

Book Reviews

The Judgment of Experts: Essays and Documents About the Investigation of the Forging of the *Oath of a Freeman*. JAMES GILREATH, ed. Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1991. x, 271 p. ISBN 0-944026-14-1.

It's the stuff of Hollywood: greed, high finance, fraud, and murder. But it's not Saturday Night at the Movies; it's a little piece of American history. This is the story of a document, its forger, and the various professionals whose expertise sussed out the crime.

In March 1985, a rare piece of Americana known as the Oath of a Freeman, turned up on the rare books and manuscripts market. This broadside was reputedly the first English-language document printed in the New World, having issued from the Cambridge Press in Massachusetts in 1638-39. No copy of the Oath (the purpose of which was to swear loyalty to the government of the Massachusetts Commonwealth) was known to exist, although its text was widely known thanks to various manuscript versions and later reprints.

The Oath had been purchased, so the story went, for \$25 in New York City by Mark Hofmann, a Salt Lake City antiquarian manuscripts dealer. Hofmann told two NYC rare children's book dealers, Justin Schiller and Raymond Wapner, about his find and co-opted them by promising them fifty per cent of the profits if they could sell the document for over \$1 million. The two men first approached the Library of Congress, which met the news with sceptical enthusiasm. James Gilreath, who edited this book, is an American history specialist in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress, and it fell to him first to examine the Oath to determine if it was a forgery.

This is a compelling book of interest to conservators, historians, librarians, archivists, and rare book dealers. Gilreath has put together a multi-faceted assemblage of documentation created by various experts enlisted in proving the authenticity of what was potentially the find of the century. The book itself resembles an archival document, rather like a file marked "Forgeries—Oath of a Freeman," containing photocopies of correspondence, textual analyses, chemical and microscopical reports (there is enough scientific detail to make a history major's head spin), photographs and illustrations, receipts, booksellers' catalogues, and transcripts of interviews, all presenting the forgery from a number of different perspectives.

The “file” begins with the Library of Congress’s initial assessment, which, to make a long and fascinating story short, determined that there was nothing textually or physically wrong with the document. Its content was consistent with seventeenth-century language and type, and the ink and paper were considered authentic. Yet the Library of Congress was still suspicious; the main problem from its point of view was the document’s lack of provenance. When the Library of Congress would not commit to paying any money without further tests, Schiller and Wapner cut off negotiations, and tried their case with the American Antiquarian Society. The AAS was more convinced of the document’s authenticity, yet was not prepared to pay the kind of money Hofmann wanted and once again negotiations were suspended.

Hofmann probably would have gotten away with his crime, at least for a little while, had not bombs started going off in Salt Lake City. On 15 October 1985, two explosions killed first a business associate of Hofmann’s, and later in the morning the wife of a business associate. In anticipation of reaping huge profits, Hofmann had gone on a spending spree; the bombs were an attempt to put off his creditors. A third bomb the next day nearly killed Hofmann and started a criminal investigation. In the course of the investigation, a number of things were discovered in Hofmann’s home that showed him to be a forger. Not only was he linked to the forgery of the Oath of a Freeman, but he was also responsible for the Salamander letters, which had threatened to rock the Mormon Church to its very foundations.

This is a much more complex story than can possibly be discussed here, and the details are well worth reviewing through the documentary evidence Gilreath presents. On one level, it is a mystery story. Even though we know from the start who did what to whom, when, where and why, we do not know how. The man at the centre of it all remains silent until the end. Facing the death penalty on two counts of murder, Hofmann agreed to tell all about the forgeries in return for life imprisonment. Photocopies of excerpts from the transcribed interviews conducted in 1987 by attorneys give Hofmann a chance to speak in his own words. Until that point, we do not know how much he knew about his subject, nor how he actually manufactured the forgery. It turns out he knew a great deal. He had the right materials, an understanding of seventeenth-century printing methods, knowledge of American printing history, some chemical know-how, and a very clever mind. Just how sophisticated his methods were, and the lengths to which this criminal would go, should serve as a valuable lesson to all who deal with rare books and manuscripts.

Gilreath’s book maintains its docu-drama feel until the very end. The dramatic interviews with Hofmann lead us into thinking that we have been reading the text of a screenplay. We expect parenthetical camera directions: Hofmann is escorted back to the Utah State Prison ... the iron door slams shut with a resonating din ... the criminal extends a cool and unrepentant stare through the bars of his prison cell. Instead, the book ends with a whimper, on a prosaic note about shellac. A conclusion, perhaps some further information about the state of Hofmann, would have been useful. I found myself wishing (probably for the first time) that Hofmann was a guest on Phil Donohue’s show, being asked those intimate, prying questions: Where did you learn to make bombs? Did your wife know what was

going on in the basement of your home? Does your mother visit you in prison? Nevertheless, it has done what a good mystery should do—leave one hankering for more.

Besides being a good read, the book made me much more aware of the scientific and technical aspects of document creation and authentication. Yet interestingly, what kept the manuscript librarians from buying the Oath in the first place, despite the preliminary scientific testing, was provenance. Physically, the Oath was almost perfect; what it lacked was a credible genealogy.

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Quick to the Frontier: Canada's Royal Bank. DUNCAN MCDOWALL. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993. 478 p, illus. ISBN 0-7710-5504-8.

In the spring of 1984, historians interested in the role of business in Canadian history met for the first time. At the conference, Duncan McDowall challenged the business and academic communities to overcome their prejudices against the writing of official corporate histories. In the decade since then, few have responded to that challenge. Few Canadian businesses have sought to record their histories, and fewer still have thought to have corporate histories produced by academic historians. At the same time, few academics, even among the small number who might list business history as one of their interests, have focused on writing the history of particular firms, whether commissioned or not.

Perhaps what is needed to stimulate more interest is a Canadian model of what a good corporate history would look like. With *Quick to the Frontier*, the Royal Bank of Canada and Duncan McDowall have provided that model. The Royal Bank provided McDowall with access, resources, and assistance, allowing him to make the best use of what appears to be a rich archival collection. A quick look at McDowall's footnotes reveals how the bank's archivists directed him to executive letterbooks, minutebooks, and various subject files, dating from the 1860s to the 1990s. The bank supported the creation of two databases that will provide the organization, as well as future historians, with a valuable guide to the *Royal Bank Magazine* and the *Monetary Times*. In addition, bank officials directed McDowall to former employees, whose interviews helped ensure that the bank's story would be about people.

In return for preserving and managing its own historical records, for commissioning **and** actively supporting an academic historian, what did the Royal Bank get? Quite simply, the best Canadian corporate history yet written. Duncan McDowall's background as a trained historian is evident throughout the book. The development of the bank is situated in the appropriate historical context; the reader is given a clear sense of the social and economic world beyond the bank's walls. Although McDowall has an eye for interesting stories, he selects only those anecdotes that help illuminate the nature of the bank and its developing corporate culture. Less relevant "human interest" stories are included in vignettes, and therefore do not disrupt the flow of the main history. As a historian, McDowall also knows what other sources to consult when the bank's records are silent. Perhaps most signifi-