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Todd M. Compton, A Frontier Life: Jacob Hamblin, Explorer and Indian Missionary

Reviewed by Anne Hyde

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comprehensive in comparison. For instance, Smith’s opposing banks of pulpits is closely examined for their ideological and theological functions and practical use by the priesthood, but their use for religious services after the LDS people departed Kirtland, and particularly by contemporary RLDS members, is not discussed in detail. Neither are other physical aspects of the space—lighting, acoustics, seating, heating, cooling, or remodeling—examined. No floor plans are provided (although architectural elevations depicting the interior from two directions are), and only one interior photo, taken during a hymn service in 2008, is included in the book.

Nevertheless, *Kirtland Temple* provides an enlightening case study of the processes of contestation and negotiation in the development of sacred space and religious identity. Readers interested in these processes or in Mormonism itself will derive great benefit from this well-written and engaging book.


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**Reviewed by Anne Hyde**

**Todd Compton’s expansive new book, A Frontier Life: Jacob Hamblin, Explorer and Indian Missionary,** covers a period and subjects I care about: the early and mid-nineteenth century and Native people, Mormons, and Western exploration. Jacob Hamblin and his entire family were amazing
people—talented, resourceful, and faithful. Hamblin, one of those astonishing characters that appear everywhere in early Mormon History, was one of Brigham Young's most trusted and valued town builders and missionaries. Hamblin had his eyes on the Mountain Meadows Massacre, was involved in the efforts to clean it up, and took some responsibility for the children orphaned by the episode. His entire family helped spread Mormonism south and west. Hamblin, in particular, took on the politically and religiously challenging task of evangelizing local Utah Indians and the tribes farther south, including the Hopi and Navajo. Later in his life, because his proselytizing and town-building work took him through so much of what is now southern Utah and northern Arizona, Hamblin accompanied John Wesley Powell on his trip down the Colorado as a guide. Such an astonishing life deserves a big biography.

Compton’s big text is carefully written from a range of materials including diaries, journals, and family letters. It also makes use of the enormous wealth of LDS bureaucratic record keeping. The book focuses on Hamblin's adult life in Utah and on his career as town builder, missionary, and LDS insider in the early years of the LDS Church. He came to Utah in 1850, and like many Mormons, he and his family had suffered hunger and cold waiting to embark on that journey for nearly two years. His first wife left him, unwilling to undertake the move to unknown Salt Lake City. His second wife, Rachel, picked up the pieces and helped Jacob move their large combined family to Salt Lake. Almost immediately after their arrival, Brigham Young sent Jacob Hamblin to begin the project of converting the Indians.

We get a detailed, almost kaleidoscopic view of Mormon life in raw and isolated southern Utah in the 1850s and 1860s. We see where Hamblin went, who went with him, what they did, ate, and said. Compton provides a wealth of evidence for the details of Hamblin’s daily life and the astonishing range of places he went. After reading the book, I had new respect for the difficulty of daily life and the kind of confident faith and personal bravery it took to leave the edges of the Mormon world and travel into Indian country. Exploring and establishing new communities like Lee’s Ferry and Callville, places filled with Native groups who
didn’t particularly want Anglo or Mormon communities near them, was challenging work. Hamblin did it the old-fashioned way; he built relationships with local Indians and learned to speak to them. His goal, however, was not neighborliness, but conversion and access to Indian water sources and land.

By Compton’s account, Hamblin never questioned the value or morality of what he was doing. Bringing Indian people into the Mormon fold was the right thing to do. It didn’t matter whether his own family suffered terribly while he was gone or if he lied to or threatened Indian guides and allies. Some of these trading and missionary expeditions went badly, leading to waves of raiding from the Paiutes and Navajos. Hamblin didn’t take children, grab horses and supplies, or insult Indians because he was a slave to Brigham Young or Mormon authority; he did them because he had a series of visions that instructed his actions.

I don’t blame Hamblin for being a man of his time or someone with missionary surety. Here’s where I want Compton to be more than a reporter providing a welter of detail that can obscure other aspects of this important story. His objective style works well to let us understand Hamblin in his own context, but Compton doesn’t provide us with enough context to understand the big picture of Indian relations in the region and Mormon and Native roles in creating these relations. For example, when we accompany Hamblin on various missionary expeditions, we see, from his perspective, Indians who are naked and hungry and godless—the very definition of wretched. They did look this way to Hamblin, and he very much wanted to clothe them and preach to them. But were they wretched? What is the context for this? The historian’s task is to provide the context required to understand what is being described. What kinds of lives did Goshutes or Hopis or Paiutes lead? How would their material and religious values differ from or speak to nineteenth-century Mormon ones? In the same way, I think we need to understand more about Hamblin’s own religious views and how similar and different they were from those of other Mormons and other Americans.

Hamblin often gets credit for being a great peacemaker in a violent period of Western American history. Compton does a good job of
complicating that story by demonstrating the varied motives that drove Hamblin and his LDS superiors and by pointing out that most of these missionary efforts failed by nearly any measure. Once the Indians realized the Mormons would not help them in their wars with other Indians and that the Mormons wanted and would take their water, relationships ended. The results, Compton says, were inevitable. In the end, he concludes that “all an Indian missionary could do would be to help both Indians and white settlers adjust to the process in a human and non-violent way.”

Again, I wanted Compton to step out from the safe position of using his sources to report—that is, providing his readers with more analysis of why things happened the way they did. In this way, readers can better understand how this very interesting character that Compton carefully details for us might have mattered in the past and into the present, a useful goal for all historians.


Reviewed by Colleen McDannell

Will we ever get enough of polygamy? Just as the textual Book of Mormon is now eternally tied to the Broadway musical The Book of Mormon, so the television show Big Love, fundamentalist Mormons, and the controversies over gay marriage lead us back to nineteenth-century polygamy. Keeping attention on alternative family patterns means Latter-day Saint history will always be a part of the cultural discussion. Christine Talbot’s A Foreign Kingdom is a masterful addition to that conversation.