The Mountain Meadows Massacre by Juanita Brooks recounts a tragic historical event in a manner that can teach important lessons. The book is well researched and well written and reflects the great historical significance of the massacre. In addition, students learn religious lessons studying the book and its subject. Although some members of the Church and a few of Brigham Young University’s faculty doubt the wisdom of teaching The Mountain Meadows Massacre, this book should be taught at BYU.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre is an important book written by an important author. Some justifiably argue that Brooks's book is invalid because she is excessively defensive of John D. Lee—thus, they reason, the book is too subjective to take seriously as a historical work. Despite this shortcoming, the book is, overall, an excellent piece of critical writing. Brooks bases her book on primary sources displaying various opinions about the massacre. Even if the book is not completely objective, students can learn from bad examples as well as good ones. Studying The Mountain Meadows Massacre, especially under the direction of a competent teacher, can teach students to think critically about literature and avoid errors in their own writing. In addition to its literary merits, the book is a prime example of how authors can have a significant influence on the public. After Brooks's book was published, members of the Church began to research and discuss the Massacre more openly. One Mormon historian states: "Beginning with the landmark work of Juanita Brooks and proceeding at an increased pace during the past dozen years a spirit of openness, reconciliation, and healing has unfolded" (Leonard 14). The extensive research that has been performed on the Massacre has catalyzed important changes, such as the construction of a memorial at Mountain Meadows and the reinstatement of John D. Lee to the Church. A Mormon woman historian was able to change her world through her research and writing. The book and its author are significant enough to warrant study.

Students should also study the Mountain Meadows Massacre as an important event in history. It is relatively rare that 120 innocent people are slaughtered, especially by members of a church that generally endorses pacifism and certainly not murder. It is extremely important to know how and why these things happened. When students understand mistakes made by others they are less likely to make the same mistakes themselves. The Mountain Meadows Massacre exposes the dangers of "us-versus-them" thinking and the devastating effects of mass hysteria in a militaristic atmosphere.

A university is more credible when students and teachers can discuss any event, no matter the controversy surrounding it. Richard L. Bushman, professor emeritus of Columbia University, stated concerning controversial matters in Mormon history, "You don't want to go around them, you don't want to cover them up…you want to go right into the center of them." Brigham Young University is especially accountable to teach the Mountain Meadows Massacre because it is significant in Western, Utahn, and Mormon history. Most of BYU's students are LDS and will spend time living in Utah. Because of this, they should be interested in the Massacre. To be taken seriously as academics, students must be well-versed in their own history.

Some argue that though the Mountain Meadows Massacre is a legitimate academic subject, it presents a spiritual risk that outweighs any benefits that a study of the book may afford. Remember, though, that BYU admits students who already have a high level of intelligence and spiritual maturity. The average entering GPA
is 3.7 and the average ACT score is 27 (Snyder 244). These high academic standards must be matched with spiritual strength: students must obtain a favorable ecclesiastical endorsement for admission to BYU.

While the Massacre is a potentially risky subject, it will undoubtedly surface in conversations with others. Students will have to deal with the issue whether or not they are prepared. They can best prepare for these discussions about the Massacre while at BYU, where students and teachers with common religious values can thoroughly explore the event. BYU presents an ideal atmosphere for this exploration. Teachers at BYU are known for giving their students opportunities to present at symposia and conferences, and do original research and publishing. This fosters an excellent student-teacher relationship that helps students feel comfortable talking with their professors. Such a student-professor relationship can lead to a frank spiritual discussion on any subject, including the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Caring faculty who live by BYU's spiritual standards can help students develop a plan for how to respond to questions about the Massacre and other controversial issues. Through this process students can become even more mature in spiritual and academic matters.

Another argument against studying The Mountain Meadows Massacre claims that it may cause students to doubt their religious leaders. Priesthood leaders involved with the massacre endorsed atrocious acts against innocent people. This seems contradictory to principles of righteous living taught in the LDS church. If those stake presidents, bishops, and mission leaders could commit such acts, then how can we trust our current leaders to give us instructions on how to live righteously? This is a legitimate fear, but perhaps it may be alleviated by remembering that all Church members are entitled to their own personal witness concerning any commandment. The Church also asserts that leaders within it are fallible; they are still subject to temptation and often act in ways unhypothetical of their callings. These principles remind us that being a member of the LDS church means working with imperfect people. It is important for all people to understand that one cannot judge a philosophy solely by those who profess to practice it. The Mountain Meadows Massacre forces readers to acknowledge this truth.

In essence, BYU students are bright, spiritually experienced, and ready for the challenge of studying The Mountain Meadows Massacre. By studying Brooks's book, students will learn to correctly address perplexing gospel issues. They will hone their critical reading and writing skills and become familiar with a crucial part of their history. If the administrators of BYU want their students to go forth as effective representatives of the Church, they must recognize the benefits of teaching Juanita Brooks's The Mountain Meadows Massacre.

Works Cited


Snyder, Eric. "True Confession: I love BYU." Why Write? Provo: Brigham Young University Department of Undergraduate Education, 2002. 244