

Review: JAM536

## A MIXTURE OF FACT AND FICTION IN *SEPTEMBER DAWN*

a film review of  
*September Dawn*  
by Christopher Cain  
(Slowhand, 2007)

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Did Mormon President Brigham Young order the deaths of 120 innocent men, women, and children traveling through Utah territory on their way from Arkansas to California on September 11, 1857? Christopher Cain's controversial film *September Dawn* leaves little doubt that Young indeed was responsible. Young's culpability is hotly debated to this day. None, however, dispute the fact that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints mercilessly slaughtered nearly every member of the Fancher/Baker wagon train at a place called the Mountain Meadows, just north of present-day St. George, Utah.

Like most dramas, Cain's account is a mixture of fact and fiction. The difficulty for Cain was in telling a very complex story in a two-hour time frame. If you are familiar with the events pertaining to the Mountain Meadows Massacre you might easily follow along; however, if you are one of the great majority of viewers who are being introduced to this story for the first time, you no doubt will walk away with several unanswered questions. For example, Nancy Dunlap, an emigrant suspicious of the Mormons, is mysteriously found floating in a nearby river. There was a person named Nancy Dunlap in the wagon train, but there is no possibility she could have been found dead in this manner since there is no river in the area.

Jon Voight plays the role of Bishop Jacob Samuelson, a man who exhibits extreme loyalty to his church and its leaders. The person of Samuelson is purely fictional, but his negative view of the emigrants who were traveling through Utah from Arkansas is probably very close to that held by several of the Mormons living at that time. Misunderstanding between the Mormons and the federal government led President James Buchanan to send a military force of around 2,500 men to quench what he believed was a rebellion in the territory. The Mormons felt that this act was a continuation of the persecution they experienced in Missouri and Illinois by "Gentile" outsiders years earlier.

*September Dawn* includes a love story subplot between Emily Hudson (Tamara Hope), the daughter of "Reverend Hudson" (Daniel Libman), a Protestant minister, and Jacob Samuelson's son Jonathan (Trent Ford). A romance between two star-crossed young people from such diverse religious backgrounds, in such a short time, seems extremely unlikely. Although Emily is capable of quoting Scripture, she seems less inclined to find out what the nuances of Mormonism are before committing her heart to a person of that faith.

Much of the dialogue spoken through the character of Brigham Young (Terrence Stamp) is taken from actual statements he made during this period that coincided with the "Mormon Reformation." Many people today believe that fiery sermons of "blood atonement," coupled with thundering demands for members to give absolute obedience to the Mormon leadership, were what fueled the tragedy. History

gives ample proof that Young did teach that men and women who had committed sins that would deprive them of being “saved and exalted with the Gods” must have their blood shed in order to atone for those sins.

Viewers must keep in mind that some of the quotations attributed to Young and other leaders, however, are conflated, meaning that they are taken from several sermons over a longer period of time. The film shows Young proclaiming, for instance, that “if any miserable scoundrel comes here to our Zion, cut his throat.” Viewers probably will think Young is alluding to the emigrants, but this statement actually was made on July 8, 1855, long before the Fancher/Baker party began their trek west. Another scene has Voight’s character giving his son Jonathan a lesson on obedience. He paraphrases Heber C. Kimball, first counselor to Brigham Young, who said, “But if you are told by your leader to do a thing, do it. None of your business whether it is right or wrong.” Kimball did make such a statement, but he said it on November 8, 1857, nearly two months after the wagon train was annihilated.

The massacre scene is sobering and comports quite closely to the account later given by John D. Lee (John Gries), the only man executed for the crime. Lee successfully convinced the beleaguered pioneers to trust the Mormons for their safety. Instructed to put their weapons in a wagon, the emigrants were then commanded to walk in single file away from their encampment. At a given signal, the Mormon militiamen opened fire on their unsuspecting victims. Only seventeen small children were spared.

Cain maintained in several interviews that his film was not a criticism of Mormonism but rather an indictment of all religious fanaticism. For all its faults, *September Dawn* does succeed in making that point abundantly clear.

— reviewed by Bill McKeever