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EDITORIAL

David M. Morris

Editor

In a year that some have described as the *Mormon Moment*, due to the media exposure of a Mormon standing for the US presidency, Mormon Studies once again enlarges the academic world. One need only look at current releases of university presses, which demonstrate this interest, many of which are reviewed here. In this issue articles are featured on intellectual and historical foci, as well as theological analysis.

We, as always, extend our appreciation to those who took time to blind peer-review articles and review books fairly and formative as possible. As an editorial board we hope you will enjoy the contents of this issue.

If you wish to make a comment or suggestions on its improvement, please feel free to email us at editorial@ijmsonline.org.

REVIEW – THE MORMON REBELLION: AMERICA’S FIRST CIVIL WAR

Reviewed by Carter Charles

David L. Bigler and Will Bagley, *The Mormon Rebellion: America’s First Civil War, 1857–1858*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011: \$34.95.

America’s First Civil War, the bold subtitle of *The Mormon Rebellion* – not the Battalion – sums it all: David L. Bigler and Will Bagley, two independent historians, are out to strike a heavy blow to common wisdom and set the record straight, providing “a balanced and accurate reinterpretation” (xi, 9) of relations between the Mormon Church and the United States, and “shed new light on [that] important, colourful, and largely forgotten episode of America’s past” (9). The outcome is a fourteen-chapter, heavily documented and illustrated volume on nineteenth century Mormon history in Utah.

The book focuses on the specific one-year timeframe of 1857–1858 when 2,500 U.S troops were ordered and were marching towards Utah to unseat *de facto* governor Brigham Young, facilitate the enforcement of America’s law in the Territory with a non-Mormon governor (11, 132, 182), and remind the Mormon “Zealots” that allegiance to civil authorities could not be a simple declamation of faith on paper (3).¹ A quick chronological retrospective shows that it took the Mormons only a decade after their arrival in Utah (1847) to find themselves back in square one, that is, being enmeshed in a major conflict because of their refusal to dissociate politics from their religion. And this is illustrated in the title of the first chapter and the first two quotations, which welcome the reader into the book (10). From there, the authors proceed to lay down the general context in which Mormon vs. “the Others” relation should be read: a context of continued armed conflicts from Missouri to Illinois, and from there to Utah where they hoped to finally establish a religious kingdom away from the rest of

¹ The Mormons then must have decided to suspend the declaration “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law”, the 12th of their thirteen “Articles of Faith” penned by their first prophet.

America (142). The authors show that the Mormons' hope did not anticipate how U.S. territorial expansion and the discovery of gold in California would alter the plans of "the newly born theocracy" (32) and create the conditions of quarrel with the federal government.

Throughout the book, Bigler and Bagley provide readers with opportunities to observe how a mid-nineteenth century U.S. president, James Buchanan, was torn between his respect for local, democratic autonomy - he "defended the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act" which made slavery, one of "the twin relics of barbarism" with polygamy, a local matter (4) - and his duty to maintain national continuity "[...] the supremacy of the Constitution and laws" of the United States everywhere in the country (Ibid). Yet, Buchanan was not on "a crusade against [the Mormons'] religion" (Ibid, 299). It is shown that his main goal was to see that Brigham Young's plans to create an independent state within the Union - as Joseph Smith had done at a smaller level in Nauvoo, Illinois - did not go through (18). Failure to prevent it would have established a vexing precedent for a country already at the brink of dislocation.

Contextualization of the Mormons' armed conflict with the United States is developed at much length in the book. Roughly seven chapters progressively take the reader into the heart of the matter, the U.S. army's operations, beginning in chapter 8 (180). After the introductory scene (11), the conflict is mentioned every now and then (53, 93) until page 132 when, on June 24, news of the decision to send the army to Utah began to arrive in the Territory. Official confirmation would come shortly thereafter with the arrival of Captain Stewart Van Vliet and his escort: he was sent ahead of the expedition to "line up forage and supplies for the troops and animals nearing the territory" (144-145). His arrival in Salt Lake City coincided with the beginning of what would become known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre (146), developed in chapter seven.

From the eighth chapter on, the authors take the readers into the particulars of the expedition as it enters the Salt Lake Valley: changes in leadership (Johnston becomes the head of the expedition), approach strategy, and the first problems in the ranks due to desertion (181). Those particulars are unfolded until Utah's new governor, Alfred Cumming, is honourably escorted into Salt Lake City by Mormons - not by the U.S. army-to take his post (301). That is followed by Brigham

Young's capitulation and acceptance of Buchanan's general pardon as presented by his commissioners, ruining Johnston's men's hope of a fight with the traitorous Mormons (315, 319).

Those who choose to go beyond this brief summary and read the book will discover why it required a lot of determination, patience, military operations, and diplomacy to see that this significant but unfortunately "largely forgotten" (9) chapter of American history comes down to us under one of the many names we know it today, The Bloodless War. Well, "bloodless" only if casualties are considered on a direct, army-to-army basis. Otherwise, you read about the murder of people who "landed in a place [...] torn by [religious] fanaticism,² war fever, and paranoia" (232). Such were the fate of five out of six men trying to meet up with Johnston's army (232, 234–35), the fate of a U.S. army sergeant shot by a Utah civilian (336), and, there is of course the fate of the victims of the infamous bloodbath that took place at Mountain Meadows (164).³

Some readers may find the book to be history repeating itself. The authors do not always highlight the parallels but those familiar with Mormon history will easily cross-reference Brigham Young's hell-fire rhetoric such as "[...] the evil which they design towards us will fall upon their own heads, and it will grind them to powder" (157) and "I shall carry the war into their own land" (206) with Sidney Rigdon's speech in Missouri in 1838 which said: "And that mob that comes on us to disturb us; it shall be between us and them a war of extermination; for they will have to exterminate us: for we will carry the seat of war to their own houses, and their own families [...]"⁴ We know what happened afterwards.

The "war fever, and paranoia" context spoken of by the authors and which have led to those types of "rhetorical assault[s]" (44) will also lead readers to the specifics of Mormon strategy to strike an alliance

² Readers should refer to Bigler and Bagley's fifth chapter, which deals with the Mormon religious awakening called "Reformation". The authors describe the period as "the most fearful spiritual upheaval since the 1642 Salem witch hunts" (94).

³ According to the authors' estimate, the number of victims should be upped to at least 140 (177).

⁴ Cf. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise*, Harper Collins, 1999, 34.

with Indian tribes in the Territory (76),⁵ their guerrilla tactics to halt the U.S army's progress⁶ and to even effectively keep it at bay for a long time in inclement weather conditions (225, 228). To that list should be added a local militia which almost doubled the size of the U.S army on paper (11) and whose knowledge of the terrain compensated for formal military training, for the most part of them. This advantage allowed them to carry out decisive stampede and destruction raids against the U.S army's cattle, provisions, and ammunitions.

In spite of the above Mormon guerrilla successes on the U.S army, the authors object to the notion of "blunder" for Buchanan, putting it rather on the side of Brigham Young for having misled his followers (356–57). Their argument is that "Buchanan's decision to order troops to Utah, often called his blunder, proved decisive and beneficial for both Mormons and the American republic" (356). Everyone can concur to the latter part of the argument: it was a well-motivated and beneficial decision. On the one hand, it was one of those decisions which made it possible for Mormonism to be what it is today, a worldwide religious movement and not one of those utopian nineteenth century groups which get to be remembered only in the footnotes of American history. On the other hand, it allowed the federal government to make it clear that the vast western lands were not a *no man's land*.

But, when it comes to the blunder, it will become obvious to readers that it was not Buchanan's *decision* which is referred to as such but rather the way he went about *implementing* that decision. As the authors themselves have pointed out more than once in the book, "he [...] underestimated the Mormon problem" (261, 5). All the "problems" the U.S. army encountered, the delays, etc. testify to the fact that he had committed a major managerial mistake, a blunder.⁷ And you may

⁵ Beside trying to create "a distinction in the minds of the Indian tribes [...] between the Mormons and the people of the United States" (76), you read in several other places in the book how the Mormons tried to convince them to join their cause against the United States to avoid being killed as well (142, 162, 197, etc.).

⁶ Several passages in the book refer to those tactics. See for instance pages 203, 212, 217, and on.

⁷ You read here and there passages like "lack of cavalry support", which must have inspired the title of the chapter (181), that "[Johnston] anticipated no

fairly wonder if such lines as “a theocratic command structure functioned with efficiency that made Washington’s fumbling performance look almost comical by comparison” (189) are not simply another way of saying that he had made that mistake.

Besides the “war fever” spoken of, the authors also provide elements that show that there was also a “war of communication” which made it difficult to tell “whose word should be believed in the often conflicting accounts [...]” (154). Considering the context, it is fair to question the validity of some of the testimonies Mormons consigned on paper. Still, some readers may come away with the sentiment that *The Mormon Rebellion* is a collection of evidence against Brigham Young and his coreligionists. There is no doubt that the Mormon Church under his leadership applied a policy of obstructionism (332) and of defiance towards Washington. But as illustrated below, several passages show a most regrettable tendency on the part of the authors to almost systematically question the validity of statements made by anyone on the Mormon side of the conflict and to present with negative undertone anyone who did not encourage a war with the Mormons and who sought a peaceful way out.

Colonel Thomas L. Kane, “ardent defender of the oppressed” according to the authors (281), known to have headed the Mormon Battalion in 1846, is depicted as a “naïve” and zealous convert to Mormonism (282) in this historical sequence. He becomes someone who “had a remarkable ability to be blissfully unaware of – or simply to ignore – the most grotesque manifestations of the Mormon theocracy” for an act which the authors acknowledge that he may not actually have heard about (286). Kane was out to find a peaceful solution because he thought his previous contacts with Brigham Young and the Mormons had made him a natural go-between. Before starting off for Utah, we learn that he had gone to meet with President Buchanan to offer his services (*Ibid*). Although not officially commissioned to negotiate (283), it goes without saying that once on the field, he had to meet both sides of the conflict. His role with regard to Washington is downplayed even though he carried a letter signed by Buchanan “commending him ‘to the favorable regard of all officers of the United States’” (291): he is not presented as Buchanan’s envoy. Paradoxically, he becomes “[Brigham]

resistance” (186), that the U.S. army’s hesitancy and incapacity to retaliate (217), its lack of “effective intelligence” (243), etc.

Young's agent, if not his mouthpiece" (290) simply because he carried a letter from Young to Johnston. If he was not an official envoy for Buchanan, you wonder how he went on to become Brigham Young's emissary while nothing says that the Mormon leader had officially commissioned him. You wonder if non-substantiated suspicion of his having been converted to Mormonism is enough to make him *a posteriori* the Mormon leader's envoy.

The treatment reserved to Senator Sam Houston, former president of "The Lone Star State" is also intriguing. His experience as a revolutionary and former president of Texas is mentioned in the book. But the authors do not tell us how that experience played or not in his choice to become what they call "the faith's champion in Congress" (298). In fact, you may fairly wonder whether Houston was actually a "champion" of Mormonism or of state/territory's rights and of diplomacy: we read on the same page that he "advised the president to appoint a commission to settle the conflict".

Even the governor named to replace Brigham Young, Alfred Cumming, is presented as a man who fell under the spell of Brigham Young (317) "who controlled the levers of power in Utah Territory" with his coreligionists (348).⁸ The authors actually refer to him and Kane as "the self-important pair of peacemakers" (300). There are fair grounds to question the way Governor Cumming handled certain issues. It is however puzzling when you read passages where the authors present in a critical way decisions he made to ward off armed struggles between the Mormons and U.S troops once in Utah (Ibid) - we are told that Cumming protested the army's occupation of a site near Great Salt Lake "before it occurred," as if it was not in his prerogatives to anticipate possible conflicts - but on the other hand, the authors have nothing to say about that same decision made a few hundred pages before by General William S. Harney when he mandated Van Vliet to open the way of the expedition (145).

Likewise, Parley P. Pratt's polygamous widow, Eleanor McLean, is presented as an "emotionally unhinged", "troubled" woman who provided an "overwrought" (157), "heart-rending account of Pratt's murder" (137), thus hinting at possible exaggeration and casting doubts

⁸ Cf. middle of last paragraph, page 312, and page 314 where Cumming is said to have found a new allegiance in Brigham Young.

on the validity of what she said. Fair enough: it is not impossible for emotions to have influenced the way she described what happened. Contrastingly though, you wonder if even understandable rancour and want for revenge did not make it at all into the testimony of Mexico war veteran, Major William Singer who reported that Mormon authorities seized his property, shot five of his cattle and that he feared for his family (40). Beside fear, nothing in the book says whether there was any emotion that could cast any doubt whatsoever on his testimony, or that of any other non-Mormon for that matter.

Some readers may also find quarrel with Bigler and Bagley on their subtitle and the assertion that America did not have one but two civil wars. For them, “the nation’s first civil war” was the Utah Rebellion (3, 11) which has either been ignored by previous historians or become a “carefully constructed [Mormon] legend (x). This final point cannot but remind of the role of history at the root of Mormon identity and the battle between “equal” historians, as the authors diplomatically term it (xi), and unequal (?) ones to have the last word in recounting the Mormon past. Both sides usually agree on what happened; but the answers often differ when it comes to who did what and in what capacity (178).⁹ As for the rebellion against Washington, the authors may have exaggerated a bit in calling it a war. It lacked a lot of the ingredients that could have qualified as such: the same authors tell us that “except for the episode’s acquisition of its unfortunate nickname, none of it ever happened” (x),¹⁰ that there were “no pitched battles” (3). Consequently, the presence of a question mark after the subtitle would have been more than welcome; it would have made it less assertive and less provoking.

Still, if the conflict does not qualify as a “war”, the fact that the authors call it such is quite instructive. It tells of an attempt to replace the Mormon Rebellion where it rightly belongs, that is, in the American tradition of political engagement for autonomy, even for separatism if need be. Thus, without excusing none Mormon non-democratic,

⁹ The passage here refers to Brigham Young’s role in the Mountain Meadows massacre. But you could find the same divergent presentation on whether it was Joseph Smith “the prophet *and* mayor” or simply “the mayor” of Nauvoo who ordered the destruction of *The Nauvoo Expositor*.

¹⁰ The pronoun « it » here refers to « the Utah Expedition, the Mormon War or, [...] ‘the unsung and inglorious Civil War of 1857-1858’ (Ibid.).

non-republican attitudes during the time the authors have focused on, it is important to see Brigham Young not only as religious leader but also heir of an American tradition. Indeed, religiously motivated or not, Brigham Young's denunciation of what he called "that odious, tyrannical, and absurd system of colonial government which emanated from the British throne" (83), his revolutionary call to sever the links with Washington (129) is strikingly reminiscent of Thomas Paine's "Tis time to part".

Carter Charles
University of Bordeaux, France
c_jcharles@hotmail.com