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An Exceptional Example of the Richness of Church History

Susan Easton Black

Review of Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Emer Harris & Dennison Lott Harris: Owner of the First Copy of the Book of Mormon, Witness of the “Last Charge” of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2023). 235 pages, 67 illustrations, appendix, references, \$29.00 (paperback).

Abstract: *Jeffrey Bradshaw has, in a single well-researched volume, provided a gift to those interested in the lives of early Church members. In Emer Harris & Dennison Lott Harris, Bradshaw brings out of obscurity the remarkable life of one of Martin Harris’s brothers and illustrates the contribution of that life to the initial decades of the Restoration.*

Whether you’re a descendant of Emer Harris and his son Dennison or a Church historian, *Emer Harris & Dennison Lott Harris: Owner of the First Copy of the Book of Mormon, Witness of the “Last Charge” of Joseph Smith* is a must-have reference book for your library.

As the title states, the book is divided into two sections—the life of Emer Harris and the witness of his youthful son Dennison. The first section is a biographical sketch that gives readers more details about Emer’s life than any other book on the market. Bradshaw has brought Emer Harris out of obscurity in an accessible and scholarly manner. He has pulled together a readable story by carefully combing source materials.

Bradshaw’s gift to masterfully create a chronological biography of Emer Harris is commendable. Without diluting the problems Emer faced, readers will learn of his hardships such as divorce, death of

a spouse, remarriages, and poverty. More importantly, readers will discover a man who had a dogged determination to stay with his faith when it appeared there was little outward advantage to do so. The author describes Emer's family as impoverished, in peril for their religious stance, and physically worn down. Yet none of these tribulations or others stopped Emer from following a prophet of God. He lived what Latter-day Saints call a consecrated life of devotion to the Lord. To this reviewer, this is best illustrated by his acceptance of a call to serve in the Cotton Mission in Southern Utah at age 81. Five years later, he was released at age 86. His statement, "determined to be for God & none else & with his assistance to do his will" captures the essence and purpose of his life.¹

Readers will discover in his biography that Emer received the first bound copy of the Book of Mormon. It was said that his brother Martin Harris, one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, picked up the book and presented it to him. After his conversion, Emer served an adventurous yet successful mission with Martin. Readers learn that following the mission, Emer's woodworking skill was needed to make window sashes for the Kirtland Temple, to build the circular staircase in the Nauvoo Temple, and so much more.

What is essential information in the biography is that when his brothers Martin and Preserved Harris backed away from their religious commitments, Emer clung to his faith. Recognizing his unwavering stance, he was told in a patriarchal blessing, "[B]ecause of the integrity of thy heart, thou hast not fainted in times of dissension & persecution, when every evil thing [h]as spoken against the church of the living God, thou has endured in faith, & the Lord is well [p]leased with thee . . . because thou art alone as it were in thy father's house; thy posterity shall be greatly blessed."² His posterity has been blessed as they have followed the pattern of faithfulness set by Emer Harris.

The second section in *Emer Harris & Dennison Lott Harris* features Dennison Harris. I was expecting to read a biography similar to that of his father, but was disappointed to find only one paragraph

1. Minutes of General Conference on 25 October 1831, in Orange, Cuyahoga County Ohio, in Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 21.

2. Wording and punctuation of Emer's patriarchal blessing taken from a copy of the blessing in Bradshaw's possession. A slightly edited version of the blessing can be found at "Emer Harris," Harris Family News (website), harrisfamilynews.com/direct_harris_emer.htm.

of biographical information. I reminded myself that this was not Bradshaw's purpose in writing, but I do hope it will be the focus of his next book.

Featured in the Dennison Harris section, subtitled "The Boy I Can Trust," are two events that occurred when Dennison was age 19. The first was his overhearing the Prophet Joseph Smith speak of the "Last Charge": "This day I am going to roll this kingdom off my shoulders on to the shoulders of these my brethren."³ The circumstances that led to Dennison being the only one outside of the Quorum of the Twelve to witness and record the "Last Charge" occurred one morning as he was riding in a wagon past Joseph Smith's Red Brick Store on Water Street in Nauvoo. Dennison was stopped by Willard Richards and asked if he would assist in filling barrels and buckets with water and haul them up to the second floor of the store for use in the endowment. After Dennison finished the task, he overheard the Prophet declare the "Last Charge." It appears this was before Joseph delivered the charge to the Twelve. The testimony of Dennison of this sacred event strengthened his resolve to follow the Twelve in their leadership of the Church.

The second event was Dennison's reporting of disaffected Church members plotting to take the life of Joseph Smith. On 15 May 1881, Dennison told the story of their plot to President Joseph F. Smith and George F. Gibbs. Gibbs recorded his words in shorthand, which were later transcribed. Readers will marvel anew at Dennison's courage to protect Joseph when his own life was threatened. Dennison's 1881 account had never been published in its entirety until Bradshaw undertook the task. To have the oft-repeated story in Dennison's words is of great worth to descendants and Church historians alike. What is most impressive about Bradshaw's presentation is the cautious manner in which he corrected mistakes of other historians. In this meticulous effort, Bradshaw shows his genius for scholarship and a willingness to acknowledge the good of past researchers.

What is truly exceptional about *Emer Harris & Dennison Lott Harris* is the inclusion of primary source material. Typically, biographical

3. See also Alexander L. Baugh and Richard N. Holzapfel, "I Roll the Burden and Responsibility of Leading this Church Off from My Shoulders on to Yours: The 1844–1845 Declaration of the Quorum of the Twelve Regarding Apostolic Succession," *BYU Studies* 49, no. 3 (July 2010), byustudies.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/49.3BaughHolzapfelRoll-009f90fd-632e-4d66-bf8b-066845335153.pdf.

books provide references in an endnote so that curious readers can follow the trail of the author's findings. Bradshaw did this and much more. Original documents—not just a few, but dozens—are scattered throughout the book. By any measure, Bradshaw's contribution to documenting history is not only commendable but laudable.

Readers will be surprised to find included in the documents a property deed of Emer Harris to Martin Harris issued on December 9, 1814, and the Emer Harris Book of Debt and Credit, 1816–1861. They will also find handwritten letters, a recipe for a poultice to ease soreness, and “William E. Rounds, Inheritors of Emer's Book.” Of particular interest will be a “Letter of Recommendation for Emer Harris written on October 26, 1831” because the original document no longer exists. Readers will enjoy pursuing photographs, artistic depictions, and period maps. Photographs of the false bottom chest, in which copies of the Book of Mormon were hid from a Missouri mob, will be of great interest.

The author freely acknowledges in endnotes his debt to scholars who have previously plowed the field of research on Emer and Dennison Harris. At least a third of the book is annotated endnotes and voluminous references. For descendants and Church historians, none will regret having this excellently crafted book on their library shelves.

Susan Easton Black *is an emeritus professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. She is also past associate dean of General Education and Honors and director of Church History in the Religious Studies Center. Dr. Black was the first woman to teach religion at BYU and the first woman to receive the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecturer Award for her research and writing, the highest award given a professor at BYU. She has authored, edited, and compiled more than 100 books and 250 articles, including several books related to Joseph Smith Jr. and the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She has served two missions for the Historic Sites Department, a mission as a psychologist for LDS Social Services, a mission to the Nauvoo Illinois Temple, and a mission in the St. George Temple Visitors's Center.*

