

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 with more passion (and money) than good sense. 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

customers also contributed, often unknowingly, to his ability to operate unhindered and unquestioned. To be fair, however, Hofmann conducted many legitimate transactions and was highly regarded as a trustworthy, if sometimes unorthodox, dealer.

Perhaps the most audacious example of Hofmann's illegitimate deals was his attempt to market a forged version of "Oath of a Freeman" — "the Holy Grail of Printed Americana." Hofmann's fraud was presented by the reputable Schiller-Wapner Galleries of New York City to the Library of Congress for \$1.5 million. The library returned the item and declined to purchase it. The "Oath of a Freeman" was subsequently offered to the American Antiquarian Society which, but for the bombings in Salt Lake City, might have purchased the forgery. As part of his guilty plea to "two counts of second-degree murder and two counts of felony theft by deception," Hofmann was not charged under New York law for the "Oath of a Freeman" forgery.

Hofmann's masterstroke, however, was his re-creation of a lost cache of papers, an entire archives, belonging to William E. McLellin, an early Apostle and close associate of Joseph Smith's who left the LDS church in 1836 to become one of its bitterest critics. Hofmann tricked one of his principal investors into parting with \$185,000 to purchase the non-existent collection. The McLellin Collection was to be Hofmann's downfall, and, coupled with a total personal debt of over one million dollars, led to his murderous scheme. For a premeditated or first-degree murder charge, however, a motive reinforced by physical evidence was required.

George Throckmorton, Utah's sole practicing forensic document examiner, eventually convinced the county attorney's office to pressure the LDS church into allowing him and a non-Mormon partner, William J. Flynn, to scrutinize a variety of documents acquired by the church from Hofmann and other sources. Throckmorton believed that none of the authentications of Hofmann's finds performed by "experts" from the Eastern United States were valid. Furthermore, "simple common sense told him [Throckmorton] that one man couldn't have turned up so many key documents over such a short period of time." One police investigator who also suspected Hofmann of forgery was reminded that "all the experts back East had authenticated Hofmann's documents and attested to his reputation."

Given the slipshod method by which the LDS church acquired documents from Hofmann, it is not surprising to read of the tight security precautions that were taken during the forensic examination by Throckmorton and Flynn. The first round of tests occupied four twelve-hour days. Data collection and tests of the 81 documents supplied by the LDS church included infrared photography to detect additions to genuine documents, as well as microscopic examination, and handwriting analysis. The one major anomaly detected under the microscope was "that on some of the documents, the ink had cracked into tiny scales — they called it 'alligator skin' — invisible to the naked eye."

The judge at Hofmann's preliminary hearing credited Throckmorton and Flynn's testimony with breaking the case:

With their cracked-ink finding, they delivered a totally objective forensic test as to the validity of the documents. That meant we never had to deal with what they said or what they meant.

Since the judge was a Mormon, such impartial expert data restrained any personal feelings he might have experienced about documents which called the origin of his faith into question.

While the description of Throckmorton and Flynn's forensic detective work occupies only a few pages, *The Mormon Murders* singles out the forensic evidence as the linchpin in a strong case by the prosecution. If Throckmorton had not been conscientious in his professional role, it is possible, given the lack of cooperation between the county attorney's office and the police, that Hofmann might at best have been charged with manslaughter, or even have gone free on legal technicalities. For archivists and manuscript curators, the lessons engendered by this case reinforce the importance of valid authentication practices. While the circumstances that nurtured Hofmann's skills as a forger were unique, isolated cases of manuscript fabrication will continue to plague archivists. As a final irony, despite the importance of forensic evidence in convicting Mark Hofmann, the county attorney's office laid off George Throckmorton as a result of an election campaign promise to cut costs.

I highly recommend this version of the Hofmann case because of the authors' thought-provoking analysis of archival issues relating to the LDS church, as well as the dramatic, though not sensationalized, writing style.