughter), there are no murder weapons, no DNA evidence, and no living witnesses. Is it feasible to prove who was responsible? Probably not. At the end of the day, Denton's book is based on

circumstantial evidence that bears a great portion of truth but nevertheless remains circumstantial.

That said, *American Massacre* is a book one shelves with great reluctance. Of her research, Denton writes, "I have taken no liberties with the factual record," and for her part it emerges as perhaps the best piece of evidence (albeit indirect) descendants and the curious have yet received. Surely the debate will continue, but at least it has breath. Such painstaking efforts in the pursuit of justice are embarrassingly overdue.