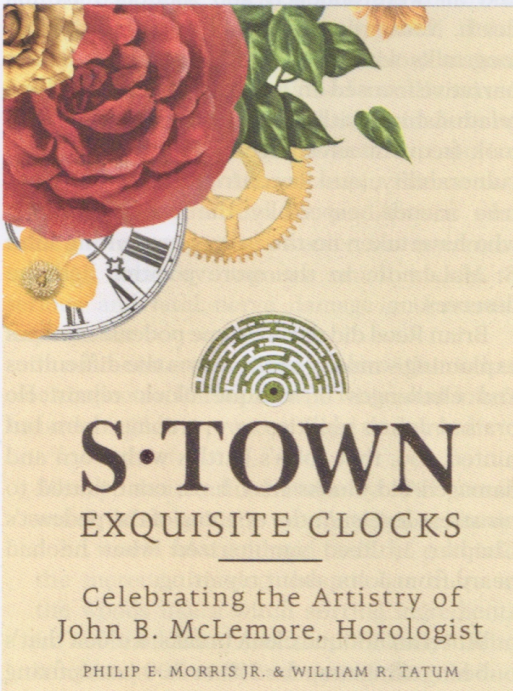


choices that put the Swiss and American watch industries on opposite trajectories.

Andrew Canter, Co-Founder, MrWatchMaster
(www.mrwatchmaster.com)

1. Eric Van den Steen and Aaron Stark, *Stealing Time: America's Disruption of the Swiss Watch Industry*, Harvard Business School Case 718-500, February 2018.
2. <https://www.watkinsr.id.au/david.pdf>



Philip E. Morris and William R. Tatum, S-Town Exquisite Clocks: Celebrating the Artistry of John B. McLemore, Horologist. National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, 2023, 192 pages, hardcover \$59.99, softback \$39.99.

In the Spring of 2017, I began hearing about the S-Town podcast. This seven-part award-winning audio series by Brian Reed, a public-radio producer, told about a highly-skilled restorer of antique clocks living in poor rural Woodstock, Alabama. This is the 'S-Town' of the series' title, with most of us knowing what the 'S' stands for.

Reed recorded hundreds of hours of rambling phone conversations and in-person

visits with John B. McLemore, and crafted a podcast that has been downloaded more than seventy-seven million times. It is probably no spoiler to report that McLemore committed a gruesome suicide by drinking potassium cyanide in June of 2015, at age 49, and that much of the podcast is devoted to the aftermath of that tragedy.

I was not happy about my clock-repair customers' fascination with S-Town. It perpetuated a common stereotype of clockmakers and watchmakers as crazy cranky misfit loners, often self-destructive. The strange and dishonest clockmaker featured in the 2009 novel *Tinkers* by Paul Harding also caught some of my customers' attentions and perhaps made them fearful of bringing their broken clocks to someone who might resemble Harding's dying protagonist.

I cannot estimate how many repair jobs I lost due to such fears, but I know that customers arriving at my door realized that I was not like S-Town's John B. McLemore or Tinker's old man. I, and nearly all of my clock-repair colleagues, are normal friendly people working at a difficult but fascinating venerable trade.

Unfortunately for us, too, the S-Town podcast only rarely and minimally addressed how John worked and what he worked on. His acknowledged expertise and experience in restoring fine antique clocks left us grasping for those details. We had two legs of the stool – the podcast and its written transcript – but we needed the two other legs. We longed to see the actual clocks he restored, and to learn more about how he did it. Now, finally, we are fortunate to have some parts of those third and fourth legs.

The National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors (NAWCC) has published *S-Town Exquisite Clocks: Celebrating the Artistry of John B. McLemore, Horologist* and is opening an associated exhibition in July at its headquarters museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania. This coincides with the Association's national convention in nearby Lancaster and the celebration of its eighty-year anniversary.

Both of the book's authors knew McLemore. Philip Morris, Chairman of the NAWCC Museum Collection Committee, spent countless hours at John's workshop during their twenty-five-year friendship. William Tatum, who knew



John B. McLemore on his property in 2014. The book offers several old snapshots of John, his shop, his nascent maze, and his gardens. Photo courtesy of Jacqueline Hess.

John for twenty-three years, owns the high-end English, French, and German clocks beautifully pictured and expertly described in the book. McLemore restored and maintained all these clocks. Morris's preface and Tatum's introduction warmly relate their personal experiences with the clockmaker. Morris also is the author of an important scholarly 512-page book, *American Wooden Movement Tall Clocks 1712–1835*, published in 2011.

Both men observed how John worked and they wrote about his superb level of craftsmanship. They offer tantalizing glimpses of his shop practices and tools, but we never will fully understand or appreciate his gifted expertise. Most of his work was done alone and often overnight when the Alabama daytime heat had dissipated. He would labour for long stretches of full concentration, then set aside projects for hours, days, or weeks while sidetracked by other passions or immobilized

by bouts of drinking and depression from his personal problems and by the perilous state of our society, economy, and planet.

The Foreword by Brian Reed precedes those two reminiscences. He revealed his surprise, soon after John's suicide, at discovering that the clockmaker had longtime friends, such as Morris and Tatum and another Alabamian, Allen Bearden. Other friends who Reed later tracked down were in Utah, in the Pacific Northwest, and in Tonbridge, England. All had deep clock-related connections with John, and all were shocked and saddened by his death. None were revealed by John during his long talks with Reed. Instead, most of Reed's narrative focused on John's tales of his troubled relationships with young local low-lives who took frequent advantage of John's generosity, vulnerability, and eccentricities. It is John's true friends, especially the book's authors, who have taken on the task of presenting John B. McLemore in the more positive light he deserves.

Brian Reed did devote some podcast minutes explaining – mostly accurately – the difficulties and challenges of antique clock repair. He praised John's abilities to overcome them but hinted, too, that John's battles with worn and damaged old clocks may have contributed to his stress levels. At the opening of the podcast's Chapter 1, Reed summarized what he had heard from John about repairing:

When an antique clock breaks, a clock that's been telling time for 200 or 300 years, fixing it can be a real puzzle. An old clock like that was handmade by someone. It might tick away the time with a pendulum, with a spring, with a pulley system. It might have bells that are supposed to strike the hour, or a bird that's meant to pop out and cuckoo at you. There can be hundreds of tiny, individual pieces, each of which needs to interact with the others precisely.

To make the job even trickier, you often can't tell what's been done to a clock over hundreds of years. Maybe there's damage that was never fixed, or fixed badly. Sometimes, entire portions of the original clockwork are missing, but you can't know for sure because there are rarely diagrams of what the clock's supposed to look like. A clock that old doesn't come with a manual

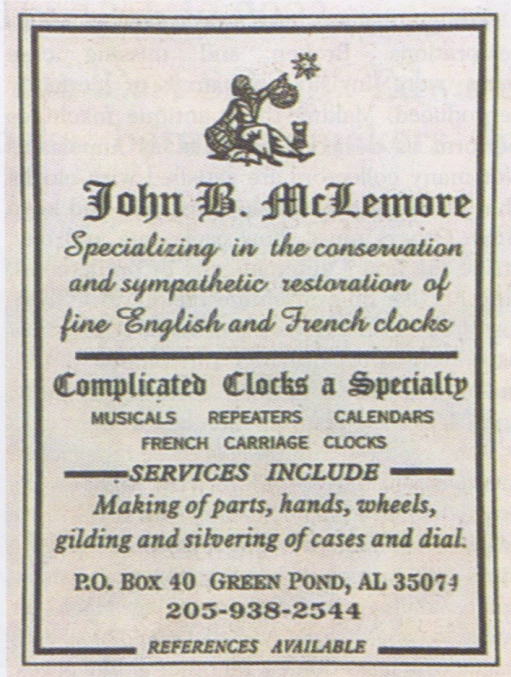
... I'm told fixing an old clock can be maddening. You're constantly wondering if you've just spent hours going down a path that will likely take you nowhere, and all you've got are these vague witness marks, which might not even mean what you think they mean. So at every moment along the way, you have to decide if you're wasting your time or not.

In the podcast Reed addresses John's dangerous and cavalier approach to fire-gilding. After admiring 'ormolu' clocks in original condition during extended visits to England, John restored lustrous gold finishes on clock statues and hardware the old-fashioned way. He mixed gold and mercury, coated the underlying metals, then torched the objects to vaporize away the mercury. As realized in France two centuries ago, and also by mad-hatters who used mercury to process woolen hat materials, inhaling mercury vapours usually leads to serious and fatal nerve damage and mental impairment.

In a later interview, Reed spoke with another clock collector, Bill Maier, who witnessed John's hazardous gilding process. Reed recounted:

Silvery, dense, fluid mercury. Bill would watch John heat the mercury into a slurry. John would take gold and melt the gold into the mercury, mixing the pot out there in the woods like a witch stirring ingredients in her cauldron. And then Bill says John would take a brush and spread the gold and mercury amalgam onto a clock and then hold the torch flame to it, vapourizing the mercury, and leaving behind a rich, textured layer of gold. It's an ancient process that appears to have originated around 300 BC or so in China called fire gilding that almost no one does anymore. Bill's a prolific lifelong clock collector and he says John is the only person he ever found in the United States who would do it. No one does it because inhaling mercury vapour is so ridiculously dangerous.

Towards the end of the podcast series, Reed explored this issue further, saying that John exhibited classic symptoms after decades of breathing mercury fumes. An autopsy did not include a test for mercury levels, and



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McLemore advertisement in the January 1999 issue of the NAWCC *Mart & Highlights*.

exhuming him later was not an option or likely to be conclusive since mercury is unstable longterm. John's erratic behaviour, depression, and eventual suicide all point to mercury as at least partially to blame.

The tragic but glowing legacy of John's fire-gilding lives on in many of the clocks illustrated in the book. Among Tatum's 'exquisite clocks' are French bronze figural clocks with statues of sculpted classical figures coated in pure gold, and English bracket clocks with ornate and complex cast gilt mounts and relief panels.

We can see Cupid riding a snail and driving a chariot, a maiden whose outstretched arms point to the minutes and hours, winged fairies, the Roman goddess Diana, the Hebrew Bible's Rebecca with her water jug, young Bacchus feeding grapes to a goat, hooded falcons, and a flame-spitting winged gargoyle.

Among these are French 'mystery' clocks that seem to inexplicably advance their hands or swing a pendulum. A circa 1870 example, shown on pages 100–101, by André Romain Guilmet has a crystal pendulum, held aloft by a golden standing maiden assisted by a winged putto, that oscillates without any obvious impulse.

Fire-gilding was just one aspect of John's restorations. Broken and missing case parts were invisibly repaired or perfectly reproduced. Making these antique machines perform as designed was just as important. Not many collectors are satisfied with clocks that just sit there. Clocks must tick and keep time. Others must show each date and day, strike the hours automatically or on demand, ring English church chime melodies or long-lost songs and hymns on nests of bells, show barometric pressure and the phases of the moon. They have to do it correctly, reliably, and 24/7 or the restorer soon hears about it.

John restored hundreds of these remarkable mechanical antiques. More than forty clocks are included in the book along with three brass cages of life-size mechanical feathered singing birds that turn their heads, open their beaks, and twitch their tails. Exotic carriage clocks for portable timekeeping, and skeleton clocks with fragile oval glass domes, fill other glossy pages. High-resolution photography, with bonus close-ups and related vintage illustrations, allow full appreciation of these marvels.

Tatum was especially attracted to French 'Industrial Series' clocks. Thirteen of them lead the book's catalogue chapters. Made during the late 1800s, mostly by Guilmet's firm, they were animated metal models of lighthouses, windmills, fountains, locomotives, marine bollards, quarterdecks, diving helmets, spoked ship's wheels, bells, and steam hammers. Standard movements kept the time and struck the hours; separate spring-powered movements turned wheels, swung hammers, spun vanes and simulated streams of water. A Guilmet 'Beam Engine' striking desk clock was Lot 371 at Schmitt Horan's Candia, New Hampshire, auction of 6 May this year.

John excelled at restoring these complicated and temperamental clocks that frustrate less-skilled craftsmen. I recall, from my early days of clock repair, my lengthy and ultimately unsuccessful efforts with a 'Helmsman' model as shown on pages 34–35 of the book. The sailor standing on the ship's quarterdeck acts as the clock's pendulum, steadily turning the ship's wheel back and forth, but my helmsman quickly tired of the task.

Many 'Industrials' found their way to John's workshop following the New York June 28, 1993, sale at Sotheby's of 'The Joseph M.

Meraux collection of Rare and Unusual Clocks'. The auction's 500-lot catalogue remains an important reference for collectors. Several Meraux-provenance clocks are in Tatum's collection including the French circa 1885 hanging lantern-form compendium detailed on pages 141–143. Retailled by Duryea & Potter, New York-Paris, it was lot 253 in the Meraux sale. Meraux (1922–1992) probably owned the most land of anyone in Louisiana's St. Bernard Parish, and he was active in the NAWCC and horological world.

Except with repair clients and a few restorer colleagues, John was not active or well-known in the antique clock community. Much of Reed's narrative focuses on the townspeople, most of them deeply flawed, in John's rural Alabama life. It was them and the mercury that apparently brought John to that glass of cyanide, not the clocks that, painstakingly restored, brought such joy to the collectors that mourn his passing. They, and all of us, wish that he were still here to perform more restorations and tell us how he did them.

John also never got to see the full realization of the hedge maze he designed and planted on his home's many acres. Inspired by vintage mazes he saw in England, and as passionate about gardening as he was about clockmaking, he in 2009 initially planted 1,625 Sky Pencil holly seedlings. These grew but still could only hint at the maze's complexity when John died six years later. It now is abandoned on the private property of the new owner.

With John gone, we are left with the controversial story Reed tells us, with the friends and collectors who knew and so highly valued him, and with the restored artistic machines we now can gaze upon. We must thank the book's authors for adding to Reed's story and showing us what the late John B. McLemore could do.

Bob Frishman

This is a slightly edited version of a review published in *Main Antique Digest*.