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## PAPERS CONCERNING ROBERTSON'S COLONY IN TEXAS INTRODUCTORY VOLUME: A REVIEW ESSAY

by *J.P. Bryan*

Dr. Malcolm McLean has recently concluded Volume XIII in the seemingly endless volumes about Robertson's Colony, or should it more properly styled Leftwich's Colony? Leftwich, in selling his contract to the Texas Association, had them agree that the colony would always bear his name. Robertson, however, being no respecter of persons except himself, chose to use his own name and McLean has dutifully followed, as a relative of Robertson, in using the Robertson Colony designation.

Volume XIII has been presented not as volume XIII but as the introductory volume. While future readers will, no doubt, be confused by this procedure, they can distinguish it by its red cover. This color was selected by McLean, he said, in order to capture the mood of the period during which Leftwich's diary was written. It could better serve as a warning to prospective readers that the introductory volume should more appropriately be numbered XIII. However, readers can take solace in the fact that this is not going to be a permanent numerical retrograde but was brought about by the discovery of the Leftwich Diary after McLean was well into his publication of the Robertson Colony works. Robert Leftwich, as anyone knows who has read the previous twelve volumes (or various combinations thereof), was the original contractor for the Robertson Colony on behalf of the infamous Texas Association.

Before we investigate volume XIII and the contents of Leftwich's Diary, a few comments about the book itself.

It is a well established truth that you can't judge a book by its cover, but there are certainly some judgments that should be made about these publications. In their normal royal blue color, they stand out quite obviously on the bookshelf, but the same would be true regardless of coloration. They are conspicuous because of their size as anyone who has had the misfortune to carry the book any distance, like on an extended business trip or even across the room, will soon become aware of. Furthermore, they weigh in at four and one half pounds a piece so, in addition to being a handy weapon to ward off would-be muggers, they can add considerably to the strength of your biceps. Additionally, their size is such that they are hard to neatly fit into anything but the library of Goliath and since they are being produced with the rapidity of rabbits, a collector or historian will soon find himself redesigning shelf space to accommodate the publication. At four and one half pounds a piece, that amounts to fifty-eight and one half pounds of information about the Robertson Colony and events surrounding its development. The thirteen-volume (to date) series already distinguishes itself as being the largest,

heaviest, and most numerous in all of Texas history. The epitaph for the publisher should read, "Here lies a man who published the most prodigious, the most ponderous, and the most poundage in all of Texas history."

In Volume XIII McLean has been faithful to traditions established in the previous twelve volumes. That is, the work is meticulously researched and studiously footnoted. It is laboriously documented, but without leaving the reader to flounder on the over-consumption of historical detail, and is consistently slanderous of the character of Stephen F. Austin.

In his work on the Robertson Colony, McLean has produced what most assuredly should be recognized as one of the indispensable works on the colonial settlement of Texas. It reaches far beyond the confines of that acreage between the Brazos and the San Antonio Road that came to be known as the Robertson Colony. Volume XIII begins with an introduction about the E.D. Farmer Association which gives scholarships to prospective students in Texas and Republic of Mexico studies. The information will be important to all past recipients of the award of which Dr. McLean was one, but will hardly be of interest to non-Farmers.

Leftwich's Diary was discovered in 1940 and eventually acquired by the U.T. at Arlington. It has been edited by Dr. McLean as a golden key in the Robertson Colony project. The diary itself is a straightforward explanation of the historical escapades of the young Leftwich as he proceeds doggedly to secure a Texas land contract for the Texas Association. It is punctuated by equal measures of his optimism and youthful enthusiasm which allow him to suffer through numerous misfortunes without being overcome by them. The diary is wisely reproduced at about sixty-five percent of its actual size and below each page, the diary is transcribed for the reader's benefit. An unfortunate feature is that many of the pages are unintelligible. Though the reader is not introduced to this fact, it becomes readily apparent. It is with considerable frustration and sadness that the reader will note that much of the conclusions of the diary and presumably the more mature part of Leftwich's observations of his forty-months in Mexico City, is unreadable. What a great frustration to be so near to what Leftwich wrote and yet so far.

In the early parts of the diary, there is considerable repetition as Leftwich duplicates much of his original observations in subsequent letters and numerous times his grant application is reproduced in the diary. In spite of that, the diary projects an interesting exuberance as Leftwich plays host to a series of historical characters such as the infamous General Wilkinson, whom Leftwich grows to loathe; the Emperor Iturbide, for whom he seems to have no strong feelings; and his roommate for a time whom he greatly admired, Stephen F. Austin. Above all else, Leftwich can be praised for his persistence. He stayed firmly at the helm of seeking his grant for some forty months and suffered the ultimate humiliation of having the Texas Association and its upright citizens fail to honor his

drafts drawn on them to fund his expenses while in Mexico City. He wisely reacted by taking the grant in his own name and later selling his interest to the unreliable association for \$8,000.

The diary is not without its more humorous insights as we frequently see Leftwich playing the role of wheeler-dealer, such as his attempt to purchase Austin's grant for \$100,000 shortly after it had been confirmed by the new Mexican government, only declining to purchase the next day Austin's offer to sell him a league of land (4130) in the grant at six cents an acre. Leftwich maintains that it would have been a conflict of interest with the other shareholders for him to own any of Austin's land individually. In fact, the real problem was that Leftwich did not have the funds to conclude either transaction. In addition to his persistence, Leftwich can not punctuate. While he pursues his claim with an indefatigable spirit, he writes about it in sentences that run together like a highway interchange. Dr. McLean has done a superb job of providing background information on the characters that flow and ebb through Leftwich's life in Mexico City. The diary itself makes good, though not robust, reading. It offers no profound historical revelations, but does sharpen our insights and perspectives of the people and events that shaped the laws and the beginnings of the Anglo settlement of Texas.

It would have served Dr. McLean well if he had had Leftwich's diary in hand before he embarked on his earlier volumes. He might have modified some of his previous accusations, such as the claim that Ramon Arispe was a co-conspirator of Austin in an attempt to keep Leftwich from securing his grant. McLean would not have been influenced by Leftwich's insights on the subject but at least he would have avoided a historical error, because it is apparent from the reading that, rather than working at cross purposes, Arispe worked assiduously to help Leftwich secure his grant and did so at the encouragement of Austin. Furthermore, as Arispe's letters show, he considered Leftwich a friend. McLean makes an issue of Austin paying two doubloons to Arispe to help in the securing of the papers (probably his grant), hardly a princely sum, and he further suggests that Leftwich pay him five to six doubloons to assist him with his grant. Since Ramon Arispe was not an official in the Mexican government, this might not be considered a bribe, though this is not to say that Austin or anyone else dealing with the Mexican government on a consistent basis would be above offering inducements. However, Stephen F. Austin was certainly not the father of such a system, as McLean seems to imply, and as Leftwich points out in his diary, the golden key to opening doors in the Mexican government was, in fact, the payment of bribery. The only person who seems to be surprised about this is McLean himself. If he was not aware of that system, he must have spent many hours on various border crossings on his numerous trips to Mexico, wondering why everyone else was speeding through customs while he got his baggage thoroughly examined. Of course that Austin would pass this information on to Leftwich was

certainly not the assistance you would provide if you wished to frustrate a competitor from doing business. Leftwich, for his part, so liked the idea that he escalated the figure to some \$15,000 that he proposed to pay one Juan Azcarate rather than Arispe to help in securing his claim and encouraged two other individuals to participate with him in the scheme.

There is also a very interesting contrast between a one dimensional Stephen F. Austin of Malcolm McLean and the observations of Robert Leftwich. Leftwich admits consistently to Austin's ability, ingenuity, and intelligence, and praises his assistance in helping him seek his grant. At least eight times, Leftwich mentions Austin's generous support and acknowledges consistently his superior right over all others in getting his grant approved by the Mexican government. McLean would, no doubt, pass his office saying that Leftwich was simply being duped by Austin, but though Leftwich may have had his failings in punctuation, character perception was not one of his weaknesses as his diary amply demonstrates. He could immediately see through the duplicity of individuals such as Wilkinson and others with whom he was dealing in the Mexican government. McLean consistently makes an issue of the fact that Leftwich got to Mexico City first supposedly under the doctrine of first in time, first in right. The fact is that Leftwich arrived in Mexico City with no more right than that which one can carve from ambition. Austin, on the other hand, came to confirm his father's grant from the Spanish government which he, himself, had gotten confirmed and the only reason he was not there well in advance of Leftwich, and those who followed him, is that he had been waiting on the Colorado River for some three months for his first colonist who mistakenly had arrived at the Brazos River. Additionally, in footnote 97 McLean continues to perpetuate the proposition that Austin did not give Hawkins all that he was entitled under their partnership. This suggestion is a total misinterpretation of the legal terms of the partnership and all the subsequent information that defends Austins' position that, in granting to the Hawkins' family half the land that he had acquired in the first colony, amounting to more than 200,000 acres, he fulfilled his obligation to Hawkins. This act was freely acknowledged by the executor of Hawkins' estate, Cox, and is readily apparent if one chooses to read the letters dealing with the subject in the Austin papers. The prejudice that McLean feels for Austin obviously distorts much of the historical objectivity in his writings. However, there still remains an abundance of good history for the reader in all the volumes on the Robertson Colony. Whether it should be the introductory volume or volume XIII, the reader will be introduced to another volume wealthy in historical insights on the colonial settlement of Texas.