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A Frontier Life: Jacob Hamblin, Explorer and Indian Missionary

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Todd M. Compton. *A Frontier Life: Jacob Hamblin, Explorer and Indian Missionary*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Jay H. Buckley

Jacob Hamblin embodies one of the more colorful and interesting Mormon pioneers in Utah Territory during the second half of the nineteenth century. During his long and eventful life, he wore many hats—explorer, frontiersman, Indian agent, missionary, colonizer, community leader—and wore them well. Born on April 6, 1819, on the Ohio frontier, Hamblin left the family farm at age nineteen to strike out on his own. After nearly dying during a cave-in at a lead mine in Galena, Illinois, he collected his wages and traveled to Wisconsin to homestead. In 1839, he married Lucinda Taylor and began farming and raising a family.

Hamblin's destiny changed after listening to Mormon elders preach the restored gospel. They baptized him into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on March 3, 1842. Lucinda refused to travel west with the Saints and left her husband. Hamblin then married Rachel Judd, crossed the plains to the Great Basin, and settled in Tooele Valley southwest of the Great Salt Lake. When he was called out to fight Goshutes who were raiding cattle from the Mormon settlers, Hamblin had a remarkable experience that convinced him that if he never took the life of an Indian, he would never be killed by an Indian. Hamblin then learned their language, spent time with them, and adopted an Indian child into his family. These tendencies sometimes put him at odds with his ecclesiastical and “military” leaders, but his associations with native tribes often proved to be beneficial.

Brigham Young called Hamblin on a mission to the Southern Paiutes in 1854. Hamblin gained standing and influence among them because of his integrity, his friendship, and his spiritual gifts. His missionary efforts often revolved around his ability to prophesy and his gift as a faith healer. When President Young appointed him president of the Southern Utah Indian Mission, Hamblin moved his family to a home along the Santa Clara River.

Hamblin was in Salt Lake City to marry to his third plural wife, sixteen-year-old Sarah Priscilla Leavitt, on September 11, 1857, the date of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. That fateful event occurred just a few miles from one of Hamblin's homes where family was staying. Some scholars believe the tragic incident may have been averted had he been present. Hamblin initially consulted with Governor Alfred Cumming to help bring to justice the Mormon perpetrators involved in the tragic murders. The governor refused to prosecute the case because all Mormons had been pardoned by President James Buchanan for their alleged crimes during the Utah War. Subsequent territorial governors and federal officials did not view the pardon the same way and sought to punish the Mormons. Under these threatening conditions, it seems apparent, though out of character, that Hamblin assisted other Church leaders in casting some of the blame for the attack upon the Southern Paiutes.

Some of Hamblin's greatest accomplishments were his peaceful negotiation of the 1870 Treaty of Fort Defiance in New Mexico and his role in aiding the John Wesley Powell exploration of the Colorado River. Hamblin also served faithfully as a missionary to the southwestern tribes (Utes, Paiutes, Hopis, Navajos, Zunis, and many others), aided by his ability to speak Indian languages. He became intimately connected with the tribes, taking perhaps as many as three Paiute women as wives, although documentation for such unions is scarce.

Hamblin married his fourth (confirmed) wife, Louisa Boneli, and watched his posterity grow to at least twenty-four children, several stepchildren, and seven adopted Indian children. He helped establish the Cotton Mission in southern Utah, built several communities, and generally kept the peace. His two-story adobe, sandstone, and ponderosa pine home, completed in 1863, was a school and community gathering place and is one of the few pioneer-era homes still standing. Eventually, federal laws against polygamy forced him to move his families into Arizona, New Mexico, and Chihuahua, Mexico. Hamblin's twilight years were spent as a fugitive, continually moving from one location to another in order to evade capture by federal officers. Hamblin died in Pleasanton, New Mexico, on August 31, 1886, and was buried in Alpine, Arizona.

Since his death, many biographers have attempted to dramatize portions of Hamblin's life story. Authors approaching this larger-than-life figure have tended to either perpetuate frontiersman legends or focus on the mysteries surrounding the man. Paul D. Bailey's *Jacob Hamblin, Buckskin Apostle* (1948) is among the first quasi novels emphasizing Hamblin's role as a frontiersman. Pearson H. Corbett's *Jacob Hamblin:*

The Peacemaker (1952) represents a sympathetic and faithful Mormon perspective written largely for the Hamblin family and was the standard biography for several generations. The accomplished author Juanita Brooks, who wrote excellent works on the Mountain Meadows Massacre and John D. Lee, also wrote a short semifictional account, *Jacob Hamblin: Mormon Apostle to the Indians* (1980). Most of these works emphasized the religious and Indian missionary aspects of Hamblin's life. More recently, Hartt Wixom's *Jacob Hamblin: A Modern Look at the Frontier Life and Legend of Jacob Hamblin* (1996) set out to unravel some of the mysteries attached to Hamblin.

Although many authors have analyzed the life of Jacob Hamblin, none have succeeded to the degree that Todd M. Compton has. Compton is an independent Mormon historian, who has garnered both praise for his careful scholarship and criticism for his deconstructionist views of Church history, or a history of "tragic ambiguity," as he calls it. He has published numerous articles and books, including *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* and *Fire and Sword: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Northern Missouri* (coauthored with Leland H. Gentry). While Compton's sometimes rationalistic explanations of religious experience will not be edifying to all Latter-day Saint readers, from a historian's perspective his biography of Hamblin is a tour de force.

Compton always gives special attention to detail, and his academic approach in analyzing primary and secondary sources to reconstruct Hamblin's life enable him to effectively situate Hamblin within the broader context of Mormon, Utah, and western history. He portrays Hamblin as a mortal man, full of many virtues as well as some vices. In some ways, Hamblin represents the "Leatherstocking of Utah," a reference to James Fenimore Cooper's fictional but legendary character Natty Bumppo. Like Bumppo, Hamblin was a frontiersman who liked Indians but struggled with the cross-purposes of living among and learning Indian ways while aiding Indian displacement and Mormon settlement, an internal struggle that Compton calls "the great paradox of Hamblin's life" (480). All that Hamblin could do was "help both Indians and white settlers adjust to the [colonizing] process in a humane and non-violent way" (482-83).

As with his previous works, Compton seeks to give a counterbalance to established narratives that have potential to give rise to myth. He provides insights when acknowledging that the earliest accounts of an incident do not always include the supernatural aspects and visionary perspectives of events that often are found in later accounts. When discussing a particular historical event, he does a good job of seeking balance when presenting the various points of view from Hamblin, Indians,

Mormons, and outsiders. He has done a masterful job of researching and documenting the totality of Hamblin's experiences, examining and disentangling many legends and controversies and offering cogent, insightful interpretations of the key moments in his life. In sum, this work represents the most scholarly treatment of Jacob Hamblin to date.

Fortunately, Hamblin left the author numerous sources to work with. His journals, diaries, letters, account books, and other correspondence provided wonderful material. These records, combined with Hamblin's autobiography that was ghostwritten by James A. Little and published as *Jacob Hamblin: A Narrative of His Personal Experience* (1881), aided Compton in his efforts to capture Hamblin's thoughts and perspectives from many sources unavailable to or unused by previous biographers. It proved to be a daunting undertaking, one that resulted in a 642-page book with 100 pages of endnotes.

Compton successfully infuses Hamblin's own words throughout the narrative, giving a personalizing touch that helps readers understand and relate to Hamblin's thoughts and feelings. Compton is also willing to take previous interpretations of Hamblin to task, sometimes to set the record straight and sometimes to offer a different perspective on controversies. He gives a nuanced interpretation of Hamblin's actions following the Mountain Meadows Massacre, which included burying the massacre victims and having his wives care temporarily for some of the surviving orphaned children. The event also created an irreparable rift between him and his friend John D. Lee, who eventually was executed for participating in the horrific affair while others probably as culpable as he were not prosecuted nor punished.

One of the downsides of this work is that the author often comingles historians with historical actors, which breaks the narrative flow and muddies the water for the casual reader, who may find the tome occasionally dry and too comprehensive or laborious to read. Those who do put forth the effort, however, will be taken on an exciting journey with one of the quintessential pioneers of southern Utah. Compton's magnificent biography of Hamblin won the Juanita Brooks Prize in Mormon Studies, and it represents the best biography of Hamblin and one of the great biographies in Mormon and Utah history.

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