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Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hoffman Case
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Reviewed by Jennifer Larson, a professional book dealer in San Francisco.

Of the various tragedies resulting in and arising out of the short but devastating career of Mark Hofmann, antiquarian book and document dealer, forger, and murderer, perhaps the least consequential is the failure of the trade and its clientele to take to heart a number of hard-won lessons. The inability of the antiquarian book trade and the scholarly community to effectively identify spurious documents has been manifested, more quietly, in many other forgery cases before and since, reminding us again that we do not have an easy, inexpensive, and infallible test for forgery, and we are not likely to get one soon.

Mr. Turley’s purpose in *Victims* has been to carefully document the Hofmann affair from the perspective of the major corporate victim, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. His very focused account relies heavily on sources unavailable to earlier chroniclers, including the personal journals of many of the Church principals involved. The result is a necessary and welcome chronological exposition of the LDS Church’s dealings with Hofmann, which were neither error-free nor, as many have supposed, sinister. Readers of some of the earlier accounts will discover that false conclusions, and at times bigotry, have colored earlier interpretations of these relations. In fact, the Church’s representatives initially showed a diligence and restraint seldom equaled in institutional and private document collecting.

Prior to its acquisition, the first major Hofmann forgery, known as the Anthon Transcript, was informally examined by a variety of knowledgeable persons and submitted for a written report to Dean Jesse, the acknowledged expert on the handwriting of Joseph Smith. Jesse’s chirographic expertise, like that of dealers, collectors, librarians, and his fellow historians, is grounded in years of familiarity with the material in question, not in formal training in forgery detection. He arrived at the wrong conclusion; however, so did Sherman Young, a former FBI handwriting analyst who examined the transcript on an informal basis. In light of subsequent failures of expertise, one
questions whether Young’s unadopted recommendation to formally retain a certified handwriting expert would have resulted in convincing evidence of forgery.

Other efforts to ascertain the nature of the transcript, loaned to the Church for examination on April 22, 1980, and not actually acquired until October 13, included study by a team of outside experts working from historical, physical, and textual standpoints. Additionally, the Church made persistent efforts to independently verify the document’s provenance. Sophisticated scientific ink and paper tests were considered and reasonably rejected as likely to be inconclusive or destructive of the document or both. Infrared and ultraviolet photographs revealed no anomalies. Finally, in negotiating for the acquisition of the document, the Church effectively resisted the seller’s inflated notion of value at the risk of losing the document altogether.

In the end, the Anthon Transcript proved recalcitrant even to the forensic team of George Throckmorton and William Flynn, whose groundbreaking discoveries exposed many of the Hofmann fakes. With the benefit of an extended comparison of a large group of Hofmann creations with comparable but authentic documents, they found only relatively inconclusive problems with the Anthon Transcript: the handwriting was “too neat for Joseph Smith” and the document “looked as though it had been heated with an iron.” Later, Throckmorton’s published forensic analysis mentioned the anachronistic solubility of the transcript’s ink, a blue-haze effect under ultraviolet light (that had either not been previously observed on this document or was not interpreted as proof of forgery), and a bleed-through effect (that even these examiners admitted was not very convincing as proof of forgery).¹

The exigencies of the trade in antiquarian documents usually preclude this sort of circumspection and leisurely analysis. Major documents are frequently sold at auctions; offers to purchase and, after successful bidding, decisions to authenticate and keep, are typically required within a period of less than two months. In private acquisitions, buyers rely almost exclusively on the reputation of the seller, rather than on outside opinion, for expertise, integrity, and solvency in the event of subsequent unforeseen problems over authenticity or title. In a word, the type of intensive independent scrutiny accorded the Anthon Transcript by the LDS Church is rare, very rare.
The second forgery, the Joseph Smith III Blessing, was scrupulously examined at the insistence of the RLDS Church. Two retired U.S. Postal Inspection examiners determined it to be in the handwriting of Thomas Bullock, with an additional annotation in the handwriting of Joseph Smith. These examiners based their conclusions on comparison with an unquestioned Bullock document and photographic negatives of several Joseph Smith signatures. The composition of the document’s ink was appropriately iron gallotannate; the paper and its sizing were analyzed by Walter C. McCrone Associates of Chicago and found to be consistent with its ostensible date and origin. The LDS Church obtained a notarized affidavit from the purported source of the blessing, in return for an agreement not to contact him; a copy of this document was furnished to the RLDS Church with the proviso that it remain confidential.

After this meticulous, even wary, beginning, the Church’s authentication procedures became considerably more relaxed. The letter of Thomas Bullock to Brigham Young, the manuscript white notes, the letter of David Whitmer to Walter Conrad, and the Grandin Contract were all acquired by the LDS Church in the apparent absence of independent verification. With the benefit of hindsight, however, the ineffectiveness of such procedures is underscored by the fact that as late as January 1986, when Hofmann was a forgery and murder suspect, the FBI reportedly failed to find evidence of forgery in the Grandin Contract.²

A lenient approach in transactions with a regular and familiar dealer is natural. Hofmann had effectively established himself as a reliable, occasionally generous, and astonishingly fruitful source of extremely interesting and apparently authentic material. More important than trust, though, as a barrier to continuing elaborate steps to independently authenticate the documents, was a fact suggested by Dean Jessee’s observation during a news conference announcing one of the sensational finds that it is “possible to ‘pay a lot of money’ to have someone ‘put a stamp’” on a document of which the authenticity is in question (68).

The value of a “stamp of approval” of the sort Jessee referred to is indeed dubious. If the effort occasionally resulted in proof positive of forgery, that result would of course justify such a proceeding, but evidently such a finding was never the result of any formal independent examination of a Hofmann forgery offered to the Church or to anyone else. In the small
world of historical document dealing and collecting, there are no certifying agencies, ethics committees, competency reviews, or examining boards to oversee the quality and validity of these authentications, which are not, in any case, tantamount to a warranty. Opinions in such matters are no more valid than the facts on which they are based, and many of these certifications are simple statements of unsubstantiated conclusion, impossible to evaluate and essentially useless.

In retrospect, the Church did miss a couple of tricks. Expert comparison of the forged high-denomination Deseret Currency Association notes with authentic lower-denomination notes might have revealed conclusive problems with those particular Hofmann fakes. Similarly, a set of four multicolored, printed scrip notes known as Spanish Fork Cooperative Notes, forged by Hofmann, were later easily demonstrated to have been printed in Carter’s brand ink for stamp pads. The notes are not very significant from a historical standpoint, however, although they had been accepted as genuine by the leading expert in Mormon currency. Furthermore, the smaller value of the Spanish Fork notes, reflected in selling prices ranging from $200 to $2,500 per set, precluded, as is so often the case, the expense of hiring outside expertise.

One might expect that, at least in this recent case of an acknowledged, confessed, and still-living forger, the scholarly and collecting communities would have the benefit of complete identification of all the spurious items originating with Hofmann and an account of his known book and document transactions. Sadly, and ironically, considering the criticism the Church has received for its secrecy in the business, such candor seems to be the case only with respect to transactions between Mark Hofmann and the LDS Church. Many of the victims in the vicinity of Salt Lake City cooperated fully with the investigation, and their evidence is at least partially on the record in the form of the twelve-volume transcript of Hofmann’s preliminary hearing. The witnesses responded only to the questions they were asked, however, a proceeding which did not result in full accounts of all of their transactions with Hofmann. Leads to a great many of the forger’s out-of-state transactions were not pursued, and a number of dealers and private collectors who regularly traded with Hofmann have never or only fleetingly been mentioned in connection with the case.
Thus, many documents and signed books associated with Hofmann remain privately held, perhaps in the possession of people who have no idea of the ultimate source of their material. The difficulty of identifying all these documents, in order that no future deceptive sales will take place, is daunting. Information is sketchy. Many of the persons involved are uncooperative; the present location of the documents is unknown; and even if the owners were known and the suspect items made available for examination, the time and expense involved in evaluating them appears to be prohibitive.

Two examples of these problems should suffice. The first is a small receipt for funds to purchase provisions for Indian prisoners, ostensibly signed by Daniel Boone and dated October 24, 1787. Its first known appearance is in a 1982 Charles Hamilton auction catalogue, where its price is estimated at $3,000/3,500. A southern California collector purchased the Boone receipt for $3,500 and subsequently traded it to an experienced dealer. The dealer later stated in writing his conclusion that the item is not genuine and is in fact probably a Hofmann forgery. Hofmann has verbally acknowledged forging a Daniel Boone autograph letter and three other Boone documents, and Boone’s name appears in the list of forgery subjects recovered from his prison cell. The Boone receipt in question was later offered at auction at Superior Galleries, October 15, 1991, estimated at $5,000/7,000. It realized $2,600.4

Also suspect are two copies of a document known as a reward of merit, consisting of four printed lines enclosed in a decorative border, completed in manuscript. The particular rewards of merit in question are valuable because the instructor who presented and signed them appears to be Nathan Hale. Hofmann stated in April 1988, that he made his own plate for a forged Nathan Hale reward of merit and produced two copies; he also stated in a letter dated June 29, 1990, to this reviewer that this item “is, indeed, a forgery.” A Nathan Hale reward of merit is illustrated in the Charles Hamilton Sale 157 of August 11, 1983, estimated at $7,500/9,500; the present whereabouts is unknown. At present, there is only Mark Hofmann’s word as to the identity of the dealer to whom he sold the other Nathan Hale document; that dealer has declined to comment. Al Malpa, the author of a forthcoming book on rewards of merit, pointed out, on inspection of a photocopy of this item, that no unquestioned
rewards of merit are known earlier than the 1790s (Nathan Hale died in 1776); no known examples bear a printed place and date, as this one does; and the typography and layout of the suspect example more closely resemble those from the 1810s and 1820s than those of an earlier date.

*Victims* does much to advance our knowledge of what happened in the trade of historical documents in Utah, circa 1980–85. In a broader context, *Victims* ought to make the thoughtful reader aware that the limitation of expertise in antiquarian documents is universal—not restricted to the freakish success of a uniquely talented forger taking advantage of very special circumstances. This larger usefulness would have been enhanced had the full text of all the expert reports authenticating the forgeries been provided. More photographs of the documents, together with the authentic examples with which they were compared, would also have been illuminating.

The field of autograph collecting has experienced astonishing and sensational growth in the past five years. Prices have reached unprecedented levels and continue to rise. Many new and inexperienced dealers have entered the field, often attracting fresh collectors with appeals based on investment potential. Those who, through their knowledge of the Hofmann case, are painfully aware of the awful havoc wrought in Utah by the failure to recognize forged documents should view such developments with foreboding and alarm.

NOTES


3 The librarians, scholars, scientists, and dealers involved in the examination and attempted sale of Hofmann’s most expensive forgery, the *Oath of a Freeman*, have participated in a valuable published account of that endeavor: James Gilreath, ed., *The Judgment of Experts: Essays and