

Review Articles

Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders. LINDA SILLITOE and ALLEN D. ROBERTS (with a forensic analysis by George J. Throckmorton). Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988. 552 p. illus. ISBN 0-941214-65-6, \$17.95 (U.S.)

by ANTHONY L. REES

Salamander is one of the first of what will likely be a number of studies of the Mark W. Hofmann affair, known generally by the sub-title of this book: the Mormon forgery murders.¹

Some details of the Hofmann case are widely known among archivists and historians, and the general public has become aware of it through coverage on several television programmes of the "Great Unsolved Crime" genre. For the benefit of those who have been stranded on desert islands or visiting other parts of the solar system, the story is as follows: Mark Hofmann, a lapsed Mormon and small-time dealer in historical books and manuscripts, begins to discover and market a series of important documents from the earliest days of the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and its founding fathers. He sells not only to amateur collectors, but also to universities and to the church itself. Though most of his activities are centred on the Salt Lake City area, he also discovers and attempts to sell to the Library of Congress the only known copy of "Oath of a Freeman," long held to be the first document printed in the American colonies on moveable type. When Hofmann's greed and arrogance threaten to expose him as a master forger, he responds by planting three bombs. The first kills a customer and colleague; the second, as a diversion, kills a suburban housewife, and the third, either another diversion or a premature explosion, almost kills Hofmann himself.

Sillitoe and Roberts, both investigative reporters living in Salt Lake City, would have been drawn immediately to the sudden shock of two fatal and one near-fatal bomb blasts in a place nicknamed "The City of the Saints." The first two bombs detonated almost simultaneously, and apparently linked two former partners in a failing investment business. First to die was Steve Christensen, a young, up-and-coming member of the Mormon church. Widely known and respected in the tight-knit Salt Lake City business community, he was an LDS Bishop with more access to senior church officials than most of his peers. While still involved in the investigation at Christensen's office, police were called to a suburban Salt Lake City house where a

second, almost identical device had killed the wife of Gary Sheets, the owner of the troubled investment firm from which Christensen had recently resigned. Investigators from five or six local and federal agencies, together with the local media, began to examine the Sheets/Christensen relationship and to compile lists of disgruntled investors. In any other major American city, they would have first turned their attention to the Mafia and drugs, but this was Salt Lake City and such thoughts were given only passing attention. The third bomb detonated less than thirty-six hours later when it was disturbed by the owner of a car parked downtown in Salt Lake. This blast, and its victim, Mark Hofmann, dramatically changed the focus of the investigation.

The link between the explosions was not the stock market, but the market in rare Mormon manuscripts. Not only were the three parties apparently linked to each other, but they were also linked directly to the LDS church itself. Even a cursory glance at the case from this perspective would have told Sillitoe and Roberts that they were looking at something far more important and interesting than the revenge of an unbalanced recipient of bad investment counselling. Their investigations, from that point forward, would involve them in what they describe as “an unstructured, diverse community of about 3,000 academics, historians, writers, artists, researchers and readers.” These individuals dealt with the history (or, more correctly, histories) of the LDS church and, according to the authors, were either parties to or victims of “a pattern of deceit that had distorted reality around Mormon issues for years and was beginning to reshape American history and literature, as well.”

At this critical point, however, the authors begin to lose control of their book. The several distinct but closely related threads with which they have woven the fabric of their tale do not reveal a clear or legible pattern. Their apparent rush into print has taken its toll. Sillitoe and Roberts attempt to explain the complicated story of Hofmann’s dramatic rise and fall through extensive interviews with family, colleagues, investigators and, where possible, with LDS officials. They have combed the voluminous public records created during an extended preliminary hearing (through an amazing plea-bargain, Hofmann never actually stood trial). At over 550 pages, *Salamander* is a long book, but it is not a comprehensive account of any of the threads. Rather, it is evidence that the Hofmann affair proved too rich a meal for the authors to digest in the time allowed. One reason is immediately evident: Hofmann’s final appearance before the Utah State Board of Pardons (an event described in some detail) was not until 29 January 1988. *Salamander* was being advertised in the Fall 1987 issue of *The American Archivist* with a release date of 6 June 1988. The intervening four months were apparently deemed sufficient not only for final editing, but also for printing, binding, distribution, and the collection of several pre-publication reviews. The preface to *Salamander* offers further evidence of the book’s inherent problem, beginning with the statement, “By February, 1986, when Mark W. Hofmann was charged with two bombing murders, document forgery, and fraud, the research for this book was well underway.” Research for which book? The Salt Lake City Bombings? The Mormon Document Forgeries? The Mark Hofmann Story? *Salamander* is a work that was halfway to somewhere when the events it deals with overtook it and led it away. What remains is something with a rushed, unfocussed feel about it.

If *Salamander* is, finally, a gloss of several important stories, what are the elements of those stories which deserved fuller and more careful explanation? That Mark

W. Hofmann, an otherwise unremarkable man, could so skillfully have created documents that fooled nearly everyone is more a commentary on his victims than on Hofmann himself. As was the case with this case's closest contemporary, the Hitler diaries, the obvious answer is that the buyers desperately wanted to be fooled. *Salamander* is full of accounts of Hofmann clients suggesting that, if he could find certain types of documents, they would be willing to purchase them. Nowhere is there evidence that any of them were the least bit surprised when, only a few weeks later, Hofmann would walk through the door with exactly what they had asked for. The response of dealers and document experts, where they were consulted, was uniform: "It looks and feels right. It is consistent with known examples. There is no obvious evidence that it is not genuine, therefore it probably is." On the strength of such negative evidence, Hofmann was able to pass documents worth countless thousands of dollars. The exact number and identity of his forgeries will likely never be known.

It is not fair to say that Hofmann's work was transparently fake. He was an expert who took great pains to use genuine period papers and to establish plausible provenances. Still, the age-old passion to collect has always been the forger's greatest ally. In Hofmann's case, he had another factor working to his advantage as well: the Mormons' obsession with their own history. Hofmann played beautifully upon the LDS mania for the study (and justification) of its own origins. It is this same passion which has made them the greatest genealogists the world has ever seen. This love of history, however, has a darker side, and the involvement of the most senior levels of LDS church management with Hofmann and his creations makes that manifest.

Sillitoe and Roberts chronicle many instances of LDS officials, including the President and senior counsellors, meeting directly with Hofmann to acquire his newly discovered manuscripts. In fact, such a meeting was scheduled for the day after Christensen's death, on a matter with which Christensen had been deeply involved. That meeting was not cancelled by the LDS church. But for the fact that Hofmann managed to wound himself with his third bomb on that day, the meeting surely would have been held. Such is the drive of the LDS church to possess manuscripts related to its own past.

The Mormons' motives in acquiring Hofmann (and other) documents were not grounded only in the wish to see preserved for research important evidence of early LDS life. There was, clearly, a drive to acquire materials which questioned or challenged the established story of the LDS church's origins and ensure that they never again saw the light of day.

These are not simply rumours (like the oft-touted secret archives of the Vatican). The salamander of Sillitoe and Roberts' title refers to a letter, allegedly written by a contemporary of LDS founder Joseph Smith, which challenges Smith's account of the discovery of the golden tablets upon which was inscribed the text for *The Book of Mormon*. The letter suggests that Smith's account was fiction, and that the tablets had been found on a treasure hunt and were guarded by a white salamander (a traditional figure of folk magic). The salamander letter (one of Hofmann's earlier creations) was purchased by Steve Christensen from Hofmann and then donated to the LDS church. Though rumours of its existence circulated quickly through the Mormon historical community, the LDS church only reluctantly released a transcript.

The original was only made public when the fact that it was a forgery was almost beyond question. The LDS church's intention to keep the letter a secret was not simply in the minds of its critics.

From Sillitoe and Roberts' evidence, it is clear that the LDS church was the main player in the transaction which led to the bombings: the McLellin Collection. This collection, supposedly being acquired by Hofmann from the descendants of McLellin, an early and vocal opponent of Smith and the Mormons, was slated to be purchased by a senior churchman and donated to the LDS church (where, we must suppose, it would suffer the same fate intended for the salamander letter.) Although everyone involved seemed to be aware that there were major problems with the acquisition of the McLellin Collection (Hofmann's cancellation of several meetings, delays in his going to pick it up, several bad cheques and so forth), in an effort to clear up the matter quickly, senior LDS administrator Hugh Pinnock called a bank of which he was a director and, on the strength of a single telephone call, Hofmann secured a loan for \$185,000.

It is perhaps not fair to suggest that Sillitoe and Roberts do not pursue the matter of LDS involvement in the Hofmann affair for any reason other than their too-tightly imposed deadlines, but two investigative reporters from Salt Lake City should have done more work on what was clearly such a major factor in their story.

This book is clearly intended for the general reader. That reader, in order to make sense of the context in which the story unfolds, needs more than the single paragraph in the preface which outlines the organizational structure of the LDS church. As well, while they refer often to the Mormon historical community, the authors do not explain the significance of recent developments in the field of Mormon thought nor the emergence of several "schisms" within that field. While they offer thanks for the assistance of the Sunstone Foundation, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nowhere do Sillitoe and Roberts explain the significance of the organizations. Hofmann understood the nature of this curious community well and he exploited its divisions. The general reader ought to be given at least a chapter on the part it played.

The Hofmann affair was important, too, for the ground-breaking work it precipitated in the field of forensic analysis. Even after it was known that Hofmann's discoveries were largely forgeries (the analysts could pick them out of a pile of other documents from the same period), how he had done it remained a mystery; a mystery that the prosecutors desperately needed to have solved. While weaving the tale of the forensic work into their narrative, the authors have sensibly left the scientific detail for an appendix, written by document examiner George J. Throckmorton, the man who eventually solved the puzzle. Though these appendices are tantalizingly brief, it is certain that the details of Throckmorton's work (and that of his colleagues) will be the subject of extensive contributions to the professional literature for some time to come. Their work in establishing how Hofmann managed artificially to age contemporary inks so that they passed all of the known tests will likely be the only real "benefit" of the whole Hofmann affair. It must be remembered, however, that the published methods for detecting such forgeries are also available to the forgers. It will not be long before they have managed to fool the new tests.

In the final analysis, *Salamander* can best be summed up as a number of great stories wrapped up in a not-so-great book. As murder mystery, *Salamander* contains too many characters and too much detail distracting the reader from the central theme. Though the authors thank their editor for clarifying the story line, he has not gone far enough and has left too many inconsequential details which, while they are a testament to exhaustive research, muddy the waters more than necessary. As psychological portrait of a cold-blooded killer, the book suffers from the fact that there was insufficient time allowed between the final act of the drama, Hofmann's appearance before the Board of Pardons, and the publication date to allow the authors to fit what they saw at the hearing into what they knew of what he had done. At the end of the book, the reader is not likely to understand how Hofmann could so easily and calmly have stepped across the enormous gulf between fraud and double murder. As document dealer Kenneth Rendell has written: "With the Hitler diaries the victims lost their jobs; in the Mormon case, two people lost their lives." As parable, *Salamander* ought to have a profound effect upon archives and the rest of the collecting community, but it probably won't. There will always be those who will ignore the simple adage, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." For that reason, one might forgive the authors for not writing a more clearly cautionary tale. One can take issue, however, with their almost matter-of-fact reporting of the case. Indeed they seem, finally, to avoid any commentary on what they have learned. As a result, the players in the Hofmann drama are left to continue on their way. Only Christensen and Hofmann seem to have paid a price for their involvement. For the former, the price was far too dear. For the latter, perhaps not dear enough.

Notes

- 1 Since beginning this review, I have become aware of at least two additional books on the subject: Robert Lindsay's *A Gathering of Saints: A True Story of Money, Murder and Deceit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), and *The Mormon Murders: A True Story of Forgery, Deceit and Death* by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), which is the subject of David Mattison's review.

The Mormon Murders: A True Story of Greed, Forgery, Deceit, and Death. STEVEN NAIFEH and GREGORY WHITE SMITH. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988. 458 p. ISBN 1-55584-064-7. \$19.95 (US).

by DAVID MATTISON

The Mark Hofmann murders in October 1985 are an extreme example of how poor document authentication practices can have tragic, long-term consequences. Hofmann, a master forger, managed to deceive several conscientious manuscript dealers, a respected Mormon historian, and two or three archivists, not to mention individual purchasers. His most important client was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS church). While the LDS church emerges as a somewhat culpable party in lawyers Naifeh and Smith's engrossing account, Hofmann's other