

Not Just Buchanan's Blunder

William P. MacKinnon. *At Sword's Point, Part 1: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858*. Norman: Arthur H. Clark Company, an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. 546 pp. Foreword by Will Bagley. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Vol. 10 in KINGDOM IN THE WEST: THE MORMONS AND THE AMERICAN FRONTIER. Cloth: \$45. ISBN: 978-0-8706-2353-0

Reviewed by Polly Aird

In this first volume of a planned two-volume documentary history of the Utah War, editor William P. MacKinnon has assembled a treasurehouse of previously unexploited documents to illuminate the decisions, actions, and bungling on both sides that led to and flowed from this little-known civil war. With unquestionable authority, this book occupies a pivotal place in Mormon historiography: It explains a critical hinge that swung Mormon-government relations into patterns of hostility and even hatred for another half-century. It also sets a benchmark of expertise that for years to come will influence interpretations of the Mormon story both before and after the war.

The eighteen chapters cover the multifaceted beginnings of the Utah War up to January 1858, when Thomas L. Kane set off on his difficult winter journey to Salt Lake City with hopes of finding a peaceful resolution. The book includes, by my count, 204 documents or excerpts of at least a paragraph in length. Of these, the majority are from archival sources. As one would expect, over half of this material is from the extraordinarily rich LDS Church History Library, especially its Brigham Young Collection. The next largest source is federal government documents, some published in now-obscure reports and many from the manuscript holdings of the National Archives. Articles from contemporaneous newspapers from Washington, D.C., and New York City to Buffalo; Cincinnati; St. Louis; Lawrence, Kansas; and San Francisco are included, as are letters, diaries, photos, sketches, and other pieces from nearly fifty libraries and historical societies.

MacKinnon has chosen not to reprint documents readily available from such sources as LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W.

Hafen's 1958 compilation *The Utah Expedition 1857–58*, or House Exec. Doc. 71, the primary government publication on the war; nor has he included those previously used in his own earlier journal articles, although he cites them for interested readers. Building on earlier works, he has focused on documents never before published or at least not previously studied for their relevance to the Utah War. MacKinnon thus presents us with many new “voices” from Mormon Utah, the army's Utah Expedition, and elsewhere, including those of women.

MacKinnon places these documents in a lucid narrative that guides the reader through the confusing emotions, plans, and events in Salt Lake City, Washington, D.C., and other places that resulted in army troops marching west to confront the Mormon kingdom. And he sets the record straight on long-persistent myths and assumptions about the war. From the acknowledgments and footnotes, it is apparent that he has worked with virtually all of the authors of recent works whose research has overlapped his own: Will Bagley, David L. Bigler, Matthew J. Grow, Ardis E. Parshall, and Richard E. Turley Jr. This cross-fertilization has contributed to a much broader view of the war.

The thirty-two illustrations are accompanied by extensive captions. Many are rare portraits of key and peripheral players, such as that of Thomas L. Kane before the Civil War (404), General Albert Sidney Johnston wearing the brevet brigadier's star awarded for his leadership of the Utah Expedition (447), and the only known image of diarist Captain Albert Tracy (457). These images are complemented by contemporary sketches, including two previously unknown Tracy drawings showing a panorama of the army's winter camp and the interior of Fort Bridger after Johnston fortified it in November 1857 (448–49, 451). An excellent modern map of the country between South Pass and Salt Lake City (396) helps orient the reader to what one researcher calls the region where the war was actually “fought” in the fall of 1857 (330).

Early in the volume, MacKinnon points out the Utah War's importance and its far-reaching consequences: “the near-depletion of the U.S. Treasury; the forced resignation of a secretary of war; the bankruptcy of the nation's largest freighting company; severe damage to the reputation of a president and his nerve for

confronting southern secession; the indictment of a church's prophet for treason and murder; the execution of his adopted son for mass murder; the Anglo rediscovery of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado; the organization of England's Pacific Northwest possessions into the province of British Columbia; and Russia's sale of Alaska" (17).

The text opens with a discussion of precursors to the war starting as early as 1849 in what MacKinnon warns is a "sprawling, complex story" (17). Especially noteworthy among the early tensions was the army's Steptoe Expedition of 1854–55. When the soldiers left Utah for California in May 1855, they took with them about a hundred married and single Mormon women seeking an armed escort out of Utah. An enraged Brigham Young swore he would never again allow U.S. troops to enter Utah or be near Mormon women. Other frictions that rasped between the government and the Mormons included the quality of mail service, jurisdictions of the courts, perceptions that the Mormons were tampering with Indian allegiances, Brigham Young's handling of government appropriations, the accuracy of the 1850 Utah Census (important in an attempt to qualify for statehood), the massacre of Captain John Gunnison's survey party, the Mormon ejection of Jim Bridger from his fort in 1853, and Young's on-going efforts to acquire arms and munitions.

Underlying these conflicts were even more volatile issues: the competency of federal appointees, the practice of plural marriage, and especially Young's vision of Utah as an autocratic theocracy. MacKinnon writes, "The Utah War came about not because of a single critical incident during the spring of 1857. Rather, it was the product of nearly a decade of corrosive incidents, deteriorating relations, and grossly differing philosophies of governance—one secular, conventional, and republican while the other was authoritarian, millennial, and theocratic" (44).

By 1856, emotions had reached a new level. Letters written by federal territorial appointees intended for their superiors in Washington, D.C., were intercepted by the Mormons and came to rest in Brigham Young's files. Most federal officials fled the territory after being threatened, two were beaten, and two were murdered on the plains "under controversial circumstances" (54 note 4). In the fall, Young launched his religious Reformation with its

most incendiary doctrine—that some sins were so grievous they could be atoned for only by spilling the sinner’s own blood. At the same time, Young continued efforts to mine ballistic lead near Las Vegas and encourage gunpowder manufacture closer to home.

In February 1857, Young preached one of his most violent sermons on blood atonement. Only days before, he had sent two letters to bishops in the south warning them that two recently released convicts, John Ambrose and Thomas Betts, were headed that way and might steal Church-owned horses, then wintering south of Salt Lake City. The message was “to authorize, if not order, their summary execution” (78). By mistake, assassins attacked four other travelers, badly wounding them as they camped along the Santa Clara River in southern Utah. A month later, Bishop Aaron Johnson of Springville interpreted one of those letters as a license to kill William Parrish and his sons, who were fleeing to California after losing their faith. Johnson was reported to have said in a meeting he had called, “some of us would yet ‘see the red stuff run’” (79).

Meanwhile, Young wrote to Philadelphian Thomas L. Kane, a non-Mormon but Church ally in the past, asking him to influence President-elect James Buchanan in appointing territorial officials whom Young and the Utah legislature had designated in one of two memorials sent to Washington. When Buchanan’s cabinet members later read them, these documents were so aggressively phrased that they had fateful effects.

MacKinnon points out, as virtually no one else has, that both Buchanan and Young were ill that spring and that neither leader liked to delegate decision-making, though Young was both younger and a more experienced manager. Nevertheless, “one wonders how the health, stamina, and leadership style of President Buchanan and Governor Young affected the decisions that they made during this critical period” (84). Buchanan’s appointment of John B. Floyd of Virginia as Secretary of War brought in a man who lacked understanding of military affairs and had little administrative skill or experience. General Winfield Scott, commander of the U.S. Army’s line regiments, had arbitrarily moved his headquarters to the Hudson River Valley in New York after the Mexican War, while in Washington, D.C., Floyd directed the army’s

staff bureaus. The result was that the Utah Expedition “was seriously flawed in its leadership and instructions” (90).

Contrary to what many have long assumed, Buchanan’s decision to intervene in Utah was not based on the despised Judge W. W. Drummond’s letter of resignation sent from New Orleans in early April 1857. That letter “recited nearly every accusation of Mormon disloyalty and perfidy that had accumulated during the prior ten years” and portrayed Utah as a “territory out of control,” with Governor Brigham Young as “the prime offender” (116). MacKinnon shows that the real catalyst for sending troops to Utah was “the substance and rhetoric in at least three other batches of material received in Washington during the third week of March 1857, weeks before the government was aware of Drummond’s resignation” (100).

The first decisive documents were the Utah legislature’s two memorials urging the appointment of only Mormons to territorial offices. As Utah delegate John M. Bernhisel reported to Young, they were seen as “a declaration of war,” breathing “a defiant spirit” and “not respectful” (106). The second document was a letter sent by Drummond probably before he left California for New Orleans and unrelated to his later letter of resignation. It detailed the impossibility of enforcing federal laws in Utah. Two more letters arrived the same week from Utah Judge John F. Kinney to Attorney General Jeremiah S. Black. Kinney gave more examples of the subversion of U.S. law in Utah and recommended that Buchanan replace Young as governor and establish an army garrison in the territory. The second Kinney letter enclosed a message from Utah’s Surveyor General David H. Burr, which included his dramatic assessment that any new governor risked assassination; Burr, too, recommended a military force.

Drummond sent his inflammatory letter of resignation in early April and gave a copy to a New Orleans newspaper, which quickly telegraphed it to newspapers throughout the country. “Soon a clamor for action from the press arose to rival the controversies over the Dred Scott decision and the fate of slavery in Kansas” (116). Thomas Kane, along with several Mormon apostles traveling in the East, tried to discredit Drummond by exposing his sordid character, but the sensationalism of this campaign only kept “the pot of Utah controversy roiling” (119). Rebuffed by Bu-

chanan, beset by family problems, discouraged, and in poor health, Kane retreated to the mountains of Pennsylvania while Bernhisel started on his homeward journey, thereby leaving a vacuum of Mormon advocacy in Washington at a critical juncture.

The die was cast. In late March Buchanan decided to replace Young as governor and to send some kind of military escort, the size undetermined. But he failed to notify Young of his decision.

MacKinnon then turns to Brigham Young and his military preparations, which included: continuing to collect arms and munitions, reorganizing the territorial militia (Nauvoo Legion), strengthening the defenses at Fort Bridger (finally paid for in 1855), establishing a revolver factory in Salt Lake City, and undertaking a five-week trek to check out Fort Limhi (the Mormon Indian mission in what is now Idaho and which was then part of the Oregon Territory). This locale, or even the Pacific Coast, were seen as possible way stations or places of retreat if the Mormons were forced to abandon Utah.

Communications among the War Department in Washington, D.C., General Scott's headquarters in New York, and General William S. Harney, commander of Fort Leavenworth, were conducted by ordinary mail rather than telegraph, even when every day counted if the Utah Expedition was to beat the winter snows. Harney was tentatively selected to command the expedition even though he had been stationed in Kansas Territory with a pledge to maintain order there in the midst of civil upheavals over slavery. Nevertheless, Harney set to work organizing the Utah Expedition: transferring regiments, hiring Jim Bridger as a guide, assembling a staff, and driving quartermasters to obtain the livestock, wagons, tents, supplies, and food they would need. Harney had a tough reputation and experience on the plains; with a large force, he wanted to "overawe" the Mormons. Harney's orders finally came at the end of June. These were to be the only orders that gave official guidance to the commander and to his successor, Albert Sidney Johnston, during the entire campaign.

President Buchanan's next challenge was to find someone willing to replace Young as territorial governor, no small task. After an embarrassingly large number of men declined, Buchanan at last found a willing Alfred Cumming, an undistinguished, 400-pound alcoholic who had been mayor of Augusta, Georgia,

and who was currently serving in St. Louis as superintendent of Indian Affairs for the upper Missouri River. His instructions did not come until early August. In the meantime, Harney and the Utah Expedition's dragoons were reassigned to Kansas's governor, who insisted that they were needed to cope with an armed rebellion there. Thus it was the third week in July before most of the Utah Expedition left Fort Leavenworth, though supply trains had been on the trail west for several weeks. The army set out for Utah without an overall leader present, a prescription for disaster.

MacKinnon then takes the reader through the response of Brigham Young and his Nauvoo Legion as they learned unofficially about the new governor and his army escort. Young and his counselors used vitriolic language in Sunday sermons that, when reprinted outside Utah, shocked and offended the nation and became "costly to the Mormon cause" (230). In sharp contrast to the dithering in Washington, Young immediately launched tactical moves including instructions to obtain tribal allegiance, sending Apostle George A. Smith south to call zealously for the settlers there to prepare for war, raising the specter that the Mormons might need to desert and burn their homes, declaring Mormon independence from the United States, and seeking intelligence about whether the army would venture farther west than Fort Laramie before winter and whether Colonel E. V. Sumner's unrelated Cheyenne Expedition indeed had secret orders to attack the Mormons and seize and perhaps lynch their leaders. (It didn't.)

MacKinnon describes the uncertainties besetting Young by the second week in September: "the advances of the Utah Expedition; the nature of the violence unfolding at Mountain Meadows; the intentions of the Buchanan administration; the need for alliances with Utah's tribes; the disposition of an oncoming tide of British converts; the political obliteration of Utah; and the optimal use of Thomas L. Kane" (277). These concerns are revealed in letters sent to Mormon leaders in Philadelphia, New York, and Liverpool, as well as in messages to non-Mormons such as the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs and Kane. Young then proclaimed martial law, which not only forbade the army from entering Utah, but also proscribed travel into, out of, or through Utah by anyone without a pass. "Without question," MacKinnon writes, "Young's release of this document escalated the tensions between

the LDS church's leadership and the U.S. government, transforming the conflict from a matter of inflammatory rhetoric to a provocation stunning in its insubordination by a federally sworn governor. . . . Brigham Young's declaration of martial law was his crossing of a Rubicon" (286).

One of the most notable chapters is titled "Lonely Bones." The Mountain Meadows Massacre of September 11, 1857—the slaying of 120 children, women, and unarmed civilian men in southern Utah—belies the oft-stated claim that the Utah War was bloodless. The massacre was not an isolated tragedy perpetrated by rogue leaders in the wild borderlands. Rather, it came out of a brew consisting of the impact of past persecution, the violent preaching of Church leaders, and more particularly from the war sermons given by George A. Smith as he traveled through the area during August 1857. The massacre was planned by men who were both Church leaders and Nauvoo Legion officers, and it was executed by them with Paiute auxiliaries. The massacre was preceded, first, by the Betts-Ambrose attack on the Santa Clara River and second, by the Parrish-Potter murders during February–March 1857. Mountain Meadows was quickly followed by a series of smaller-scale killings. According to MacKinnon, "this little examined violence . . . firmly links the Mountain Meadows Massacre to a broader context—the military campaign and the territorial culture of violence that spawned it" (297).

To explain further, MacKinnon details the murders that can be closely identified with the Utah War: Richard E. Yates, who sold gunpowder to the army and was considered a spy by the Nauvoo Legion; the Aiken party of six men from California, with their pockets full of gold, riding fine horses with fancy saddles and weapons; and Henry Forbes, also well outfitted, who was heading home to Illinois from California but was detained in Utah by martial law and the lack of an exit pass. MacKinnon examines the sources for such violence (and the pervasive looting of victims' possessions) and concludes that they lay in Brigham Young's irresponsible language, negative leadership, and bad example. After reviewing instances of these behaviors, MacKinnon writes, "There was an unhealthy, wholly undisciplined, longstanding use of language by and in the presence of the governor and the Legion's most senior commanders about lynching, other

forms of summary execution, and theft” (325). Compounding the situation, Young neither investigated the murders nor punished the perpetrators.

MacKinnon is not proposing that irresponsible leadership and inappropriate acts were limited to the Mormon side. He gives the reader a hint of what is to come in *At Sword's Point, Part 2*: the federally instigated Indian assault on Fort Limhi in February 1858 and General Johnston's March decision to hire Shoshone warriors as mercenaries to operate and defend the critical ferries on the Green River. “During the Utah War neither side had clean hands with respect to violence and atrocities. In quite different ways and on a substantially different scale both Brigham Young and James Buchanan were accountable, if not culpable, for what took place as well as for what they authorized and communicated” (328). MacKinnon's willingness to present documents on both sides and to try to strike a balance—uneven as it is—makes *At Sword's Point* particularly valuable.

The Mormon atrocities were not isolated events but were intricately connected to the guerilla-type operations of the Nauvoo Legion. As the army advanced toward Fort Bridger, the Mormons had to assess whether it would attempt to enter the Salt Lake Valley before winter and plan how best to protect their women and leaders there. Then too, though less publicly, they needed to deflect the army from investigating the killing fields at Mountain Meadows. Thus, the Nauvoo Legion began a campaign to delay or halt the army by any means without shedding blood, although under the pressures of mid-October, Young and Nauvoo Legion General Daniel H. Wells clearly authorized, if not directed, use of lethal force against army officers and their civilian mountaineer guides. The legion set out to capture and burn army supply wagons, stampede cattle, burn grass far and wide so as to destroy forage, and burn both Fort Bridger and Fort Supply, thereby denying the army shelter or comfort for the winter. It was a scorched-earth policy that ranged over portions of Nebraska, Utah, and Oregon territories. “Within less than a month this destruction—together with the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the martial-law proclamation, and the publication of General Wells's captured operational orders to Major Joseph Taylor—reinforced the nation's conviction that Utah was indeed a rebellious territory” (330).

Using fresh sources, MacKinnon records the army's reaction to the Nauvoo Legion attacks and to Colonel Alexander's ineffective, demoralizing march up Hams Fork and back. These developments are followed by reports of the Mormon raids in the eastern press and the shockwave they created. President Buchanan and the military leaders finally awoke from their seeming lethargy and began to formulate plans for a possible second thrust up the Colorado River or overland from California or Oregon. Even the ambassadors in Washington from Great Britain and Russia became alarmed at the possibility of a mass Mormon exodus to Pacific Coast havens such as Vancouver Island or Alaska.

Finally, after the loss in a blizzard of thousands of animals, newly arrived General Johnston decided that he lacked the literal horsepower to push into the Salt Lake Valley through highly defended Echo Canyon. During the third week in November, the Utah Expedition went into winters quarters and set to work building Camp Scott, which soon spread over the general area of Fort Bridger. Adjacent Eckelsville, named in honor of incoming Judge Delana R. Eckels, formed the civilian village that housed the new territorial officials. Johnston took immediate action to "defend, police, reinforce, and resupply" (446) the Utah Expedition to prepare for a spring move on Salt Lake.

In Eckelsville, Judge Eckels empaneled a grand jury of questionable impartiality, which returned treason indictments against Young and more than a thousand other Mormons; Governor Cumming finally took the oath of office; and Indian agent Garland Hurt visited Uintah Indian bands in the mountains to reinforce their allegiances with the federal government. But in all this activity, no one launched a federal investigation into the Mountain Meadows Massacre or tried to determine the whereabouts of the child survivors. One of the more engaging accounts from this winter period is that by discharged army teamster Charlie Becker who was captured by Mormon scouts and related their kind treatment—a sharp contrast to the fatal bludgeoning of civilian prisoner Richard E. Yates.

The final chapter contrasts the year-end annual message of President Buchanan to Congress with that of "Governor" Young to the Utah legislature. Incredibly, it was Buchanan's first public explanation of why he had sent the army west and consists of justi-

fications and indignation at Mormon raids and Young's declaration of martial law. Nevertheless, it was ambiguous about the state of rebellion in Utah and, in a stunning omission, failed to mention the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Young's address omitted any reference to the presence of a newly sworn governor at Fort Bridger, the mobilization of the Nauvoo Legion, the Mountain Meadows Massacre that it had committed, and his own proclamation of martial law. Remarkably, Young's message—read to the legislature by the legion's adjutant general—mentioned the army then wintering on Utah's northeastern border as simply a "rumor" (488). The volume ends with documents bearing on the Christmas discussions between Kane and Buchanan and with Kane setting off for New York where he would embark on a steamship for Panama, then to cross the Isthmus, land at San Pedro, California, and start overland for Salt Lake City. The phrasing of the letters he carried from President Buchanan make clear that Kane was acting on his own, but at the same time—and ever after—there have been commentators more than willing to assert that he was indeed a government agent.

For all its virtues, the book is not perfect. For a volume of this significance and complexity, the index is sadly inadequate. At one point I tried to locate references to the alleged tampering with Indian allegiances by the Mormons, but the entry for "Indian-Mormon relations" consists of thirty-seven page numbers with no subtopics, making it essentially useless. Furthermore, by my calculation, a fifth of the text is footnotes—866 in all—many of which contain intriguing anecdotes or other information that I expect to want to locate in the future, but they are not indexed. I hope in a future reprinting of this volume, this deficiency will be rectified, for without a comprehensive index, the value of the book is unnecessarily diminished.

I highly recommend this "sprawling," exciting, and well-written documentary history. I eagerly await Part 2.

Scry Me a River

George B. Handley. *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo*