

Ronald O. Barney. *The Mormon Vanguard
Brigade of 1847: Norton Jacob's Record.*

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005

Reviewed by William G. Hartley

In *The Mormon Vanguard Brigade of 1847*, Ronald Barney and Utah State University Press have published the valuable Norton Jacob diary account of the historic 1847 trek. Because of excellent transcriptions and extensive annotations, this might well be the best published version of any of the 1847 pioneer diaries. The manuscript diary, donated to the LDS Church Archives by family members in 1949, is part of the book *The Record of Norton Jacob*, privately published (and not widely circulated) in 1949.¹

Among key historic events of the American West, the 1847 Mormon vanguard trek is one of the best documented. At least 24 of the nearly 150 pioneers kept diaries, or almost 1 in 6. Most have been published. Arguably the best two diaries were those kept by company clerks Thomas Bullock and William Clayton. Will Bagley recently edited and published Bullock's diary in *The Pioneer Camp of the Saints: The 1846 and 1847 Mormon Trail Journals of Thomas Bullock*.² Well transcribed and moderately annotated, it earned a best book award from the Mormon History Association. George D. Smith edited and published Clayton's diary in *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton*.³ Smith, not an expert in western history, provided little annotation. As a manuscript, Norton Jacob's diary perhaps ranks behind the Bullock and Clayton diaries in importance and coverage, but I believe that Barney's masterful annotation pushes this volume to the top of the list.

Barney, a historian and archivist at the LDS Church Archives, has served on the Mormon History Association council. Prior to this book, he authored an award-winning biography, *One Side by Himself*, about his ancestor Lewis Barney (likewise a diarist in the 1847 vanguard group).

Structurally, *Mormon Vanguard Brigade* flows smoothly. It begins with a brief life summary of the diarist. Norton Jacob was born in Sheffield, Massachusetts, in 1804; joined the LDS Church in Illinois in 1841 at age thirty-six; and died in Glenwood, Utah, in 1879. Next, the book

provides Jacob's reminiscence up to 1844 and contains diary entries from 1844 to 1846. Then comes the heart of the book, the diary of the great trek. Barney presents the trip entries by month, each month forming a separate installment (chapter). He begins each installment with an introductory summation of what occurred that month in the diary entries. After the trek coverage, the book provides diary accounts detailing Jacob's return trip from the Great Salt Lake Valley to Winter Quarters. Finally, diary entries and writings for 1848 through 1852 conclude the book. A useful appendix contains the Jacob genealogy, a list of the 1847 vanguard company members, biographical sketches for each person mentioned in Jacob's writings, and a thorough bibliography and index.

This publication makes several contributions to the literature on the 1847 vanguard company. First, the information in this diary is priceless. Regarding Jacob's 1847 diary, trail bibliographer Merrill J. Mattes, in his *Platte River Road Narratives*, says that "though less publicized than Clayton's and Egan's, [Jacob's diary] is exceptional in the keenness of observations and richness of detail."⁴ One example is Jacob's May 6, 1847, entry in which he mentions in passing the wildlife he encountered: buffalo, elk, a horse, dogs, a white wolf, and a calf (128–29). Best of all, Barney provides a meticulous transcription of the handwritten original. His introduction details the editing standards he carefully followed.

Second, Barney's annotations alone are worth the price of the book. His extensive notes at times are mini-histories and in-depth explanations of practices, events, places, and people. As one example, Jacob's entry for July 28 summarizes comments Brigham Young made about spirits entering their mortal bodies during pregnancy, to which Barney, in a note, cites another pioneer's summary (John Brown's) that indicates Young said the spirit enters the infant tabernacle inside the mother at the time she first feels life (230 n. 161).

Third, Barney's commentary in notes leads readers to the best and most recent scholarship on matters discussed in the diary. Mastery of the secondary literature, as well as primary sources, is evident throughout. He utilizes, for example, recent studies regarding mountain fever, odometers, rebaptism, and trail sites and locations. Other published 1847 trail diaries' references to secondary studies pale in comparison. Barney's notes provide a comprehensive guide for further reading and research.

Fourth, Barney's notes contain his own observations and interpretations as a historian. He challenges, for example, trail expert Stan Kimball's assertion that the 1847 vanguard company followed existing routes and blazed "less than one mile" of trail. Barney notes that in several trail sections the vanguard "plotted new courses on the old roads," and when

tracks or traces of routes in some places “proved negligible or were not conducive to travel by a large body,” at “numerous times” the vanguard “had to innovate” (137 n. 88).

About half of the 1847 pioneers, including Brigham Young, left the Great Salt Lake Valley and returned to Winter Quarters that same year. Jacob’s account of his group’s return, along with Bullock’s, are the best we have of that part of the story. Also, Jacob’s entries for 1848 through 1852, though less frequent and detailed, are useful documentary sources relating to events during those years.

In the book’s introduction, Barney states that Jacob’s diary provides a “blue collar” view of the trek by one who was not part of the leadership circle. Hence, we expect to be shown differences that Jacob’s point of view provides. Without the other 1847 diaries side by side for comparison, readers cannot sense what Jacob records that is different from or contributes more than the other diaries, and it is something Barney should have mentioned. We need more examples like one he put in note 151 on page 227, where he observes that, while Clayton, Bullock, Egan, and Jackman recorded some of Brigham Young’s extensive comments on July 27, “Jacob’s and Wilford Woodruff’s accounts of Young’s speech are the most extensive that are extant.”

Barney’s annotations are not intended to provide a detailed site and route guide. For such information he advises readers (98 n. 16 and 17) to consult published trail guides and to examine detail maps on file with the National Park Services trails office in Salt Lake City, which maps Stan Kimball and other trail historians helped chart.

USU Press dressed this book well. It has a handsome cover, pleasant layout and typeface, good formatting, and, thankfully, footnotes at the bottom of the pages, not endnotes. The book features cleanly drawn maps by Tom Child. (However, a map showing the vanguard company’s first locations in Salt Lake City relative to today’s streets would have been helpful.)

Substantive histories, as opposed to diaries, of the epic 1847 pioneers’ venture are rare. Preston Nibley’s narrated centennial history for Mormons, *Exodus to Greatness*, provides but a chronicle of the 1847 venture.⁵ E. Cecil McGavin’s *The Mormon Pioneers* gives a basic narrative for the popular Latter-day Saint audience.⁶ Wallace Stegner’s *The Gathering of Zion* is a well-written story and insightful assessment for a national audience but is drawn from limited sources and is more journalistic than honed history.⁷ For the trek’s sesquicentennial, Richard E. Bennett published *We’ll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846–1848*, which devotes four thoughtful, analytical, superbly documented chapters to the vanguard story.⁸ His is

the most historically solid narration yet produced. A popular, vignette-filled, day-by-day account and trail guide is Hal Knight and Stan Kimball's *111 Days to Zion*.⁹ Similarly, in *Saints Find the Place*, compiler David R. Crockett created a day-by-day account that marshals diary excerpts for each day mixed with his own short commentaries.¹⁰ Several Mormon Trail books with text and photographs also have been published.

Within this lineup of published diaries, chronicles, histories, and popular renderings, *The Mormon Vanguard Brigade* offers not only a premier 1847 trek diary that is well edited, but when Barney's rich annotations are read along with the diary, readers also become absorbed in an in-depth history of the vanguard experience.

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1. C. Edward Jacob and Ruth S. Jacob, eds., *The Record of Norton Jacob* (Salt Lake City: Norton Jacob Family Association, 1949).

2. Will Bagley, *The Pioneer Camp of the Saints: The 1846 and 1847 Mormon Trail Journals of Thomas Bullock* (Spokane, Wash.: Arthur H. Clark, 1997), 111–234.

3. George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995).

4. Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives: A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, Montana, and Other Western States and Territories, 1812–1866* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 101.

5. Preston Nibley, *Exodus to Greatness: The Story of the Mormon Migration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1947).

6. E. Cecil McGavin, *The Mormon Pioneers* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1947).

7. Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

8. Richard E. Bennett, *We'll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846–1848* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).

9. Hal Knight and Stanley B. Kimball, *111 Days to Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1978).

10. David R. Crockett, *Saints Find the Place: A Day-by-Day-Pioneer Experience* (Tucson, Ariz.: LDS Gems Press, 1997).