

McLELLIN JOURNAL FINALLY IS LOCATED

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Brent Ashworth's Find

PROVO — Brent Ashworth found a long-lost notebook of one of the earliest and most controversial general authorities of the LDS Church. The rediscovery of what Ashworth believes is a notebook of William E. McLellin, an excommunicated Mormon apostle, also brings closure to a central part of the forgery schemes of convicted murderer Mark Hofmann.

Hofmann's Forgeries

Ashworth, an attorney and a collector of Mormon and other historical memorabilia, remembers the first time he heard about Hofmann's "McLellin collection." In 1981 Hofmann often cited the collection as a catchall source to bolster his document forgeries' credibility — and price. Ashworth lost thousands of dollars in cash and in real documents traded to Hofmann for forgeries.

Hofmann contended the collection held many documents that would be embarrassing to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As time went on the stories became more elaborate until Hofmann simultaneously sold the collection to two people and tried to sell it to Ashworth

"That's sort of what happened in the evolution of Hofmann. People started buying things sight unseen, including myself, because he was coming up with such great stuff," Ashworth said. "He offered (the McLellin collection) to everybody, but I didn't have the \$185,000 he wanted at the time."

The elaborate scheme fell apart in October 1985 after Hofmann murdered Steve Christensen and Kathleen Sheets with pipe bombs and a third bomb accidentally went off in his own car. Hofmann's McLellin collection was a fraud — a figment of Hofmann's imagination.

The Real McLellin

But even though Hofmann's collection was fictional, there was a William McLellin who did keep journals and notebooks. But in October 1985 nobody knew those items still existed.

McLellin joined the Mormons in 1831 and kept a journal almost from the beginning. He was an original member of the church's Quorum of the Twelve but was excommunicated in 1838.

After he left the church he tried unsuccessfully to persuade David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon, to take leadership of a new church more to McLellin's liking. Whitmer refused.

McLellin became an outspoken critic of the LDS Church and, to a lesser extent, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now the Community of Christ). He wrote his beliefs and recollections in several notebooks. Those records were given to a family friend, John Traughber, after McLellin died in 1883. That friend sold some of them 25 years later for \$50 to the LDS Church.

They were forgotten until after Hofmann's arrest in 1985.

Some of McLellin's real papers were discovered in Texas, and soon after that the items sold to the LDS Church in 1908 were found. There was a real McLellin collection after all.

"The Journals of William E. McLellin 1831-1836" was published in 1994 by BYU Studies and the University of Illinois Press. This was followed by "The William E. McLellin Papers 1854-1880," published by Signature Books in 2007.

The Find

But one piece was missing.

There was a record of two partial pages of one McLellin notebook. Those pages had been photographed probably in the 1920s. An excerpt from those same pages appeared in an RLDS Church newspaper in 1929. But by the time "The William E. McLellin Papers" was published it was thought the notebook was "not extant."

Ashworth, however, was always on the lookout for McLellin materials and hoped to find the lost notebook. After about 20 years he finally did so.

The Provenance

"The notebook has an excellent provenance, going back to the beginning of the last century," Ashworth said. "And it's pretty hard to argue with the photographs (taken of the notebook in the 1920s)."

Ashworth said the evidence implies that the notebook came from McLellin's widow in Missouri who

had joined the RLDS Church. Ashworth believes that she gave or sold the book to someone named W.O. Robertson, who has two signature stamps in the notebook. Robertson then sold it to John Resch in 1919, according to an inscription and signature. Resch then sold it to RLDS apostle Paul M. Hanson who put excerpts into a 1929 newspaper.

The notebook remained in the family until a trusted contact of Ashworth's brought it to his attention this summer.

Description

The notebook is about 6 by 8 inches and 266 pages long. It is filled from binding to page edges with the fine and clear handwriting of a teacher of penmanship. McLellin wrote in it in 1871 and 1872. The notebook has a detailed index of the many subjects it contains.

"My opinion is he was trying to write a book. And this is written with more care than some of his other notebooks. I think he was actually trying to put a book together," Ashworth said.

Positive or Negative?

Hofmann's fictional McLellin collection was claimed to be devastating to the LDS Church and Joseph Smith's reputation. Ashworth believes the evidence shows that this is a real notebook of McLellin's. Although it does contain some pointed criticisms of the church, they are similar to those already published in "The William E. McLellin Papers."

Ashworth, however, sees the notebook as one of the most significant finds in the past 50 years because of an unexpected element: McLellin's faith in the Book of Mor-

mon.

The notebook puts a story in context that was only partially known through the photograph and excerpt from the 1920s. McLellin asks his readers a question in a section titled, "The Testimony of Men." He says the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon, who said they saw an angel, "either told the truth or they willfully lied. How shall we tell which, how shall we know?"

The Witnesses

McLellin then recounts a story of meeting two of the witnesses, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, in July 1833 in Missouri. McLellin and the two were in danger of their lives from anti-Mormon mobs. McLellin wrote:

"I said to them, 'Brethren, I never have seen an open vision in my life, but you men say you have, and therefore you positively know. Now, you know that our lives are in danger every hour, if the mob can only catch us. Tell me, in the fear of God, is that Book of Mormon true?' Cowdery looked at me with solemnity depicted in his face and said: 'Brother William, God sent his holy angel to declare the truth of the translation of it to us, and therefore we know. And though the mob kill us, yet we must die declaring its truth.' David said: 'Oliver has told you the solemn truth, for we could not be deceived. I most truly declare to you its truth!!' Said I: 'Boys, I believe you. I can see no object for you to tell me falsehood now, when our lives are endangered.' " (punctuation modernized)

Ashworth said: "This 'apostate' had a rock-solid testimony of the Book of Mormon. And you can extrapolate his belief in Joseph Smith. Obviously he believed Joseph Smith was a prophet at the begin-

ning of the church."

Joseph Smith as a Student

Another surprise is McLellin's description of Joseph Smith as a student in McLellin's "High school" he taught during the winter of 1834. McLellin wrote: "I learned the strength of his mind as to the study and principles of science. ... And I here say that he had one of the strongest and well-balanced, penetrating and retentive minds of any man with whom I ever formed an acquaintance."

Harvard Heath, a historian who has seen the notebook, said, "I don't think we've had too many individuals who write about the LDS Church from a former-member standpoint that wrote so articulately — his grammar and his way of expressing himself in this journal is rather remarkable for its time."

Publication Prospect

Ashworth is hoping to have the notebook published soon, and at least one publisher has shown interest. This will fulfill McLellin's aim to produce a book and Ashworth's goal to share his discovery with others.

The discovery and eventual publication of the notebook likely also will have another impact. Both Ashworth and McLellin have been living to some extent under Hofmann's shadow of lies, forgeries and schemes. Ashworth hopes that will change.

"I think that it's kind of ironic that I would be the one to find this last lost journal. That seems to me to be more than just coincidental," Ashworth said. "It kind of puts an end to the speculation that Hofmann began."