



Oh What a Slaughter: Massacres in the American West: 1846--1890

Larry McMurtry

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In *Oh What a Slaughter*, Larry McMurtry has written a unique, brilliant, and searing history of the bloody massacres that marked -- and marred -- the settling of the American West in the nineteenth century, and which still provoke immense controversy today.

Here are the true stories of the West's most terrible massacres -- Sacramento River, Mountain Meadows, Sand Creek, Marias River, Camp Grant, and Wounded Knee, among others. These massacres involved Americans killing Indians, but also Indians killing Americans, and, in the case of the hugely controversial Mountain Meadows Massacre in 1857, Mormons slaughtering a party of American settlers, including women and children.

McMurtry's evocative descriptions of these events recall their full horror, and the deep, constant apprehension and dread endured by both pioneers and Indians. By modern standards the death tolls were often small -- Custer's famous defeat at Little Big Horn in 1876 was the only encounter to involve more than two hundred dead -- yet in the thinly populated West of that time, the violent extinction of a hundred people had a colossal impact on all sides. Though the perpetrators often went unpunished, many guilty and traumatized men felt compelled to tell and retell the horrors they had committed. From letters and diaries, McMurtry has created a moving and swiftly paced narrative, as memorable in its way as such classics as Evan S. Connell's *Son of the Morning Star* and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*.

In Larry McMurtry's own words:

"I have visited all but one of these famous massacre sites -- the Sacramento River massacre of 1846 is so forgotten that its site near the northern California village of Vina can only be approximated. It is no surprise to report that none of the sites are exactly pleasant places to be, though the Camp Grant site north of Tucson does have a pretty community college nearby. In general, the taint that followed the terror still lingers and is still powerful enough to affect locals who happen to live nearby. None of the massacres were effectively covered up, though the Sacramento River massacre was overlooked for a very long time.

"But the lesson, if it is a lesson, is that blood -- in time, and, often, not that much time -- will out. In case after case the dead have managed to assert a surprising potency.

"The deep, constant apprehension, which neither the pioneers nor the Indians escaped, has, it seems to me, been too seldom factored in by historians of the settlement era, though certainly it saturates the diary-literature of the pioneers, particularly the diary-literature produced by frontier women, who were, of course, the likeliest candidates for rapine and kidnap."

Oh What a Slaughter: Massacres in the American West: 1846--1890 Details

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From Reader Review Oh What a Slaughter: Massacres in the American West: 1846--1890 for online ebook

Steve Brooks says

there WILL BE BLOOD!

Karl H. says

Oh What a Slaughter is a look at the massacres of native peoples in American history. One thing it did very effectively was highlight my ignorance about how the west was won- I didn't know even the names of five out of the six massacres highlighted in the book. It was good to have my gaps in history filled in, even just a little. It also made me more interested in the Wild West in general. A fuller accounting of the nation during this period would make for fascinating reading material. McMurtry does a good job rendering the larger than life personalities of the time period. We encounter pompous explorers, peaceful natives both naive and pragmatic, crafty but doomed native warriors, politically adept religious figures, and legendary figures- all of which are well-drawn. This book is supplemented with pictures, which are very useful to help one visualize the participants. One of the great things this book does is characterize the type of people who lived in the Wild West.

But the topic is simply too ambitious. McMurtry talks about the lead up to the massacres, the massacres themselves, the aftermath, his personal visits to the sites in question and the impact of the events on the present hundreds of years later. This would be ambitious for a 150 page book (with pictures) about ONE of these massacres, much less six! McMurtry shows himself capable of doing each of these things competently, but its too many balls for him to juggle and he consistently drops about half of them for each massacre. I found myself wishing for more meaty historical matter- the accounts of events of the massacres often were perfunctory. The tone also fails to hit a sweet spot- it neither plunged me in the chaos of the proceedings or provided a dispassionate and sweeping historical overview. As a consequence of the overreach, the conclusions the author drew seem general and incoherent.

The question that a book like this must tackle is: Why? What made the West such a bloody place? What drove massacre after massacre? All we get are conflicting answers: one happened because the perpetrators "were in a killing mood, and they killed", another because whites couldn't tell the peaceful Indians from the warlike ones, another because of the Mormon doctrine of Blood Atonement, or perhaps simple greed, another because of a vainglorious cartographer's quest for personal glory. What was the unifying factor? I still don't know. However, each massacre piled up in this book makes for a compelling question, which is why I am awarding it three stars. One final note: Massacres of the Mountains by JP Dunn was the primary source material for this text. I wager its a more thorough treatment of the subject.

Mike Perry says

Concise, straightforward with McMurtry's thoughts and opinions tossed in. He knows the subject as well as anyone out there. A welcome addition to anyone's library on the American West.

Karren says

What I liked: thoughtful commentary, an accessible summary of big Western massacres. this would be a great introduction for someone who doesn't want to read a thick tome, but wants more commentary than Wikipedia.

that being said...

I was a little disappointed in the style of this book. 1) Its organization is a little strange. McMurtry first rambles/muses in a few chapters about massacres in general, references some of the massacres he has yet to tell the reader about, and acknowledges that almost everything in the book is uncertain, speculative, guess-work. I'm glad he states that upfront, but it is a little odd to so frame a book of history. I dunno.

2) some of the massacre summaries/ commentaries are quite lengthy (multiple chapters) and others are spartan.

3) He alludes to characters or concepts but doesn't explain them fully in some cases, which makes me a little unsure about the comprehensiveness of his research. Examples: Kit Carson, ghost dances, blood atonement, etc. He references them enough that they warrant a tangential explanation, in my opinion.

4) I agree with other reviewers that I think he should have given this book more than 150 pages. I think he had some very interesting commentary that could have been fleshed out, and I would have liked to have had more detail from the histories. I did take notes from his bibliography for additional reading.

Overall, not a bad survey of a very sad and very murky part of American history.

Fara says

McMurtry discusses six massacres that occurred in the American West between 1846 and 1890 - most of Indians, some of whites, and their causes and aftermaths. Periodically, he puts them in context to other massacres, historical and contemporary. It's a dark book, but a good one, a reminder of how our own history in the US is riddled with human passion and mistake. It's also a good study of how government policy is as slow to change as the people who make it, not matter what one individual knows or promises.

Pam ?Because Someone Must Be a Thorn? Tee says

I've read quite a few reviews of "Oh, What a Slaughter" and I have to say that I'm surprised that most reviewers seem to have missed what this book is really about (my humble opinion, of course).

"Oh, What a Slaughter" is not a popular pulp book about the Old West, nor is it your standard military or political history. If it was, McMurtry would have talked more about the famous individuals that were

involved in these incidents, and/or he would have written more about how these events changed the course of American history.

But he basically ignores both of those perspectives and we find instead a much different analysis, principally a focus on the intimate circumstances that allowed the massacres to occur.

Oh What A Slaughter is, in other words, a study of Violence. But not the professional violence of organized armies that meet on a field, nor the personal sort of violence that erupts when two people come to blows. But rather the sort of violence that can emerge when small groups are overcome by fear and stress.

McMurtry asks what happens to men that they can get so worked up that they act out of character to what they profess as their standards. How it is that 'normal' men can find themselves in a state of mind where murdering unarmed women and little children is acceptable. And where skinning the 'enemy' and wearing their private parts as a hatband or using them a tobacco pouch becomes a symbol of pride.

McMurtry examines these questions and builds a case that connects these violent episodes to what scientists now know about human physiology and psychology.

The most interestingly aspect of this book for me was McMurtry's arguments that related to exaggerated historical records. I'm sure you know what I mean if you are at all acquainted with ancient or medieval sources. There are simply circumstances where otherwise reliable individuals quote figures that are just unbelievable -- be it the numbers of ships launched, or the numbers of opponents met. McMurtry argues that the exaggeration is perfectly understandable if you take into account what modern science knows about human biology and physiology.

If you take the problem of body counts as an example, McMurtry would say that inaccuracies stem from two effects. The first being the actual physical difficulty of counting people who have been thoroughly dismembered. And the second being that adrenaline serves to alter how events are perceived.

To conclude, I'd say that if this type of approach to history interests you at all, that you pick up this little volume. It's a quick read and one that illuminated some aspects of warfare that I hadn't considered before.

Talking Points:::

Oh, What a Slaughter is an astute study of fear and violence and how these two emotions work to affect the perception of historical events. It's a thought provoking book that focuses on the psychological, physiological, and cultural elements that make massacres possible.

The book is a quick read and has many interesting old photos.

McMurtry makes quite a few smart observations that are worth applying to other historical contexts. [A point made more or less in the introduction where McMurtry points out similarities between events in the 1800's and more recent events in Rwanda and the United States (9/11/01).:]

It should be noted that while the author outlines the events of different massacres, his focus is not on historical details. Or to put it a bit differently: Students of humanity and war-in-the-abstract will probably find the book of interest. Readers expecting a detailed history will probably go away unfulfilled.

Recommended to students of history.

Here are the Chapter Headings:

The Meat Shop
The Vulnerable Pioneer
The Big Massacres and Some Others
The Moral Taint
Did Kit Regret?
Counts
Images, Heroes, Stars
The Sacramento River Massacre, Spring 1846
The Mountain Meadows Massacre, September 11, 1857
Mountain Meadows (II)
Sand Creek, November 29, 1864
The Marias River Massacre, January 23, 1870
The Camp Grant Massacre, April 30, 1871
The Broken Hoop: 1871-1890
Wounded Knee, December 29, 1890
Wounded Knee (II)
Wounded Knee (III)
The Waning Moon
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Pam T!
opinionated person and reviewer at <http://www.pageinhistory.com/>

Bob Cantrell says

The other side of the coin

This is short book, but it packs a punch. I majored in History in college so a several of these massacres were known to me: The Mountain Meadows, Sand Creek and Wounded Knee. Mcmurty doesn't go into the Fetterman and Custer Massacres, because they dealt with the military being the victims. The majority were massacres of Native-Americans with The Mountain Meadows massacre being a wagon train of immigrants from Arkansas. In each of these tragic events women and children were brutally murdered by their attackers. If you want to get a feel for what was done in the name of Western Expansion then this is good place to begin. One last thing this book will make you wonder, just who were the savages.

Richard says

"Oh What a Slaughter," is a look into American history that most of us would rather avoid. It's a slight

history of six massacres of Westward Expansion that reminds us our nation was founded in blood, and draws parallels to the bloody deeds humans of any nationality continue to perform in the name of this, that, or the other ideology. As an American it was impossible for me to read about Sand Creek, or Wounded Knee without thinking about My Lai, or wondering what abuses will be uncovered in the course of our current war in Iraq. For those reminders, and reflections, this is a book anyone interested in the American character would do well to read. Mr. McMurtry's contention that blood cries out for attention is chilling, and his use of the "meat shop," metaphor for the grotesquely littered site of any massacre certainly troubled my imagination, but for all that "Oh What a Slaughter" is a "slight" history.

In the first few chapters Mr. McMurtry lays out his intent and strategy in a way that sounds like a pitch to the publisher, or a writer's warm-up that somehow got incorporated into the finished product. The stories he goes on to tell, albeit interesting, are cursory. Mr. McMurtry has always written well of the sudden violence of the American West, and though some of that skill comes through, the accounts seem more like notes than finished stories.

As an evening read, "Oh What a Slaughter," is illuminating, unfortunately it lacks depth as history, or storytelling.

TroTro says

Love McMurtry. This book is short, but not so sweet. It is really an intro into the "bad" history of the west.

Vel Veeter says

I was recently in a Memorial Day program at a high school, one that is decidedly patriotic about such things, and there was a slideshow. The slides consisted of students from AP Geography and other geography classes creating slides of their family who were servicepeople. The slides were a strange cacophony of images and color. So the result hundreds of clashing slides alongside overly loud and poorly edited music. It was earnest and well-meaning, but it was a mess. For each conflict that the US has been involved there was a introductory slide that gave the name of the conflict in cartoonish font and then a popup of the "War Dead". It was horrifying.

Anyway, in this book about slaughters in the West, none of which had numbers even remotely close the numbers in that slide show, Larry McMurtry spends a lot of time dissecting the various accounts and coming up with something like a consensus look. It's a perfectly fine book, but not one that lends itself to the author's talents. So this book gets read because he's a well-known writer, but he's not the writer best suited to this topic...in contrast to say his memoirs and essays about Hollywood and the West.

P.S. Winn says

This is a great book, even though it is heart breaking. The terrible massacres in America's history should never be forgotten and this book looks at them in a well written collection.

Jeff says

Poor historiography and too much author opinion. McMurtry acknowledges that some of these massacre chain-of-events are hard to piece together, yet still comes to the absolute conclusion that the Mormon Church, and not rogue units, instigated, or at the very least condoned Mountain Meadows despite a continuing legitimate debate based on source documents. He inconsistently gives the U.S. Army a break at Wounded Knee saying that differing reports make it nearly impossible to determine how the massacre occurred or who is to blame. Comparing Sitting Bull and the Sioux to "Afghans in Cuba," telling stories of getting lost and driving around the Sand Creek Massacre site, and weighing the artistic merits of monuments are useless to the reader, unclear, and sound too much like punditry. References to revisionist "Little Big Man" disgust me as much as any other faux-history like "They Died with Their Boots On." Is there any evidence or proof that Custer died during a spell of lunacy (or even conversely during a courageous spell)? Then don't mention it in a serious historical piece! Finally, don't use paintings of Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn as the cover of the book if you readily admit that it was a battle and not a massacre and barely address it. If it is (which most modern historians agree was not), then use it for the cover of your book. For serious Western history, stick with Utley or Hutton and avoid McMurtry.

Jimmy says

McMurtry discusses 6 massacres in the Old West: Sacramento River, Mountain Meadows, Sand Creek, Marias River, Camp Grant, and Wounded Knee. Along the way he refers to other massacres leading up to the main one or that happened as a result. He tries to look behind the scenes to figure out why people commit massacres. He discusses the efforts to find out the truth, including body counts. He looks into whether or not perpetrators felt guilty later. I believe he is fair-minded in his approach.

Jess says

Very informative. This was mostly about the lesser known massacres that occurred out west. I'm so close to finishing "Black Hills" and there is a lot of the Sioux language throughout and mentioning of many historical figures. That book is the reason why I wanted to learn more about this subject. I also read "Custer" by McMurtry a little while back so I guess that's the book that started it all for me.

Ben Denison says

Love McMurtry , but I think expected more. It reads like he started a book on a topic he was interested in and then lost interest and it's a short book and doesn't seem to benefit from his great writing.

Did have some interesting facts, but this will not be remembered.
