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‘The Testimony of Men’: William E. McLellin and the Book of Mormon Witnesses

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Abstract: William E. McLellin (1806-1883) was an early Mormon apostle who later left the church. In his later years he questioned the authority of founder Joseph Smith, but he always said he believed that the Book of Mormon was truly the word of God. In 1871 he wrote a notebook in which he recorded his contacts with men who had filled special roles as Book of Mormon witnesses in 1829. McLellin described his 1833 interview of Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, his circa-1850 visit with Martin Harris, his 1869 visit with John Whitmer, and a report of an 1833 event involving Hiram Page. Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Harris steadfastly reaffirmed that they had handled the Book of Mormon plates and were visited by an angel. John Whitmer and Page reaffirmed that they had handled the plates. All continually testified that they believed the Book of Mormon to be the word of God. McLellin’s 1871 notebook was thought to be lost but is in fact extant, in a private collection. This article includes photographs of four pages of the notebook. The entire notebook will be presented in William E. McLellin’s Lost Manuscript, to be published in 2011.



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“The Testimony of Men”

William E. McLellin and the Book of Mormon Witnesses

Mitchell K. Schaefer

A recently discovered circa 1871 manuscript written by William McLellin, an early Mormon Apostle and, later, apostate, includes a passage that narrates how, in 1833, he engaged two of the three and one of the eight witnesses of the Book of Mormon about the nature of their experiences as witnesses. The testimonies of the witnesses printed in each copy of the Book of Mormon are some of the most compelling evidence in favor of its miraculous revelation and translation. For believers, this evidence approaches proof of Joseph Smith’s miraculous claims. But some have questioned the nature of the testimonies and made a strong counterargument that what the witnesses experienced was solely supernatural and not, therefore, credible. The witnesses, this argument asserts, only experienced the plates via an unverifiable subjective experience, rendering their statements void.

Historians have generally adopted one of two interpretations of the historical record by and about the Book of Mormon witnesses. Historians who believe the statements of the witnesses as credible usually focus foremost on the original testimonies published in the Book of Mormon and on the witnesses’ fidelity to their statements despite dissent and disaffection by many of them from the Church itself. The leading historian espousing this interpretation of the evidence is Richard Lloyd Anderson. In his work *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, Anderson holds that despite the fact that the witnesses left the Church at one point or another, they never denied their testimonies of the events that solidified their belief in

the Book of Mormon.¹ More recently, scholars including Dan Peterson and Scott Faulring have also defended the evidence that the witnesses unflinchingly maintained their testimonies.²

Dan Vogel articulated a counterargument, namely that the accounts of the three and eight witnesses are unreliably subjective and cannot be taken at face value.³ This interpretation focuses on the varied and complex body of second- or thirdhand evidence to build an alternative interpretation to the one that emerges from the witnesses' direct statements and from Anderson's scholarship.

The purpose of this publication is to facilitate access to William McLellin's contribution to the historical record, a remarkable piece of little-known secondhand evidence, for consideration by everyone interested in the witnesses and the history and nature of their testimonies. McLellin held a peculiar position relative to the Book of Mormon witnesses. From his first knowledge of the Book of Mormon in the summer of 1831 until his last known writings nearly a half-century later, he affirmed his faith in the testimony of the Book of Mormon witnesses based on his personal experiences with them. When James Cobb, a Salt Lake City resident antagonistic to Mormonism, wrote to McLellin in August 1880 seeking evidence to undermine the Book of Mormon, McLellin wrote back, adamantly assuring Cobb that when he had last seen David Whitmer in 1879, Whitmer testified "to the truth of the book—as sincerely and solemnly as when he bore it to me in Paris, Ill. in July 1831. I believed him then and still believe him."⁴

William E. McLellin and the Book of Mormon Witnesses

When William E. McLellin first heard the message of the restored gospel in 1831, it came from the mouths of Harvey Whitlock and Book of

1. Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); see also Richard L. Anderson, "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 18–31.

2. For example, see Dan Peterson, review of *Mormonism*, by Kurt Van Gardon, *FARMS Review* 8, no. 1 (1996): 95–103; Scott Faulring, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," in *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006): 321–62. Both of these articles and more are available at maxwellinstitute.byu.edu.

3. Dan Vogel, "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 79–121.

4. Stan Larsen and Samuel J. Passey, eds., *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854–1880* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007), 522.

Mormon witness David Whitmer. McLellin recorded in his journal that after Whitlock preached about the Book of Mormon and explained why he believed it was a divine revelation, “D[avid] Whitmer then arose and bore testimony to having seen an Holy Angel who had made known the truth of [the Book of Mormon] to him.”⁵ McLellin followed the Mormon missionaries to Independence, Missouri, where, after interviewing other witnesses and learning more from the Book of Mormon itself, he felt compelled to pray for his own testimony of it. In his August 20, 1831, journal entry he recorded, “I rose early and betook myself to earnest prayr to God to direct me into truth; and from all the light that I could gain by examinations searches and researches I was bound as an honest man to acknowledge the truth and Validity of the book of Mormon.”⁶ As McLellin’s journey through Mormonism progressed, he also bore testimony of Joseph Smith’s calling and authority. Nearly a year after his baptism, McLellin wrote to his relatives that he had spent about three weeks with Joseph, “and from my acquaintance then and until now I can truely say I believe him to be a man of God. A Prophet, a Seer and Revelater to the church of christ.” Later in the same letter, McLellin related, “We belive that Joseph Smith is a true Prophet or Seer of the Lord and that he has power and does receive revelations from God, and that these revelations when received are of divine Authority in the church of Christ.”⁷ In 1835, the Book of Mormon’s three witnesses chose McLellin as one of twelve Apostles. But McLellin’s formal affiliation with the Church apparently ended in May 1838 when a bishop’s council heard his confession that he had “indulged himself in his lustful desires” after hearing that “the heads of the Church . . . had transgressed, and got out of the way.”⁸

Certainly after and perhaps even before leaving the Church, McLellin questioned his earlier conviction of Joseph’s authority and the integrity of his revelations. It is the more remarkable, then, that his conviction of the Book of Mormon endured for the remaining half century of his life. Nothing in his lifetime of writing casts doubt on or dismisses his early and profound experience with the Book of Mormon and its witnesses. The document below records yet another event in McLellin’s life, not mentioned in his other writings, that further solidified his faith in the Book of Mormon. In this document, McLellin narrates a harrowing experience as the Saints

5. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 29.

6. Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 33.

7. Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 79–84.

8. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 268.

were forced from Jackson County in the summer of 1833. McLellin, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer feared for their lives and made a covert escape through the woods. McLellin recounted the testimony he elicited from Whitmer and Cowdery in this circumstance and then added his own views about it. McLellin recorded his account of these events sometime between January 4, 1871, and January 15, 1872. Historian D. Michael Quinn has demonstrated that at times McLellin attempted, through his later writings, to remove himself from history and place himself almost as an omniscient being, watching as others, such as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, acted in history.⁹ That indeed seems characteristic of McLellin's later writings, including the 264-page manuscript from which the pages cited here are taken. But in this brief narrative McLellin resumes the characteristic trait of his earlier missionary journals and earlier writings. He writes of himself as one of the historical actors. This document places McLellin back in the thick of the dramatic history as a witness of the Book of Mormon witnesses, and it does so in his own words.

William E. McLellin's Papers

In 1994, Jan Shippo and John Welch published McLellin's missionary journals as *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*.¹⁰ In 2007, Stan Larsen and Samuel Passey published McLellin's later manuscripts and letters in *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854–1880*. Larsen and Passey compiled McLellin's seven known notebooks in chronological order. They designated the 1871 notebook as Notebook 2 and titled it "On the Testimony of Book of Mormon Witnesses."¹¹ However, the copy of the record Larsen and Passey worked from was made in 1929 and is incomplete. They worked from photographs of the original document made in 1929 by C. Edward Miller, church historian of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ). The poor images captured only partially the text on pages 166 and 167 of the original manuscript and proved difficult to decipher. Larsen and Passey also state, "In 1929, Paul M. Hanson quoted [in an article, 'Unwavering Testimony,' published in the *Saints' Herald*] from pages 166–67 of this particular notebook and added that it consisted of 264 pages and bore the date of 15 January 1872." Larsen and Passey claimed Notebook 2 was no longer extant, and as a result

9. D. Michael Quinn, "My Eyes Were Holden in Those Days': A Study of Selective Memory," in Larsen and Passey, *William E. McLellin Papers*, 59–82.

10. Shippo and Welch's volume won the Steven F. Christensen Best Documentary Award from the Mormon History Association.

11. Larsen and Passey, *William E. McLellin Papers*, 253–55.

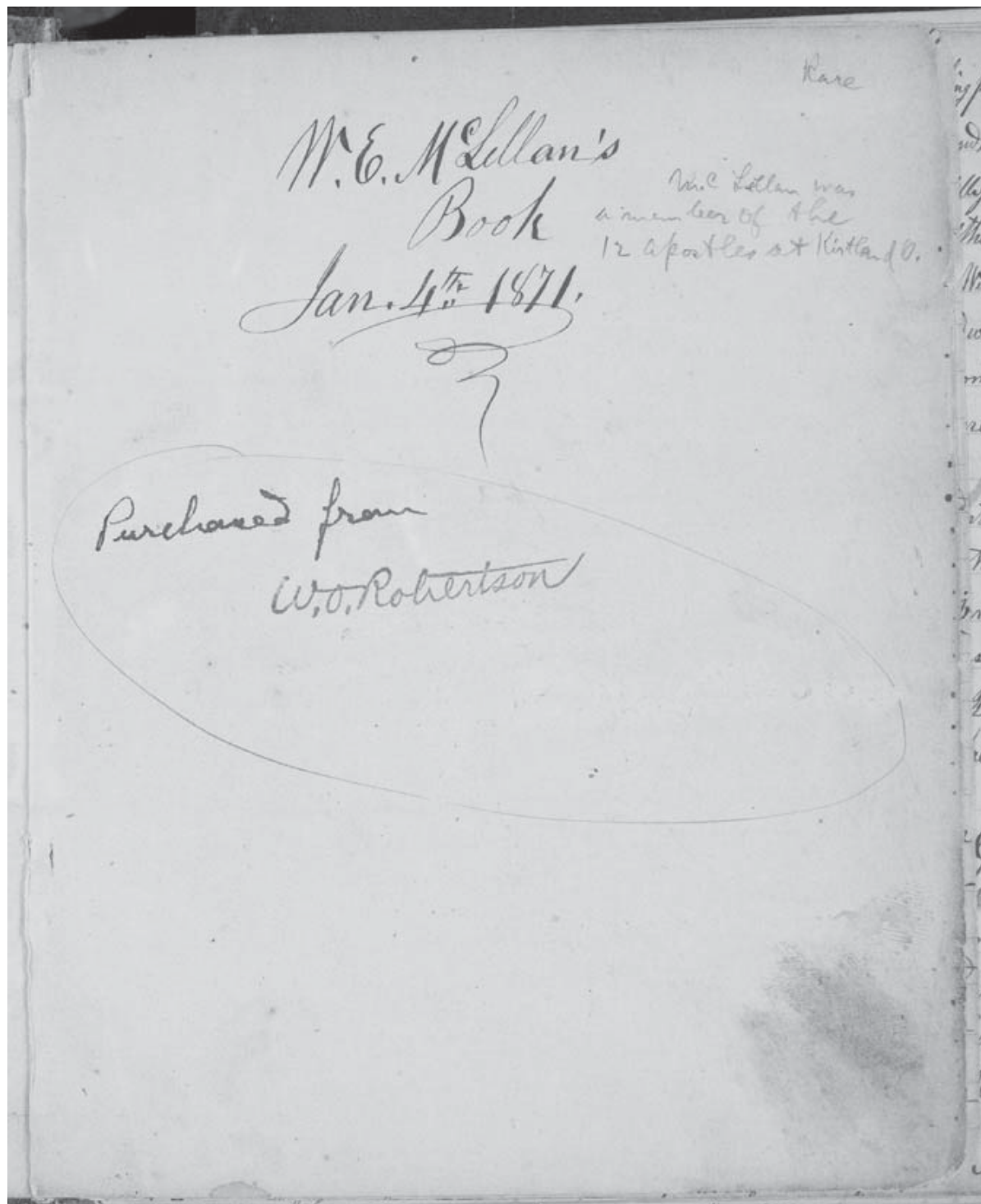
the portion of Notebook 2 they published is very small compared to the entirety of the original work.¹² Fortunately, this notebook is in fact extant. All 264 pages are intact and legible and a scholarly edition, titled *William E. McLellin's Lost Manuscript* (Eborn Books, 2011), is soon forthcoming. The document that follows is a transcription of the original pages 165–67 of the manuscript of McLellin's Notebook 2.¹³ The manuscript is in the private collection of Brent F. Ashworth.

McLellin wrote the account transcribed below and made many editorial markings and changes. The editorial method and transcription symbols for this document have been borrowed from the Joseph Smith Papers Project.¹⁴ Text that Larson and Passey were not able to include in their edition is set in **bold** typeface for easy identification. Though this document is brief, it contains valuable information pertinent to Mormon history, to McLellin's life, and to the experiences and testimonies of Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, David Whitmer, Hiram Page, and John Whitmer, all of whom are mentioned in it. McLellin's manuscript may be the only documentation of the events told therein, and as a result this account stands as a vital part of the historical record.

12. Larsen and Passey, *William E. McLellin Papers*, xvi.

13. The edge of page 167 was damaged after this transcript was made.

14. Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1*, lxii–lxiv; Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford and Steven C. Harper, *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Transcriptions, Manuscript Revelation Books* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009): xxxiv–xxxv.



Cover page of W. E. McLellan's Book, circa 1871, written by William E. McLellan, from the private collection of Brent F. Ashworth. All photos courtesy Brent F. Ashworth.

165
with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precepts of men: therefore behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, yea a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid." All the above is plain and pointed, and cannot refer to any other circumstance so plainly as the coming forth of the book of Mormon. And to that it does refer specially and pointedly.

10. When old Jacob was blessing Joseph's sons between his knees, he said of Ephraim, "And his seed shall become a multitude of nations." No where on this wide earth can Ephraim be traced into a "multitude of nations," except the Indians of North and South America, that multitude. And this accords with what old Jacob said in blessing Joseph as the progenitor, and head of one of the twelve tribes. He said, "The blessing of thy Father have prevailed above the blessing of my progenitors, unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills." The utmost bound from Goshen in Egypt to its farthest point east or west, would be in America, would be the Rocky mountains. Now we will hear Moses, the man of God, when he put his last blessing on the tribes. He thus said specially to Joseph, "Blessed of the Lord be Joseph's land. For the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof." No man can apply this passage so as to make sense unless it applies to Ephraim, according to the book of Mormon, and the Indians in our American land. It is the only continent where the earth contains a fulness. Where all fowl of every wing, all fruits of every tropic, all beasts and reptiles of all grades, and the "earth and its fulness," can be found. Can't find it on any continent on earth except the American. And the vast American continent, where the Indians have roamed for many a century, runs from the straits of Magellan in the south, to the North Pole, containing a fulness."

The Testimony of men.

11. In open daylight, in an open wood lot, with their sensitive powers all calm and serene, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris testify that an angel of glorified

166.
appearance and countenance came down from heaven, and stood before them, and took the
the plates which Joseph Smith had possessed, from which he had translated the Book, and held
them in his hand, and showed as many of the ^{the} leaves or plates as Joseph had translated, ^{read the translation of the book} to them. ^{the angel} ^{completed}
so that they saw, and looked upon them until they were entirely satisfied. And he spoke to David
Whitmer and said, "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keepeth his commandments." These men
saw his form, saw his glorified appearance, heard his words, saw all that he showed them, and
then saw him ascend to heaven again. This was no collusion. These men could not be mistaken.
They either told the truth, or they wilfully lied. How shall we tell which, how shall we know?
This vision was in 1829. More than forty years ago, and what has been the conduct of those men
since that day? Two of them are dead - ^{and yet} two living. Those who are dead testified to the last hour
of their lives to the truth of their vision. Those who are still living are firm in their testimony.
I visited David Whitmer after he was more than 65 years of age, and solemnly declared to me
"I saw the Angel of God, I heard his voice, hence I know of a truth! Martin Harris is some over
89 years of age, and still he carries the book of Mormon under his arm, and testifies to all
great and small, 'I saw Martin Harris in all the world, and I know the book of Mormon
to be verily true. And although all men should deny the truth of that book, I dare not do it. My heart
is fixed. O God, my heart is fixed! I could not know more truly or certainly than I do!"
13. In 1833, when molting reigned triumphant in Jackson Co. Mo. I and O. Cowdery fled
from our homes, for fear of personal violence on Saturday the 20th day of July. The mob
dispersed, agreeing to meet again on the next Tuesday. They offered eighty dollars reward
for any one who would deliver Cowdery or McLellan in Independence on Tuesday. On Monday
I slipped down into the Whitmer's settlement, and there in the lonely woods I met with David Whit-
mer and Oliver Cowdery. 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? Cowdrey 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 then for 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 false now, when our lives are endangered. Eight men testify also to handling that sacred pile of plates, from which Joseph Smith ^{was the} translated that heavenly Book.

13. One circumstance I'll relate of one of these eight witnesses. While the mob was raging in Jackson Co. Mo. in 1833 some young men ran down Hiram Page ^{in the woods} ^{witnesses}, one of the eight, and commenced beating and pounding him with whips and clubs. He begged, but there was no mercy. They said he was a damned Mormon, and they meant to beat him to death! But finally one of them said to him, if you will deny that damned book, we will let you go. said he, how can I deny what I know to be true? Then they pounded him again. When they thought he was about to breathe his last, they said to him, Now what do you think of your God, when he don't save you? With said he, I believe in God — Well, said one of the most intelligent among them, I believe a damned fool will die to it though we kill him. Let us let him go. But his life was nearly run out. He was confined to his bed for a length of time. So much for a man who knows for himself, knowledge is beyond faith or doubt. It is positive certainty.

14. In company with friend, visited one of the eight witnesses ^{in 1869} — the only one who is now alive, and he bore a very lucid and rational testimony, and gave us many interesting particulars. He was a young man when he had those testimonies. He is now sixty eight years old, and still he is firm in his faith. Now I would ask what will I do with such a cloud of faithful witnesses, bearing such a rational and yet solemn testimony? These men while in the prime of life, saw the vision of the angel, and bore their testimony to all people. And eight men saw the plates, and handled them. Hence these men all know the things they declared to be positively true. And that too while they were young, and now when do they declare the same things.

“The Testimony of Men,” an excerpt from W. E. McLellan’s Book, circa 1871¹⁵

The Testimony of men.

11. In open day light, in an open wood lot, with their sensitive powers all calm and serene, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris testify that an angel of glorified [*end p. 165*] appearance and countenance came down from heaven, and stood before them, and took the the plates which Joseph Smith had possessed, from which he had translated <read <off> the translation of the book> the Book, and held them in his hand, and showed as many of <the> leaves or plates as Joseph had translated <completed>, to them. So that they saw, and looked upon them until they were entirely satisfied. And he <the angel> spoke to David Whitmer and said, “David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keepeth his commandments.” These men saw his form, saw his glorified appearance, heard his words, saw all that he showed them, and then saw him ascend to heaven again. This was no collusion. These men could not be mistaken. They either told the truth, or they wilfully lied. How **shall we tell which, how shall** we know? This vision was in 1829. More than forty years ago, and what has been the conduct of those men since that day? Two of them are dead— <and probably> two living.¹⁶ Those who are dead testified to the last hour of their lives of to the truth of their vision. Those who are still living are firm in their testimony. I visited David Whitmer after he was more than 65 years of age, and <he> solemnly declared to me “I saw the angel of God, I heard his voice, hence I know of a truth! Martin Harris is some over 89¹⁷ years of age, and still he carries the book of Mormon under his arm, and testifies to all great and small, “I am Martin Harris in all the world, and I know the book of Mormon to be verily true. And although all men should deny the truth of that book, I dare not do it. My heart is fixed. O God, my heart is fixed! I could not know more truly or certainly than I do.”

15. McLellan titled this notebook W. E. McLellan’s Book. McLellan himself wrote his name with variant spellings.

16. Joseph Smith Jr. died in Carthage, Illinois, on June 27, 1844, and Oliver Cowdery died in Richmond, Missouri, on March 3, 1850. Martin Harris and David Whitmer were the two witnesses of the Book of Mormon plates still alive when McLellan wrote. Harris and Whitmer died on July 10, 1875, and January 25, 1888, respectively. Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1*, 405, 412, 446.

17. Harris was most likely eighty-eight at the time of McLellan’s writing.

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13. One circumstance I'll relate of one of these eight witnesses. While the mob was raging in Jackson Co. Mo. in 1833 some young men ran down Hiram Page <in the woods> one of the eight <witnesses,> and commenced beating and pounding him with whips and clubs. He begged, but there was no mercy. They said he was <a> damned Mormon, and they meant to beat him to death! But finally one then said to him, if you will deny that damned book, we will let you go. Said he, how can I deny what I know to be true? Then they pounded him again. When they thought he was about to breathe his last, they said to him, Now what do you think of your God, when he dont save you? **Well said he, I believe in God—Well, said one of the most intelligent among them, I believe the damned fool will stick to it though we kill him. Let us let him go. But his life was nearly run out. He was confined to his bed for a length of time. So much for a man who knows for himself. Knowledge is beyond faith or doubt. It is positive certainty.**

14. I in company with <a> friend, <I> visited one of the eight witnesses <in 1869>—the only one who is now alive, and he bore a very lucid and rational testimony, and gave us many interesting particulars.¹⁸ He was a young man when he had those testimonies. He is **now** <was

18. John Whitmer was the last surviving of the additional eight witnesses to the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. He died at Far

then> sixty eight years old, and still he is firm in his faith. Now I would ask what will I do with such a cloud of faithful witnesses, bearing such a rational and yet solemn testimony? These men while in the prime of life, saw the vision of the angel, and bore their testimony to all people. And eight men saw the plates, and handled them. Hence these men all knew the things they declared to be positively true. And that too while they were young, and now when old they declare the same things.

West, Missouri, on July 11, 1878. Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1*, 447.

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