[INVESTIGATIVE FILES JOE NICKELL

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Occult Angel: The Mormon Forgeries and Bombing Murders

In October 1985 in Salt Lake City, Utah, two bombing murders drew attention across the United States. Then a third bombing occurred, but the victim survived. When detectives went to his hospital room to interview the man—a young Mormon who sold rare historical documents—they caught him in a lie about how he had reached in his car for a parcel someone had placed there. Thus was exposed Mark W. Hofmann as the probable murderer. In time, it would also be learned that Hofmann was one of the greatest forgers of all time who had fooled some of the best-known experts.

Perhaps Hofmann's most controversial document was the "salamander letter," supposedly penned in 1830. One of numerous Mormon-related papers Hofmann sold, it assigned somewhat scandalous occult-magic practices to an earlier con man, Mormon founder Joseph Smith, who purportedly recovered golden plates on which the text of the Book of Mormon was bestowed. Hofmann's greed and warped genius, which led him to face both financial ruin and possible criminal exposure, had ultimately led to the bombings. Although the FBI laboratory and a historical-document expert failed to disprove the salamander letter's authenticity, I provided early evidence to the district attorney's office that it was a fake. Much more evidence would follow. This is a summary of that long, grim, and fascinating case.

Mormon Seer

The founder of the Mormon church—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—was Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1844), who was allegedly visited by an angel.

He had been born into a poor unchurched but religious family in Sharon,

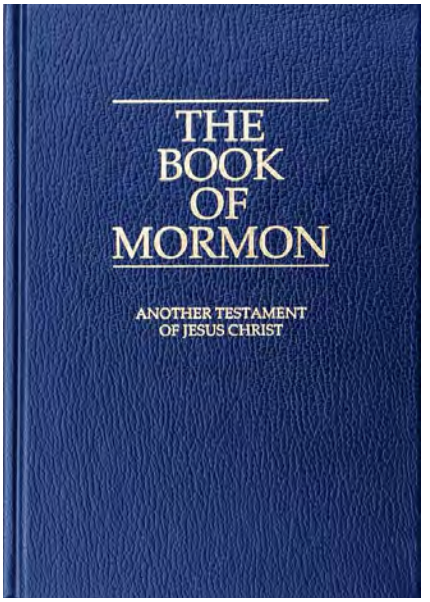
Vermont, the third of nine children. A contemporary recalled him as a disheveled boy who wore patched clothing with homemade suspenders and a battered hat. He was characterized as a "good talker" with a "fertile imagination," indeed "a romancer of the first water" (Taves 1984, 16). At the age of fourteen, troubled by religious rivals in his locale, he sought out, he said, a wooded area where he hoped to commune directly with God.

This, his first attempt, found him surrounded by a thick darkness and "seized upon by some power," an "enemy which held me bound." He then saw "two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description." One called him by name and, gesturing at the other, said, "This is my beloved son, hear Him." He asked the two personages which of the various sects was the right one to join, but he was told all were corrupt. "And many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time" (quoted in Brodie 1993, 21–22).

Smith would give different versions of his visions, but they apparently seemed genuinely real to him. His account suggests he probably dozed off and experienced a common "waking dream" (a hypnagogic hallucination that occurs between being fully awake and asleep). And his reference to an entity having "held me bound" suggests the immobility caused by the sleep paralysis that often accompanies such an experience (Nickell 2013, 279).

At the age of seventeen, Smith had another such vision, again entirely consistent with a hypnagogic hallucination. This was the appearance *at his bedside* of a white-robed "messenger" named Moroni who was sent to say that God had work for him to do (Taves 1984, 277). The following year, 1823, Smith claimed Moroni revealed the existence of a new gospel called the Book of Mormon, engraved on gold plates that were hidden in a hill near Palmyra, New York.

Smith translated, or pretended to translate, the alleged plates by scrying (crystal gazing), an occult technique he had already employed in the folk practice of "money digging"—searching for buried treasure for clients. He was once



arrested for imposture (Persuitte 2000, 40–53; Taves 1984, 17–18). However, he appears to have been a "fantasizer"—that is, to have had what is called a fantasy-prone personality (Wilson and Barber 1983; Nickell 2013, 281). (Of course, deception and fantasy are not mutually exclusive.) Significantly, say Wilson and Barber (1983, 371), "individuals manifesting the fantasy-prone syndrome may have been overrepresented among famous mediums, psychics, and religious visionaries of the past." And they specifically include Joseph Smith in their list of historical fantasizers (Wilson and Barber 1983, 372).

For the translating, Smith used his imagination while also borrowing from certain contemporary writings. He would sit on one side of the room staring into a special seer stone, with an early convert named Martin Harris on the other side, writing at a table, a blanket across a rope separating the two (Taves 1984, 35–40). After the translation, Smith claimed, he returned the plates to the angel Moroni—thus thwarting critics who wished to examine them. Harris was permitted to show a "transcript" of the plates' text to certain experts, including Columbia University professor Charles Anthon. Anthon concluded the language was bogus and the tale a hoax. However, Smith persuaded the credulous Harris that the original scribe had switched to a "shorthand" form of Egyptian writing unknown to the professor.

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After the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, Joseph Smith and associate Oliver Crowdery—having allegedly been conferred priests by divine revelation to Smith—officially founded the Church of Christ at Fayette, New York. Eight years later, the name was changed to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Smith and his brethren founded a settlement at Kirkland, Ohio, also establishing a bank *after* he ran out of money! To convince creditors of its security, he reportedly filled the vault's strongboxes with sand, scrap iron, etc., and topped that with a layer of bright half-dollar silver coins. Prospective customers were thrilled until the bank failed in 1838 and Smith "declared bankruptcy with his feet," fleeing with his followers. He founded other communities, meeting his end in Nauvoo on the Mississippi River when a mob stormed the jail where he and his brother Hyrum were held (Hansen 1995, 365).

White Salamander

Forger Mark Hofmann must have cynically admired con man Joseph Smith, whom he came to imitate. Hofmann fabricated numerous documents regarding the colorful and controversial history of the Latter-day Saints movement. By focusing on and even inflating the questionable magical practices of Smith—something of an embarrassment to the orthodox views of the modern church—Hofmann may well have believed church authorities would want to suppress the documents by acquiring them, thus significantly increasing their selling price on the historical market. But it is still debatable to what extent that may have been the case.

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markedly from the accepted version of Smith's practices. It conjured up, so to speak, previously unheard of aspects of Smith's involvement with the occult. The letter was supposedly penned by Martin Harris (who had written down Smith's "translations" from the gold plates) and addressed an early Mormon convert named William Wines Phelps. Hofmann benefitted from the fact that there were almost no authenticated examples of Harris's handwriting except for signatures (Throckmorton 1988, 544). In the letter, "Harris" refers to the use of a seer stone, enchantments, and conversing "with spirits." "Joseph," he says, "found some giant silver spectacles with the [gold] plates"; he "puts them in an old hat & in the darkness reads the words & in this way it is all translated and written down" ("Salamander letter" 2020).

The letter's major innovation is that instead of the angel Moroni, "Harris" mentions a "white salamander" that transformed itself into a spirit and gave instructions to Joseph. To obtain the "gold bible," he was to bring with him his brother Alvin. However, because Alvin was dead and buried, Joseph asks, "shall I bring what remains?"—but the spirit has vanished, only to say later, "I tricked you again." (The 1993 film *The God Makers II*, supposedly an exposé of Mormonism, suggests that Joseph Smith was indeed required to exhume his brother's remains and bring a portion to receive the gold plates, but the only source for this scandalous "fact" is the bogus salamander letter.) To address the issue of the controversial white salamander, Hofmann showed one researcher an 1828 dictionary that indicated a salamander could be assigned mystical powers such as living in fire; thus, it could conceivably be an angelic messenger that transformed into a spirit ("Salamander letter" 2020; Sillitoe and Roberts 1988, 275).

Hofmann initially attracted little suspicion, because he himself was a Mormon with a reputation for being both extremely knowledgeable and honest in the field of historical documents. His forgeries were so good that they fooled collectors and even document dealers. A persistent problem was unproven provenance (historical record), but the chain of ownership of many genuinely old documents cannot be established. Still, Hofmann's often too-good-to-be-true offerings did raise some doubts, and those increased after the bombings in October 1985 and again after he was charged with two murders, forgery, and fraud in February 1986.

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The salamander letter had presented special problems as to authentication. Prominent historical-document dealer Kenneth W. Rendell stated that the paper, ink, handwriting, and postmark were all consistent with the 1830 date, concluding that there was nothing to indicate that missive was anything other than authentic. Similarly, a report by the FBI laboratory stated that no signs of forgery were discovered (Sillitoe and Roberts 1988, 170, 291–292). However, I later spotted the salamander letter as a fake from a photograph. It had been folded and sealed incorrectly for a letter of 1830—before envelopes were common. I reported this in a letter to prosecutor Gerry D'Elia (Nickell 1986), while forensic examiners were preparing their case against Hofmann.

Set a Thief …

Mark Hofmann and I had, quite ironically, parallel careers. By about the late 1970s, we were each studying watermarks and other aspects of antique paper, formulating inks from original recipes, learning to cut quill pens, practicing period styles of handwriting, and acquiring numerous other esoteric skills in making fake historical

documents. Hofmann was doing his work in secret, motivated by greed and sociopathic tendencies. I, on the other hand, called myself an "academic forger" and promised autograph expert Charles Hamilton that—if he would tutor me in the art of forgery—I would never turn to a life of crime. I was operating on the old principle "Set a thief to catch a thief" (as I had done earlier in a more targeted fashion when I worked undercover as a Pinkerton detective to infiltrate criminal operations).

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Indeed, not only would Hamilton agree and provide a generous foreword to my magnum opus, *Pen, Ink, & Evidence* (Nickell 1990, vii), but when he served as a consultant to the prosecution in the Hofmann case, he suggested they seek my advice on the matter of ink. Hamilton would have said something like, "Nickell probably knows as much about making and artificially aging iron-gallotannate ink as anyone—with the possible exception of Mark Hofmann."

Thus prosecutor Gerry D'Elia (whom I had earlier advised about the incorrectly folded salamander letter) telephoned me at the University of Kentucky about Hofmann's suspected forgeries. I went over the basics of making iron-gall ink: soaking crushed oak galls in rainwater to extract tannic and gallic acids, straining the decoction, and adding copperas (hydrated iron sulfate) to create a chemical reaction that yields a black color, followed by gum arabic to increase viscosity and act as a binder. (See Nickell 1990, 37, for a photo essay on this procedure.) I also advised D'Elia how one could make a similar ink using an ordinary chemistry set or even improvise an iron-gall ink from household items, such as using instant tea for the tannic acid.

Our discussion then turned to "old" iron-gall ink as it typically appears on historical documents. D'Elia wanted to know how the ink could be artificially aged to simulate the black ink having turned rust-colored. I explained that there are basically two methods. One involves heating (slowly baking the document or applying a hot iron—both risky to the paper). The other uses chemicals: hydrogen peroxide or ammonium hydroxide. D'Elia then indicated to me that Hofmann had apparently used the latter because, under ultraviolet light, his suspect documents looked as if they had been dipped in some solution and then hung up to dry.

A subsequent forensic report on the Hofmann documents (compared with actual historical documents) discussed the use of hydrogen peroxide or ammonium hydroxide to artificially age the ink (and also produce a telltale "slight blue hazing effect on the paper itself," under ultraviolet light).

As to the mis-folded, pre-envelope salamander letter, the report also stated (after Nickell 1986), "Most stampless cover letters are folded so that the contents are not visible unless [the] sealing wax is broken. This letter was folded so that one end was open, and the contents could be seen by looking in the end" (Throckmorton 1988, 544).

The homicides were more straightforwardly dealt with than the forgeries. As to motive, Hofmann had been threatened with civil and criminal consequences—by Steve Christensen (who had purchased the salamander letter) and others. Evidence showed that the explosive devices were pipe bombs with generic components, fitted with mercury switches (Sillitoe and Roberts 1988, 450–454).

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On January 23, 1987, justice was handed out. Mark Hofmann avoided the death penalty by agreeing to plead guilty to two counts of second-degree murder—of Steven F. Christensen and Kathleen W. Sheets—plus one count of second-degree theft by deception for selling the salamander letter to Christensen and one count of obtaining money from a man named Alvin Rust for a nonexistent batch of documents known as the McLellin collection. Hofmann agreed to answer questions about these crimes before his plea was entered in court, and several other charges in Utah and New York were dismissed (Sillitoe and Roberts 1988, 474–481).

Left unresolved were many other forged documents that seem to match Hofmann's *modus operandi* and show up from time to time. Those I have disauthenticated include a promissory note (signed with an "X") by famed mountain man Jim Bridger and an incomplete copy (missing the first page) of the forged Gettysburg Address "signed" by Abraham Lincoln (Nickell 2009, 94–95, 67–79). Historians and collectors, beware. ■

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