

Why Were Scholars Misled? What Can We Learn from This?

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IN THE MAY 1986 MORMON HISTORY ASSOCIATION MEETINGS, a panel of historians and archivists explored the impact of the Mark Hofmann documents on the LDS and RLDS churches and views of their common origin. Soon after these papers were published (*DIALOGUE*, Winter 1986) came Hofmann's stunning confession, not only to the murders of two people in October 1985, but also to the forgery of numerous documents "discovered" since 1980. The confusion and concern resulting from these revelations gave rise to another symposium and panel, held at Brigham Young University on 6 August 1987.

This panel convened to explore two questions in relation to the Mark Hofmann forgeries: Why were scholars, archivists, document examiners, and church officials misled so thoroughly; and what has been learned through this long and painful process?

First, why were so many misled? I believe that Hofmann's notably sophisticated historical perspective was an important factor. His documents seemed to settle easily into the historical milieu of early Latter Day Saint beginnings. Salamanders, witching sticks, seer stones, buried treasures, talismans — these and other symbols and usages of the folk magic of New England and Western New York in the 1820s surrounded the budding young prophet and his family in Manchester Township. We have learned this from the writings of D. Michael Quinn, Ronald Walker, Richard Bushman, and Jan Shipps, much of which was published near or soon after the time the "white salamander" letter surfaced.

Hofmann's closely guarded secret of his own disillusionment with the traditional story told by his church of its miraculous beginnings also misled us. He had begun to doubt that official story early in his adolescence. It was as if he had been robbed of his late childhood by the trauma of realizing just how powerfully that honored tradition clashed with his own sense of things as they

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must have been, back there with Joseph Smith, in the “burnt over district.” It would take the woeful October events of 1985 and their aftermath for investigators to exhume Hofmann’s agnosticism from six generations of family faith. The prosecutor’s discovery of Hofmann’s loss of faith — drawn from his personal journal entries as a lad — would engage the mind of any scholar who has raised serious faith questions about LDS history.

No longer would scholars be misled, for now they understood, with an anguish born of their drive to believe the best about themselves and others, that Hofmann was a person they should never have trusted. His own emerging story projected images of vanity, greed, opportunism, and an insensitivity to the integrity so foundational to friendship and all honorable human covenants of trust. Hofmann had been utterly undeserving of the trust of others, yet wholly convincing in his repeated assurances for nearly a decade. Scholars were misled by the plausibility of his documents from every perspective, and by his engaging, if elusive, stories of how they had come into his hands. His lies were told with such apparent candor and offhand humility that concern for *genuine* provenance faded in the face of provenance *by implication* — authenticity soaring on the wings of some very believable lies.

Finally, some were misled by a subtle distinction of forensic science. For example, Albert Somerford and James Dibowski, renowned forensic examiners of questioned documents, each with nearly forty years service in criminal investigations with the U.S. Postal Service, and neither in any way related to Mormonism or the RLDS church, examined the Joseph Smith III blessing document in 1981. They found through their careful testing no reason to consider the Joseph Smith III blessing document a forgery. It seemed to me then that they had “authenticated” that document. And so I wrote to the people of the RLDS church: “the Joseph Smith III blessing document is authentic.” So authentic, in view of Somerford’s and Dibowski’s findings, that I was willing to finalize the exchange with Mormon church officials of a genuine 1833 Book of Commandments for Hofmann’s blessing document. And just weeks before that, Mormon church officials had traded away valuable artifacts to Mr. Hofmann to obtain the Joseph Smith III blessing document in the first place. This they had done on the strength of Dean Jessee’s analysis of its two handwritings and physical properties. We were to learn from George Throckmorton five years later, however, that the best that forensic technology can do is to raise doubts as to a document’s authenticity by pointing out evidences of forgery. Technically, then, the authenticity of the Salamander letter, the Anthon transcript, the Lucy Mack Smith letter, the Joseph Smith letter of June 1825, and the Joseph Smith III blessing document was never *established* but only *believed in* by those who trusted expert testimony that there was no evidence of forgery — that is, until after the October 1985 bombings.

Now to the second question: What can we learn from this? First we can learn to demand (though we may not get it) an unbroken, verifiable chain of ownership and conveyance to every valuable document and artifact that requires our evaluation. We have learned that Hofmann’s consistent refusals to supply provenance rested squarely on his inability to do so in believable ways.

Instead he told fanciful stories of networking with others, unusual coincidences, and hard work combined with uncommon resourcefulness and tenacity. We can learn from this that as believable and enticing as such stories from a master forger can be, they are no substitute for an artifact's impeccable pedigree. From this day forth, archivists, collectors, scholars, and dealers will no doubt be more demanding on this point than ever before.

We can also learn to be more sensitive to our young scholars, from junior high years on up. They often develop what seems to be an inordinate curiosity about the *real* past that lurks behind the stories of heroes and villains that for the most part make up "official" church history. Once every generation or so a few of these troublesome questioners find the courage to ask someone else, out loud, their questions. I, for one, stand committed to be that "someone else" who cares enough about intellectual rigor and integrity to encourage the asking of such questions. We need mature individuals who are willing and open to explore the issues with those young minds. We need individuals who can challenge youth ever to embrace and to be embraced by the quest for historical truth, in all its complexity, ambiguity, and anomalous beauty.

Finally, I believe we can learn to value what Mark Hofmann has taught us through this whole painful course of events. I affirm that at least we can learn from him that our personal religious stories can never safely be isolated from the rest of our lives. While in a sense there is history on the one hand and faith on the other, Hofmann's tragedy seems to warn all serious scholars as well as all "faithful" souls. Simply put, Hofmann teaches us that holding our faith separate and distinct from our historical conceptions is most safely done in exploratory exercises in the seminar, in the classroom, and in theoretical discussions among friends who are committed to mutual growth through understanding. In the end, our individual stories, our faith journeys, are best nurtured and most fully informed by a historical quest seasoned with theological grounding and undergirded by a logical and meaningful philosophical method.

Integrating the power of faith and the discipline of analytical history can best occur in an empathetic community. There we can be fully *for* one another in ways and to degrees that would help prevent the emergence of another Mark Hofmann — hopelessly isolated among family and friends, driven by despair and disillusionment over faith and history which cannot fit together. In the end, such persons must suffer the agonies of a life of lies, torment, guilt, fear, and, as was Hofmann's tragedy, the ultimate degradation — the taking of other human lives just to avoid facing the truth about oneself.

I look with pity and sorrow on the trail of broken dreams Hofmann left behind him. I give thanks, however, that the story of his violent life highlights in bold relief the potentially redemptive power of the members of the compassionate community. Quietly, day by day, they willingly invest boundless energies into seeing that every last member of the community will know the expanding life of learning the glorious and sometimes painful truths of God's universe, "even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118; 85:36a, RLDS ed.).