

The Document Diggers and Their Discoveries: A Panel

The Context

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Mormon history has always been a hot topic. From the earliest days of Church history over a century and a half ago, vastly divergent accounts of the origins and development of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been penned and published. In many cases, controversies about LDS historical topics have spilled over into the national press. In the last generation, for example, disputes about the accuracy of Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* and Juanita Brooks's *Mountain Meadows Massacre* have been avidly covered in national newspapers and magazines.

Most scholars of Mormon (or Restoration) history have long been aware of the fact that theirs is a field fraught with well-publicized controversy. In spite of this, few of them were prepared for the sensational series of document discoveries announced in the last six years or for the eager attention given these discoveries by Mormons, anti-Mormons, and the national press.

Many of us remember the evening in Canandaigua, New York, six years ago at the opening plenary session of the 1980 Mormon History association meetings when a soft-spoken but engaging young man named Mark Hofmann discussed his first big discovery, the Anthon Transcript. Hofmann ran across this 1828 transcription of characters from the plates in Joseph Smith's own hand between the pages of an old Bible purchased from a Salt Lake man. None of us anticipated then that this historically exciting but basically non-controversial discovery would launch Hofmann on a career of document finds that would shake the profession from its moorings and eventually place many historians under direct or indirect attack by LDS General Authorities.

Since the first big find in 1980, Hofmann has announced the discovery of other "blockbuster" documents with almost uncanny regularity. In 1981 Hofmann sold the LDS Church an 1844 blessing to Joseph Smith III in which his father, the Mormon prophet, named his son as his successor. The document was later traded to the RLDS Church. In August 1982, the LDS Church announced its acquisition from a private collector of Hofmann's next significant

discovery, an 1829 letter by Lucy Mack Smith which discussed her son's gifts of translation and discernment, and his reaction to Martin Harris's loss of the initial 116 pages of the Book of Mormon translation.

In 1984 financial analyst and Mormon document collector Steve Christensen purchased the now famous "salamander letter," written by Martin Harris, one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, to W. W. Phelps, a newspaper editor who would eventually join the Church. The letter reports Joseph Smith's account of taking possession of the golden plates and includes a reference to the "old spirit" who guarded the plates and "transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole." If taken literally, the Harris account would appear to contradict the Church-sanctioned version of the story which states that the plates were handed over to Joseph Smith by an angel. Christensen donated the letter to the Church in April 1985.

The salamander letter references to what had long been considered to be pagan superstitions were circulated with great glee by a number of militant anti-Mormons for more than a year before the Church's official announcement of the letter. This discomfort within the Church caused by the salamander letter's apparent references to folk magic was intensified with the announcement accompanying the Church's publication of the salamander letter that it had also purchased from Hofmann a letter dated 8 June 1825, from young Joseph to Pennsylvania farmer Josiah Stowell explaining how proper use of a split hazel stick could summon a "clever spirit" to lead him to buried Spanish treasure.

After weathering the initial shock, historians of Mormonism launched fascinating explorations into the largely forgotten world of New England folk magic in which Joseph Smith was raised. But the exhilaration of discovering a heretofore little-known world where intense Christian commitment was frequently combined with a faith in magical spirits was dampened by the fact that the newly found documents appeared to inspire a defensive attitude among several LDS Church authorities, some of whom condemned historical inquiry as a challenge to the faith.

On 15 October 1985, the profound disquiet caused by the Hofmann documents was transformed into tragedy as Steve Christensen, a Salt Lake financial analyst, bishop, and collector of Mormon documents, and Kathy Sheets, wife of a Christensen associate, were murdered by planted bombs. The police search for the murderer quickly focused upon Hofmann, who himself had been gravely injured when a bomb in his car exploded on the afternoon of Wednesday, 16 October. Hofmann committed these desperate acts, the police claimed, to prevent Christensen from finding out the truth about the fraud, misrepresentation, and forgery that had characterized Hofmann's document dealings. After a preliminary hearing in April and May, 1986, Hofmann was bound over for a trial on two charges of first degree murder, on charges of delivering bombs and construction or possession of a bomb, and on multiple counts of document forgery and fraud.

In the face of such tumult, the program committee for the 1986 meetings of the Mormon History Association felt that the time had come for a wide-

ranging assessment of the impact this sensational document series has had on Mormon history. Many historians had questions about the shrouded demi-monde of professional document dealers in which Hofmann operated. What are the "standard" conventions of the profession? Was Hofmann's usual practice of concealing the sources of his documents a normal one for document brokers? How extensive must authentication be before most documents are sold? What methods did Hofmann and his network of investigators employ that brought him such apparently phenomenal success?

We asked Allen D. Roberts to address these questions. Roberts is a prominent Salt Lake architect who has been engaged in supporting and contributing to Mormon history for many years. Former president of the Sunstone Foundation, Roberts presently sits on the *DIALOGUE* board of editors and recently co-authored a major magazine article on the Salt Lake bombings and their aftermath. He is collaborating with Linda Sillito on a book about the bombings that has required a probing look into the document dealers' world and Hofmann's place within it.

The well-publicized profits that Hofmann made from many of his transactions inspired thousands of others to seek their fortunes in back drawers and attic trunks. Mormon document sales became big business with private collectors, religious organizations, and long-established archival collections bidding up the price for the most valuable prizes. The "document wars" of the 1980s have had a radical — and in Jeffery Johnson's view — extremely unfavorable impact on the traditional archival collections. Johnson, currently in charge of the Reference Bureau for the Utah State Archives and former senior archivist for the LDS Church, gives a searing assessment of the problems caused for historians and the damage done to the Mormon documentary heritage by those who see documents primarily as a source of profit.

The program committee was especially eager to give members of the association an opportunity to take a longer and wider look at the document discoveries of the 1980s, assessing not only the documents themselves, but the controversies stirred by the discoveries. To take on this difficult task, we sought two senior historians whose work has commanded high respect among their colleagues and whose broad-ranging interests in Mormon history would give them the perspective necessary to comment on the field as a whole. We were most gratified that two scholars who meet these qualifications in every detail accepted this challenging assignment. James B. Allen, currently chairman of the History Department at Brigham Young University is a former Assistant LDS Historian with a long list of distinguished books and articles to his credit. His biography of William Clayton is currently in press, and the highly regarded *Story of the Latter-Day Saints*, which he wrote with Glen Leonard, has recently been reprinted. He is currently working on a twentieth-century history of the LDS Church.

Richard Howard, RLDS Church Historian, has made equally impressive contributions to the field of restoration studies. His monthly articles in the *Saints' Herald* are models of high-quality, incisive historical writing. Howard is currently at work on a narrative history of the RLDS Church.

The remarks of these two distinguished historians demonstrate clearly why their profession holds them in such respect. Their explorations of the consequences of the first six years of the “document decade” has led them to insights about the very nature of historical inquiry and to the shared observation that even if all the Hofmann “discoveries” are eventually proven to be forgeries, they will have changed the face of the profession in many deeply significant, and generally positive ways.

The Hofmann Case: Six Issues

Allen D. Roberts

I feel that it is appropriate, in this setting and this company, to take a moment to acknowledge the memory of Steven Christensen — my friend, your friend, a great lover of history and supporter of the Mormon History Association. Would you join me as I bow my head and remember Steve?

I realize as I look out over this audience that I will need to speak to many of you over the next year or so as Linda Sillitoe and I try to reconstruct the events that have brought Mormon history to the place it is now, have sent Steve and Kathy Sheets to their deaths, and have indicted Mark Hofmann on counts of murder and fraud. I am very conscious about how careful I need to be on my behalf and Linda’s as I speak.

At present, interpreting recent events seems no easier than interpreting events of the distant past. Trying to explain the rare Mormon document business generally and the activities of Mark Hofmann specifically is like trying to fully account for what happened when Pandora’s box was thrown open and the contents spewed forth, swirling about and settling all over the land. The Salt Lake City bombing murders case with its intriguing sub-plot of possible document forgery and fraud is complex and, for the moment, unsolved. In terms of its impact on Utah and Mormon life, it may be the most important murder case since the Mountain Meadows Massacre. It appears that we have Mormon killing Mormon, perhaps because of money but also over documents of historical and religious significance — facts which have not escaped the attention of observers and writers worldwide.

Despite the magnetic interest and importance of this case for all of us, I must identify some reservations which will be reflected in my discussion. First, I believe strongly in the American judicial principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. I do not want to contribute to the already massive amount of pre-trial judging and condemning. We must remember the rights of both the accused and the victims, including the survivors of those who were killed.

Second, I am keenly aware of the dangers in making too many assumptions, especially about documents, because much of the evidence is still not in. The defense has not yet spoken. Many key witnesses including some previously

positive document authenticators have not spoken; and the accused, Mark Hofmann, has not had his day in court. While it may seem that there is no way of explaining away damning information presented in the preliminary hearing, there are still nagging questions being asked by those who maintain that a reasonable doubt persists. How, for example, could the mastermind(s) behind one of the most complicated and brilliant forgery schemes ever devised make such obviously thoughtless blunders as carrying a clearly addressed package up an elevator while dressed in one's favorite letter jacket in direct view of two potential witnesses? Or how could one person perpetrate such a huge number of heretofore undetected forgeries of every conceivable kind without the help of others? To date, no other parties have been named as conspirators. The single-event scenario that police and prosecutors have drawn seems incomplete. Further, how could a young, seemingly untrained college student make forgeries of such quality as to be pronounced "consistent with the period" (the closest terminology to "authentic") by two of the nation's leading writers of books on forgery detection? There may be answers to these questions; but until they are established using legal rules of evidence, we would be wise and fair to reserve judgment about both the murders and the documents.

Having said that, what remains for us to discuss? I think we can examine the issues presented by this case and deal with possible answers to key document-related questions which will need to be answered before the case is resolved (and I allow for the possibility that it may never be fully resolved). So my intention here is to ask and attempt to answer, in a preliminary way, six questions which seem essential to this case.

1. Is it likely or even possible that one person could locate authentic documents of the quality, quantity, and diverse type reportedly found by Mark Hofmann? Most document dealers and heads of archives I have interviewed say yes. They point to their own finds of remarkable documents, usually discovered without extraordinary effort. They say that if they were to work at it full time with a support team of researchers and lead-chasers, they could confidently expect excellent results. In a sense the field is white already to harvest, in that tens of thousands of books, pamphlets, letters and so forth, exist undiscovered — largely because only a few people are searching for them.

2. By what methods do dealers find rare documents? The methods vary from dealer to dealer but some common denominators of successful finders are (1) a good knowledge of Mormon history, particularly of families and individuals of importance, (2) an understanding of and willingness to do painstaking genealogical and historical research, and (3) capital sufficient to travel widely to pursue such research and to purchase documents.

The finding process often involves clear thinking and hard work, not just good luck or "stumbling across" an important item. One starts by determining what things have been printed, or where and by whom letters may have been written. Reverse genealogy is one process by which descendants of early Mormons may be contacted for now-rare documents they have received from their ancestors. By starting with John L. Traughber, for example, who lived in Texas at the turn of the century, and working forward only one generation, a

researcher helped *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter Dawn Tracy find H. Otis Traugher who possessed some journals written by early apostle-turned-apostate William E. McLellin. This research took only a couple of hours and twenty dollars to complete. Multiply this effort and success several times and you approach what well-financed Mark Hofmann may have been achieving with his team of paid researchers and scouts.

Other techniques used by document dealers include searching through book stores and antique stores, sifting through stampless cover and autograph collections, examining document collections of libraries and archives, attending auctions, buying from catalogues and through national networks of sellers with related collecting interests, going door-to-door in historic Mormon places, following up rumors, referrals, or citations of footnotes in journals, books, and papers, and so forth.

I have personally found some books, magazines, glass negatives of historic photographs, and artifacts of value with virtually no effort. I was simply in the area and, during casual conversations, learned of their existence. I know of an elderly lady in this city who possesses some journals written by Parley P. Pratt. They are in a trunk in an attic. My guess is that Hofmann, Lyn Jacobs, Rick Grunder, Peter Crawley, Brent Ashworth, Sam Weller, Deseret Book, Church and university archives, and all the other collectors, have only scratched the surface in finding the rare books and documents that may be extant.

3. How do document dealers do business and command such high prices for pieces of paper? Again, styles vary but basically this is a buy-low, sell-high business, much like the purchase of real estate, cars, coins, or any other commodity. Items of exceptional content or in excellent condition command premium prices. Ranges of values for printed documents are fairly well established or can be appraised using dealers' catalogues, recent auction results, or other market precedents.

Written holographs are harder to place values on because they are unique, but the importance of the writer and the content are the most value-laden qualities. Consider the difference in value between a single banknote signed by Joseph Smith, compared with the last letter he purportedly penned to General Dunham from Carthage Jail just before his death. The letter sold for \$20,000, resold for \$90,000 and then \$110,000 before finally being again sold, strangely, for \$60,000 in what was obviously a very convoluted and unusual set of transactions.

Styles of individual finders, sellers, and buyers vary, but secrecy is a common characteristic. Successful dealers conceal their sources jealously. Transactions usually involve confidentiality, especially about the prices paid for documents. Agents are brought in for big-dollar items such as "Oath of a Free Man," or "The Haunted Man" manuscript. To enhance credibility, some dealers sometimes — though not always — try to demonstrate provenance. Mark Hofmann seldom if ever established provenance.

As I have interviewed dozens of people in this field, the feeling has gradually emerged that the unwritten rules of document trades include accepting a certain amount of ruthlessness and minor deception or misrepresentation in

dealing. Almost without exception, every dealer, buyer, or seller I have talked to has a story about how he or someone else was taken advantage of by another supposedly reputable dealer. The gray hats are far more abundant than the black and white ones.

4. How did the prices for Mormon documents get so high? Are the prices realistic and a fair representation of value? It is important to understand that the prices do seem high if we compare them to documents written by such nationally prominent people as Washington, Jefferson, or Lincoln, whose documents often bring lower prices than some of the higher prices paid for Mormon items. Recently I read an article by Charles Hamilton in which he listed the prices for various documents signed by prominent people, ranging all the way from a low of three or four hundred dollars for Jesse James items to \$25,000 for items from the very important presidents.

But some of the Mormon documents have brought much higher figures. It is clear that we are dealing with the phenomenon of supply and demand here. Collectors of Mormon documents have been willing to pay prices in the tens of thousands of dollars — or more — for unique items of unusual content. Among the collecting types or groups we have the LDS Church Archives, individual General Authorities, various other institutional collectors, plus private collectors, some of whom buy for keeps, others of whom buy for resell or trade. Private dealers like Hofmann also have extensive dealing with commercial dealers like the rare book department of the downtown Deseret Book store.

In addition, individual dealers often combine forces with other collectors or dealers to put together enough capital to go after expensive items. Thus we have Alvin Rust giving Mark Hofmann \$180,000 to buy the McLellin collection, while a trio consisting of Hugh Pinnock, Steve Christensen, and David Sorenson attempted to buy the same collection. Several parties thought they were buying the "Haunted Man" manuscript. It appears that many collectors have been eager to put out large sums of money for documents. Collectors' motives become irrelevant in an environment where they are led to believe they are in competition to obtain a one-of-a-kind, symbolically priceless document.

In a culture in which we have faith in historical events as well as gospel principles, it is not hard to understand why some may want to own pieces of history. Whether the motive is to own, safeguard, or expose history, a tangible remnant of that past can represent for Mormons a pearl of great price.

5. What measures are taken to authenticate rare documents? The answer to this question in the future will undoubtedly differ from that of the recent past, given the current controversy. Representatives from institutional and commercial archives have said during interviews with me that they have rarely if ever conducted physical tests on documents. Former Church Archivist Don Schmidt testified recently that only a few of the forty-eight documents he helped obtain for the Church from Mark Hofmann had undergone extensive testing. This should not be too surprising since until recently, no group or individual in Utah had ever reported buying a document which later proved to be a forgery.

As we have learned through the unraveling of the complicated story of AFCO investments, which has produced jail sentences for fraud for its chief officer, coupled with an embarrassingly long list of other scams, people in Utah are incredibly trusting and unquestioning. A major exception seems to be that they are often suspicious of the value of "expensive" professional consultants who, in fact, might protect them. At the same time, they love bargains and high-risk, speculative ventures which promise to return big profits. It is thus easy to see how such gullibility could be exploited by an unscrupulous historic documents con artist.

I do not mean to say that no safeguards were ever taken. The LDS Church for example, submitted some documents to those familiar with the handwriting of the purported writer. Those doing the review, however, were not professionally and technically trained in the detection of forgery. Top-flight forgers can only be exposed by a few equally expert authenticators.

Even then, it appears to me that forgery detection is far from a hard science. I have seen a variety of styles among authenticators and forensic examiners. Some look at handwriting; others look at ink and/or paper; some study internal evidence such as the accuracy of the content. A host of mechanical devices can be brought to bear on potential forgeries including, most recently, the cyclotron which has been used to examine Gutenberg's documents. But authentication is an expensive luxury, one not needed or used until the recent crisis.

6. The police have a long list of possible forgeries. How likely is it that all of them are, in fact, forged? Some historians close to particular documents believe that certain documents like the "salamander letter" or the Joseph Smith III blessing are authentic. They maintain this belief based on internal evidence and the fact that some documents have passed previous authentication tests.

Utah's only forensics examiner, George Throckmorton, together with prestigious out-of-state colleagues like Kenneth Rendell, Charles Hamilton, Albert Lyter, and William Flynn, seem to think that Hofmann was dealing in large numbers of high-quality forgeries. William Flynn's testimony regarding cracking ink seems to be devastating for believers in the Mormon holographs. We have had an excellent sampling of some of their findings in the preliminary hearing but have yet to see their evidence proven in court. Cross examination may test the consistency and conclusiveness of their data. I simply want to go with the best, most convincing evidence.

In summary, we can say that an environment existed in our culture which made it ripe for exploitation through document misrepresentation and deception. I have suggested some of the contributing factors: a trusting group of buyers, no history of previous documents forgeries to put buyers on guard, and the intense importance of history to Mormons which creates a need to own, safeguard, expose, or defend history.

These conditions have created a tempting sellers' market where buyer could be pitted against buyer, driving prices into a rapidly upward moving spiral. Among some members of our culture, a paranoia about the content of the

documents has been coupled with a naivete about document prices, authentication procedures, and the need for provenance — and perhaps including an over-valuation of the significance of documents to history and perhaps simply a lack of understanding of human nature.

These conditions almost invited someone to step in and take advantage of the situation. What characteristics might such a person or group have? And is there a logical connection between fraud and murder? Here is a possible scenario, one that the police seem to be operating on.

Let us hypothesize an individual or, perhaps, a small group of conspirators. They might have a scheme or master plan. They might have a lack of respect for the institutional Church or perhaps even a desire to seek revenge on the Church for private reasons. They certainly would have facility with Mormon history and literature, probably possess artistic talent and significant technical competence with physical material, and have the appearance of orthodoxy, or at least of being grounded in Mormon culture and teachings. They would probably have persuasive verbal skills and an air of altruism sufficient to build up a reserve of credibility — a trust and reputation for integrity sufficient to withstand inquiries about minor indiscretions. They would also have greed.

Such a scenario indicates a perpetrator or perpetrators who have lost faith in the Church, may have abandoned an orthodox lifestyle, and was determined not only to profit financially from the great interest Mormons have in documents but also to erode people's faith in the Church by showing the dark side of history. In so doing, the perpetrator or perpetrators may have been trapped in the web of their own spinning and, in an act of impulsive desperation never part of the original plan, struck out at those they felt were about to expose them.

This hypothetical situation may or may not be true. Only time will tell. Meanwhile, as an association, as a Church, and as a people, this, too, has become part of our history.

The Damage Done: An Archivist's View

Jeffery O. Johnson

I feel that the reason I'm on this distinguished panel is because I told Allen Roberts that the profession of manuscript dealing was a "sleazy business," and that statement found its way into print in *Utah Holiday* (Roberts 1986, 58). I do not retract that statement, for I speak as an archivist who has seen my profession impacted for the worse as a result of dealing in documents over the last few years. However, I want to be fair and balanced in discussing this sensitive topic. I will make no statements that lie outside my personal knowledge and that I cannot personally document. For the most part, I have no reason to believe that most of the document dealers in Utah are not honorable and honest. I do believe, however, that they have professional interests which some-

times conflict with my professional interests. It is these differences that I wish to discuss.

Twelve years ago when I worked at the Church Historical Department, I remember that a woman named Arlene Cummings brought in an autograph book of Barbara Neff Moses, a plural wife of Julian Moses, her great-grandfather. She felt that this book was important, and she wanted it preserved so that her family and historians could use it. We were delighted to oblige. I still remember the genuine thrill I felt as I looked through it so that I could catalogue its contents. It contains a short poem by Joseph Smith, sentiments by Heber J. Grant, Orson Hyde, W. W. Phelps, Willard Richards, Sydney Rigdon, George A. Smith, George Albert Smith, John Henry Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith, Eliza R. Snow Smith, Lorenzo Snow, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Hannah Tapfield King, John D. Lee, Leonora Cannon Taylor (anything by this first wife of John Taylor's is very precious because there is so little extant that she wrote), Lyman Littlefield, Joseph L. Haywood, Ammon Babbitt, Edwin D. Wooley, Benjamin Winchester, Orson Spencer, and Brigham Young.

Even if their inscriptions had been trivial, the book would still have been important; but the sentiments are far from banal. Many of them expressed profound feelings about the gospel as they wrote in this little autograph book and Joseph Smith's autographed sentiment, though perhaps more consciously witty, is also an insight into his personality:

The truth and virtue both are good
When rightly understood
But charity is better[,] Miss[,]
That takes us home to bliss
and so forthwith
remember Joseph Smith

(This poem is published in Jessee 1984, 576).

From my point of view, the probability that Sister Cummings would today donate that book to the Church Historical Department is greatly reduced. Before I left the Church Historical Department in 1984 for the Utah State Archives, it was not uncommon for people to bring in an ancestor's diary and ask how much we would pay for it. In one case, an individual asked us to place a monetary value on his great-grandfather's patriarchal blessing. I suppose that I am confessing a sort of ivory-tower naivete when I tell you that such instances shock and offend me. I see the value of those documents as inestimable because of their mere existence, documents that have survived time and that have the capability of speaking to future generations in the irreplaceable voice of the past. They have their own worth — historical worth. It shifts the ground of that value to translate them into potential dollars — as though a father would measure his children's worth by the number of A's they brought home on their report cards.

But are the document dealers to blame for this? I think that we can document some of this regrettable change in attitude through the autograph catalogs. If you compared autograph and manuscript catalogues in the middle

1970s with the most recent editions, you would see a great difference. For example, I recall seeing a letter from Sarah P. Rich to her husband, Charles C. Rich, exhibited for sale locally for about \$300, the same price as a letter by Brigham Young that I saw advertised for sale in about 1975. Both dealt with domestic affairs and so it was not the content of the letter that determined its value. Instead, it was the author's identity that was marketable, yet there is a great difference between the president of the Church and the wife of an apostle.

It seems clear to me that the field of Mormon documents has become commercialized. Sister Cummings saw the documents as an important part of her heritage and of her church's heritage. The commercialization of the field has made them pieces of investment property. I certainly would not claim that this phenomenon is universal, but the publicity surrounding early Mormon documents in the last six years supports my feeling of a general impression that Mormon documents are money. I have talked with other archivists who have Mormon collections, and they tell me the same thing: that people are coming in offering to sell, rather than donate, family documents. In some cases, they auction them off to the highest bidder.

Why does that matter? Commercializing the field of Mormon documents have had five effects which I consider to be highly negative.

1. Manuscript dealers tend to violate one of the most sacred values of archivists, a value that reaches back to the Middle Ages — the principle of provenance. *Provenance* stems from two Latin words, *pro-*, meaning "forth" and *venire*, meaning "to come." In sum, it means that you know how the document was created and who created it. It also, for archivists, has come to mean the history of that document — not only who created it and how but when and how it came to reside in its particular location. The ability to establish provenance has enabled archivists to confirm the authenticity and accuracy of a document in their possession.

In Utah in recent years, we have cases where some document dealers have deliberately obscured provenance. Some have refused to reveal from whom they received the documents. I have also heard of cases that would suggest deliberate falsification of origins. Another phenomenon affecting Mormon documents in recent years is that dealers have traded them around until the provenance of the document has been completely destroyed.

One of the delights of Barbara Moses' little autograph book is that we knew exactly where it came from. We knew that she had lived first in Nauvoo, then Utah, that she knew these people that wrote in her book, and that it had remained in the family before coming to Sister Cummings and then to us. We were able to supply the complete provenance of this book to any researcher who wanted to know and hence were able to assure its authenticity with a high degree of reliability. Even if the Church Historical Department were to acquire that same book today but from a dealer, I have no confidence that its provenance would have come with it.

But why is this so? Surely a work's value would be increased by a complete provenance and it would be to a dealer's advantage to preserve it? While this may be true as a dealer sells a book, it is not true as he or she buys it. Docu-

ment dealers stay in business on the difference between the price for which they buy a document and the price for which they sell a document. It would be useful to have enough known cases to be able to give average and typical figures in a transaction; but an extreme example is the "salamander letter." An associate of Mark Hofmann has reported that Hofmann bought it for \$25 and sold it to Steve Christensen for \$40,000 ("Stalking" [1986]). If the buyer does not know who originally had the document, then he or she cannot go back to that person for additional documents nor is that original seller likely to find out that there was a 400 percent jump in price after it left family hands. Secrecy, in short, works to the dealer's advantage.

Probably there are other reasons as well; but whatever the reason, this destruction of provenance damages, sometimes permanently, the historical context within which the document should make its contribution. I hope that the Hofmann case will establish exact provenance for some or even all of the disputed documents, but I am not sanguine. I know of three separate stories of the origins of the Martin Harris letter, for instance. Lyn Jacobs told me one version, reported an altered version in his *Sunstone* interview ("Stalking" [1986]), and testified to still a third version in court.

2. Another violation of a cherished value for archivists is the division of a collection. I feel real anger over such cases. Naturally, for dealers who are primarily interested in their profits, the best location for an item is the archive or private collector who will pay the most for it.* However, such divisions reduce the historical value of a collection because of the way in which documents read together to make a more complete picture of an event, a personality, or a period.

The case of Susan Wilkinson is instructive. She is hardly a well-known figure in Mormon history. You would not think her letters very important in the first place, let alone keeping them together. However, Susan Hough Conrad Wilkinson was a young married woman in her twenties who joined the Church in Philadelphia in 1840. In 1845, she was again living in Philadelphia with her husband and her new son; but she had spent some of the intervening time in Nauvoo where she had formed a close attachment to Mary Wickersham Woolley, one of the wives of Edwin D. Woolley. In August 1844, she wrote Mary from Cincinnati, expressing her feelings upon hearing of the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith and recalling her close association with both Joseph Smith, who had written her a letter, and the Woolley family. She also mentions a painful but unspecified trauma that had occurred the year before in April.

The Church acquired this letter by trade from Mark Hofmann in 1985 and it joined her autograph book, which the archive had acquired in 1978. I did not know that other Wilkinson documents existed and was surprised to read in the *Ensign* that Brent Ashworth had acquired a letter from Joseph Smith, reportedly written to the Wilkinson family. The text of this letter consists of a treatise on the principle of virtue, reminiscent of Doctrine and Covenants 121:45-46; and two lines written in pencil on the lower edge of the sheet identify the place as Philadelphia and the item as February 1840, the month

in which Susan was baptized ("Joseph" 1985, 77-78). I also know of a depository in California that has another of her letters. I think it is sad that dealers did not sell the letters as a collection; for Joseph Smith's instructions in virtue gain new interest by knowing the family to which they were addressed, and Susan's response to Joseph's death is made more significant by knowing that he "apparently stayed with the family the week after he had visited Washington, D.C." ("Joseph" 1985, 77-78).

I feel particular chagrin about the current dismembering of the Francis Kirkham collection. Francis Kirkham was a well-educated man, a lawyer and a Ph.D., in early twentieth-century Utah. He taught at BYU, was principal of LDS Business College, superintendent of schools for Granite School District, and then became involved in national welfare and youth organizations. His most significant professional activity was the insurance business, which supplied a comfortable living from 1938 to 1959 and enabled him to make significant contributions to the Church. He served three missions to New Zealand, became a recognized authority on Maori, was a stake MIA president in Canada, a member of the New York Stake high council, and a very popular speaker, particularly on the Book of Mormon. His *Source Material Concerning the Origin of the Book of Mormon* (1937) and his three volumes of *New Witness for Christ in America* were important scholarly contributions (Pardoe 1969, 390-92). Perhaps more important is the extensive network of contacts he maintained among the General Authorities, members of general boards, and faculty members at BYU. He was an energetic and prolific correspondent, whose personal papers have the potential of being a valuable source on early twentieth-century Church history. Periodically I notice in the manuscript catalogues that letters to Francis Kirkham are advertised for sale. For instance, Deseret Book's *Catalogue Three of Mormon Americana* (item 232) lists a letter to Kirkham from John A. Widtsoe on Council of the Twelve letterhead for sale for \$35. The letter deals with advertising and selling *New Witness for Christ in America* but the selling point is obviously the Widtsoe signature. Several different manuscript dealers and autograph handlers are selling these letters as individual items, thus breaking up an important document collection.

The loss to Mormon history and Mormon historians is permanent. There will be no way to restore such far-scattered documents.

Another example of how Mormon history is impoverished through the breaking-up of collections is that Mark Hofmann sold the LDS Church a draft letter from Thomas Bullock to Brigham Young written 27 January 1865. I did not know of the existence of this letter until the list of forty-five documents acquired directly from Hofmann was printed this spring ("Church Acquired 45 Documents from Hofmann," *Church News*, 20 April 1986, p. 13). I still do not know the contents of this letter, but it is rumored that the letter had originally been kept with the blessing Joseph Smith, Jr., gave Joseph Smith III that is now in possession of the RLDS Church in Independence, Missouri, and that it explains why the blessing was in Bullock's possession so many years after it had been given. I do not know if Hofmann made the Reorganized Church aware of this letter, but my archival instincts protest the separation of the two

documents and the subsequent loss of whatever light they may have shed on each other.

If Mrs. Cummings had sold Barbara Moses' autograph book to a dealer, it is not inconceivable that the book would have been separated into separate leaves or perhaps resewn into two more covers. Would it have been a serious loss, except for the destruction of the book as an entity? I think so. Even in this autograph book, context is important, for many of these people respond to other messages in the book. For example, Joseph Smith's little poem about the importance of charity was answering a poem written on the same page by W. W. Phelps where he had counseled:

To Miss B[arbara] M[atilda] Neff
Two things will beautify a youth
That is: Let *virtue* decorate the *truth*
and so you know; every little helps
yours — W. W. Phelps

In turn, Joseph F. Smith in 1901 continues the vein begun by his uncle Joseph Smith: "Let truth and virtue, hand in hand together Shine, and charity them both adorne, and all, together, bow at lovely Mercy's shrine." If the three autographs had been sold separately, this contextual commentary would have been lost.

3. The commercialization of Mormon documents has directly increased the holdings of the archives; but the consequences are not as beneficial as might be supposed. Within the past year, the Utah State Archives has been compelled to spend significant sums of money — money that might have well gone into preservation, cataloguing and registers, or publication — to install protective systems for our collection. I do not know of a Mormon repository that either has not already changed its reference procedures or is studying possible changes. The Church Archives, as this issue goes to press, has hired full-time security personnel, established elaborate check-in procedures that require picture identification, a printed name and a written signature, remodeling in both the library and the archives reading room, and stringent interview and access procedures.

In my case, the taxpayer's money is financing these systems. In the case of the Church Archives, tithing funds must be diverted from other uses to meet these new expenses. A high priority in both archives is microfilming important collections. One reason, of course, is so that fragile documents will not suffer from unnecessary handling; but an equally important reason is security. Microfilms are never as satisfactory as originals and are seldom as legible. Despite care in the process, pages are occasionally skipped or duplicated, the process is a lengthy one during which research comes to a halt, and researchers who have experienced the almost tangible connection with the past that comes from working with originals cannot reconstruct that sensation from the microfilm.

Are archives just overreacting? I don't think so. Both the Church Archives and the Utah State Archives have experienced document thefts — and not just from overzealous researchers who are motivated, however misguidedly, to "see that the truth gets out." In some cases, the thefts have been of microfilm reels

where it is quite clear that the valuable commodity is the content on the reel. But in another example, the state archives during the 1960s had Brigham Young's will. It has disappeared since then. The document has been published in full in several places and is readily available, so this theft was not motivated by a concern with its content. It is possible that the thief was someone who simply wanted an original Brigham Young document and has gloated over it in secret ever since, but I have no way of knowing that it has not moved into the channels of document dealers.

About eight years ago, I read in an autograph catalogue of a letter written by Brigham Young to the governor of Alabama in 1846 asking for possible help or encouragement in resettling the Saints after the death of Joseph Smith. Brigham Young wrote similar letters to the governors of all the states and to some of the territories. During the 1950s, the Church Historical Department had received a copy of this letter in the Alabama State Archives. In the late 1970s that letter was on the market. We made inquiries of the staff of the Alabama State Archives who responded that they were not the entity offering it for sale — in fact, that it would be against state law to sell it.

Within the last two months, the Church returned to Hancock County circuit court in Illinois certain documents. These documents had disappeared from Hancock County records illegally. Newspaper accounts of this transaction left the impression that only one dealer, Mark Hofmann, was involved; but to my personal knowledge, those documents came to the LDS Church Archives from at least six dealers. I do not know how the dealers acquired them, but they put the Church in the uncomfortable, though innocent, position of receiving contraband documents. I find such a situation thoroughly reprehensible.

4. The commercialization of Mormon history has encouraged faking. I was shocked within the last year to see what I could consider only as fakery by one of Salt Lake City's most reputable book dealers. This dealer had a copy in good condition of Charles MacKay's *The Mormons or Latter-day Saints, with Memoirs of the Life and Death of Joseph Smith, the "American Mohamet"* (London: National Illustrated Library [1851]). He had a second copy which had been damaged but which had an end paper with a glowing recommendation signed with the name of Brigham Young (although the handwriting was so different that they were not advertising it as a Young signature). The book dealer had removed that autographed end paper from the damaged volume and tipped it in to form a flyleaf in the undamaged volume, thus doubling its value. As an archivist, I respond to such fakery with contempt.

5. The commercialization of Mormon documents has had the direct result of creating an investment market. When valuable documents are sold to private individuals, it is sheer coincidence if these people have a historical interest in them. You don't have to enjoy the beauty of diamonds to use them as investment property, and many buyers of fine art receive no aesthetic gratification from possessing them. Similarly, many who possess Mormon documents are interested in their content primarily because it represents the reason for their value.

In today's market, if a dealer had possession of the Moses autograph book, I am sure that the asking price would have moved it beyond the acquisitions budget of any archives I'm familiar with. It would most likely have gone to a person who wanted it as an investment. It might have been preserved carefully — assuming that it remained intact — in a bank's safety deposit box and perhaps would have doubled in value in twenty years. But it would have been lost to history.

At this point, we come to the question of the buyer and the responsibility he or she bears in this process of commercialization I have deplored. In my opinion, it makes very little difference whether a buyer is the victim of an unscrupulous dealer or whether the buyer is an active participant in the process. It is the process itself that is unwholesome. I take the position that all historical documents should belong in depositories where they are available to the public — that document dealers and document buyers should not be involved in the process at all.

I realize that this is an extreme position, even though it is consistent with my professional standards. Perhaps I have been too harsh on manuscript dealers. We see the same object from different perspectives. To a dealer, a document is an item of trade. Its value lies in its marketability. I am an archivist and a historian. I see the value of these documents in their representation of our past — the only means we have, short of direct revelation, of understanding that past. It's possible to construct another scenario where the same document would have an entirely different meaning. If Charles C. Rich, snowshoeing across the mountains from Bear Lake to Salt Lake City in the winter, had been trapped in a blizzard and found shelter in a cave that contained wood, a historical document might have been the only paper he had to light a fire with. I admit that all of these perspectives are valid.

However, there is an issue here of public rights as well as individual rights, of future claims as well as present ones. I understand that document dealers and private collectors feel that they are exercising their legal rights of purchase and possession and that the item is therefore theirs to do with what they will — much as if they were acquiring a car or a hamburger. I feel, however, that these items cannot belong to a single individual. As a generation and as individuals, we are guardians of the past. We have no right to make irreversible decisions about documents — decisions that would remove a portion of our history or make a portion of it permanently inaccessible.

But what of the thousands of documents that have not survived? In that context, isn't my stand a bit silly? Not at all. We do not have the ability to make decisions regarding lost or destroyed documents. We only have the power to make decisions about documents that currently exist. That's why our decisions must be, I think, that they continue to exist — continue in a form that will most accurately represent the past and in places where they can be most accessible to those studying the past.

I think it is an indictment of our society and our values when we count the worth of Susan Wilkinson's letters from Nauvoo in terms of marketability and investment potential. I think this value reflects a society that may be more

concerned with campers and VCRs than it is about supporting the school system that their children go to. Four generations ago, Utahns in the depths of poverty produced the grace and beauty of the Manti Temple. Today, at a level of affluence beyond that temple generation's wildest dreams, we build cheap mass-produced temples and chapels.

As an archivist and historian, it is valid for me to speak from my own past. You may call it nostalgia, if you will, but I remember with appreciation — even reverence — the years before 1980 when a descendant brought in a box containing more than a hundred letters of Charles C. Rich to family members and associates. However he phrased it, his motives honored and respected the past. He felt deeply that those letters represented something that would outlast his own lifetime but which had enriched it and could enrich others in the same way. He desired to give his past a permanence that his own present could not have.

We cannot turn the clock back; but I think there can be some value for the future in recognizing that something has changed in the six years since 1980 as dealing in Mormon documents has become a lucrative profession. The costs of that change to history and to human values have been high.

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The Documents: A Historian's Approach

James B. Allen

When Cheryll May asked me to appear on this panel I felt honored, yet I wondered what I could say of real substance. Much has been and will be said about the topic; yet, in a way, very little can be said, for at present we still do not know all the things we really need to know. I look forward to the time when some of the dilemmas are solved and we know more than we do today about many aspects of the documents under discussion.

Cheryll asked me to comment on some of the broad aspects of what is happening to Mormon history as a result of the recent document "flurry." Such a question in itself raises questions about the nature of history. What do historians do when they create history?

I use the word *create* advisedly. By definition, "history" is nothing more nor less than an interpretation of the past, or, if you will, an image of the past, created by a human mind. The facts of the past — most of which have not been discovered and probably never will be — do not "speak for themselves," as some people have too confidently assumed.

Rather, facts have meaning only when someone consciously molds them together in some kind of form or image. Anyone, actually, can create that image. Whether "good" or "bad," "true" or "false," it remains in the viewer's mind until someone else creates another image for him, that is, until some revisionist presents a new interpretation based on a fresh look at the old sources, his or her own interpretation of some new historical document or artifact of some sort, or some combination of both. The historian, then, actually becomes a *creator* of the past, for the events of the past have no current life of their own until they are discovered, interpreted, and put into some kind of form. How close such an image comes to what really happened depends, of course, upon the skills and purposes of the individual historian.

Again, I use *purposes* advisedly. There is obviously no time here to go into a discussion of the nature of bias in history, but let me simply state the obvious: Even though they must try, historians can never really be "objective," that is, free from any kind of bias or prejudice as they attempt to interpret the record of the past and form it into some comprehensible image that will reflect the reality of what happened. The important thing is that each historian, as well as his or her readers, must recognize what those biases are. Presumably, if they include some well-thought-out or otherwise solidly based, deeply felt commitments to certain moral, ethical, or even spiritual principles, then what the historian writes will often reflect (or, at least, not do damage to) those principles.

When one views the writing of history this way, it becomes apparent, at least to me, that historians have an awesome task — even, if you will, a humbling one — for the records of the past can assume protean shapes in their hands. Herbert Butterfield, a widely respected British historian of ideas, put it vividly: "It has been said that the historian is the avenger, and that standing as a judge between the parties and rivalries and causes of bygone generations he can lift up the fallen and beat down the proud, and by his exposures and his verdicts, his satire and his moral indignation, can punish unrighteousness, avenge the injured or reward the innocent" (1965, 1). But Butterfield also reminded us that "the primary assumption of all attempts to understand the men [and women] of the past must be the belief that we can in some degree enter into minds that are unlike our own" (1965, 9).

It is the attempt to enter into the unlike mind that makes history so challenging, particularly — in our case — when we attempt to evaluate historical documents that do not reflect current perceptions of reality. The "white salamander" letter would be an example. Most of us tend to view the past with very presentist orientations and values. This tendency, though natural, distorts our ability to understand the past and makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to understand our progenitors exactly as they understood themselves. Even after years of study and, in effect, living with a personality of the past by

reading all the remaining records produced by or relating to him or her, the historian still has never completely entered that individual's mind and therefore may never be fully capable of interpreting any important document exactly the way its author or his contemporaries would have interpreted it.

History, nevertheless, is a social necessity, for nations, institutions, and churches all tend to look to their historians (i.e., those who write about the past, whether they are professionally trained or not) for insight into how existing situations came to be. As these situations or conditions change, the questions society asks of its historians also change. In addition, and of special relevance here, every newly discovered document or artifact has the potential of casting important new light on some old interpretation of the past. History (that is, our *interpretation* of the past) is thus ever-changing. If this condition is true of history in general, it is particularly true of Mormon history.

Given the fluid nature of history, what then has been the significance of the recently discovered documents that have created so much interest and have seemed to supply so much new information, and hence cause for new interpretations, in Mormon history? I cannot, of my own knowledge, comment on the authenticity of the documents that have been so recently in the news, but two general topics are relevant: (1) the significance and importance of documents as such in the ongoing process of creating history, and (2) some consequences and lessons growing from the recent flurry.

For the purposes of our discussion, documents are the written (or printed) records of the past, and may include chronicles, biographies, genealogies, memoirs, diaries, letters, and even certain kinds of inscriptions. They are not the only sources of history, for oral tradition, folk music, works of art, and a variety of relics, artifacts, and architectural structures also help us reconstruct the lives and thoughts of our progenitors. However, written documents usually become the most important of all the keys to the past, really the "stuff" of history — the warp, the woof, and the backing of whatever tapestry the historian is attempting to weave.

All historians know, of course, that every document was produced by someone, and that whoever produced it had his or her own biases and perspectives that affected whatever went into the document. As a result, the historian seldom if ever assumes that a single document, or even a large number of documents relating to a specific issue, can give him or her a fully "objective" assessment of what went on in the past — they can only help in the continuing quest for truth and meaning. Nevertheless, since these sources are the only way even to get close to the past, the historian must rejoice with every newly discovered document that is in any way related to what he or she is attempting to understand.

It is tragic, of course, that the history of recent discoveries has been tainted by charges of fraud, forgery, and murder. What can we say, nevertheless, pending the outcome of judicial process, about the significance of these documents? For me, at least, three general areas suggest themselves as important consequences as well as lessons.

First, to the degree that any of the recently discovered documents are authentic, certainly they have added new insight into our ever-changing under-

standing of the past. At the same time, they have provided firmer support for much of what we have already known.

On 20 April 1986, the *Church News* published a list of forty-eight documents that the Church had acquired directly from Mark Hofmann. The "salamander letter" was not on the list, for Steven Christensen had acquired it from Hofmann, then gave it to the Church. Presumably a few other documents, now in the Church's possession, would similarly be excluded from a Hofmann list because they were indirectly acquired. As I looked over the list, I confess I had a hard time believing that *all* of those documents might be forged, for the description there made them appear so innocuous. I cannot, of course, make any conclusions on that issue.

It also appeared to me that such items as the 1853 George A. Smith letter to Brigham Young explaining the activities of a military expedition to the Indians in the vicinity of Fillmore, Utah, could provide some very interesting information for people who were doing research on a variety of topics, including Indian relations, George A. Smith himself, the history of Fillmore, military history, and perhaps other items. I don't really know anything at all about this document, but I mention it only to show how a single document, if authentic, could be of immediate value to several historians independently studying several different historical issues.

The same is true of the more dramatic of the recent documents. If, indeed, the "salamander letter" proves to be authentic, then it is of tremendous value to various historians who may, independently, be studying a half dozen or more different topics, including Joseph Smith himself, the life of Martin Harris, the history of the Book of Mormon, folkways in early nineteenth-century America, folklore, treasure hunting, and perhaps others. Beyond its possible new insights, however, the document also supports an old story: that of the Anthon transcript: This, I believe, may too often be overlooked in our eagerness to explore other implications in the curious story of the salamander.

Second, it is clear that these newly discovered documents, whether they are authentic or not, have stimulated a great deal of important research that has gone far beyond the documents themselves. Such research is probably the most important contribution that any of the more dramatic documents have made, and it is for this that I think the historical profession should be most grateful. Consider, for example, the 1844 blessing given to Joseph Smith III by his father. Whether the document that came into the possession of the LDS Church and is now in possession of the RLDS Church is authentic really makes little difference so far as some of the spin-off historical research is concerned. Most historians already had little doubt that Joseph Smith had given some such blessing to his son and that he had also designated other possible successors to the prophetic office. But I was very impressed with the fine article Michael Quinn (1981) produced shortly after the document had been discovered in which he outlined more clearly and convincingly than ever before the various people who had been designated at various times as successors to the prophet, including Joseph III, and put the whole issue into a very understandable, but much broader, perspective. Thus, although questions about the document's

authenticity may yet be raised, its discovery became the catalyst for important research that only added to our understanding of what really happened in the past.

The same thing is true of the "salamander letter." In *BYU Studies*, for example, Ron Walker (1984) has just published what I consider to be one of his finest articles. Here he places the practice of treasure hunting in its broader historical setting, demonstrating more clearly and convincingly than ever before how prevalent and — yes — how respectable it was at the time among certain classes. He also includes a fine discussion of various related "magical" practices. In this and in his second essay in the same issue, furthermore, he conveys a spirit that not only adds to our understanding of the times but also helps us understand the importance of avoiding the trap of imposing our current perspective on the past, and all in a tone that supports rather than casts doubt upon his faith as a committed LDS historian.

In short, studies resulting from the discovery of that particular document have helped us understand the importance of remembering that, partly because of our presentist expectations, some very important parts of the past simply are invisible to us. Anne Firor Scott, in her presidential address before the Organization of American Historians, remarked, "It is a truism, yet one easy to forget, that people see most easily things they are prepared to see and overlook those they do not expect to encounter" (1984, 1). Hopefully we are learning to pay greater attention to how we see and how easy it is to overlook some things in our past, simply because we were not expecting to see them.

A final lesson for me has been the wisdom of using caution before drawing conclusions. We all sensed a certain frustration around us when we first heard of the Joseph Smith blessing, or of the salamander letter, or of the 1825 Josiah Stowell letter, and at least two extreme reactions became apparent. On the one hand, some people seemed positively delighted that these documents contained information not part of the official version of Church history, and critics soon used them to raise more questions about the authenticity of many other aspects of the Church's claims. Such shooting from the hip is unwise in any case, for it takes a long time to fully evaluate all the implications of any document. On the other hand, some people seemed too ready to assume that all the documents are forged. So far as I know, the matter simply has not been settled yet. It has become a matter for forensics experts and judicial determination. I hope we are learning to reserve judgment until all the possible facts are available.

In short, I hope one lesson we have learned from all this is the perils of what I sometimes call the "AHA!" approach to history. This is the tendency to wave every new discovery excitedly before our public, announcing everything we think it means, but not taking time to put it in the many variety of perspectives that would do it the most justice. Often the "AHA!" approach simply creates confusion and doubts, for the writer has been so eager to reveal some new discovery that he or she has not taken time to weigh a sufficient number of its possible implications either for scholarship or, if you will, for the faith.

Documents must be taken seriously. On that, I think all of us would agree. But it seems to me that taking a document seriously is good reason for not rush-

ing into print too quickly — or, at least, not presuming to make final conclusions when the research is still tentative. I do not believe in waiting until one final, conclusive interpretation can be made, for scholarly dialogue is an essential factor in understanding the implications and unfolding significance of any document. I do, however, believe that each scholarly voice should join that dialogue only after a great deal of homework and with due humility. Each of the most controversial of the new documents means much more now than it did the day its discovery was announced; and we can feel some assurance in saying that a year from now, each will mean even more — whether because of its own authenticity or because of the spin-off scholarship it has generated.

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Revisionist History and the Document Diggers

Richard P. Howard

Recent discoveries of historical sources with vast implications for revisionist history are yet to make a notable impact on the RLDS scholarly community. Mark Hofmann's 1980 discovery of the Anthon transcript did, however, have one rather immediate result for the RLDS History Commission: We withdrew from the RLDS museum what we had uncertainly represented for over twenty years as the Anthon transcript. We removed it out of deference to the unanimous opinion of several scholars and handwriting experts that Hofmann's Anthon transcript was not only inscribed by Joseph Smith, Jr., but also had the physical appearance attributed it by Anthon himself in E. D. Howe's 1834 publication, *Mormonism Unveiled*. Our copy looked remarkably different. Depending on the outcome of the Hofmann trial, we may need to dust off our Anthon transcript and prepare it for exhibit once again.

Why has the RLDS response been comparatively noncommittal? Let me trace a little recent RLDS history. The work of Robert Flanders in the mid-1960s pointed historical scholarship in the RLDS tradition in a new direction. His Ph.D. dissertation in its published form, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965) confronted RLDS people with a wholly new vision of the founding prophet. To the traditional roles of prophet, seer, revelator, and translator were added those of entrepreneur, lieu-

tenant general, mayor, newspaper editor, chief magistrate of Nauvoo's Municipal Court, Recorder of Deeds, sole trustee-in-trust for the church, storekeeper, land speculator, and land agent. Seeing Joseph Smith in broader, more human perspective has been a mixed blessing to RLDS church members. On the one hand, many RLDS members have come to be grateful for scholarly encouragement to view Joseph Smith through a lens other than that furnished by religious dogma. On the other hand, many others have felt deeply threatened by the scholarly demand to replot the field of their heritage which had lain verdant and undisturbed for many years. It had been a predictable landscape, strangely a-historical in character, yet seeming to give the feeling of authentic roots for a faith.

Significantly for the RLDS tradition, President W. Wallace Smith, whose presidency spanned the twenty years from 1958 to 1978, particularly his counselors, F. Henry Edwards (until 1966), Maurice L. Draper (1958-78), and Duane E. Correy (1966-78), and a sizable contingent of the General Officers and their headquarters staff, pressed the church into a period of theological and historical ferment. This they did by the determined, disciplined analysis of the content of the Restoration faith and the nature of the church's historical existence since its founding. The fruit of that intellectual and spiritual quest appeared in religious education materials for all ages and other adult study texts designed to broaden the world view of the members. As a result, the past twenty-five years of RLDS history have exhibited a sort of rhythm between radical paradigm shifts in theological understanding and historical perceptions on the one hand and, on the other, concerted resistance to change by significant interest groups comprising many jurisdictional leaders and members within the church.

Efforts to establish a church historical society began in 1954, with an earnest proposal by Barbara and William Higdon. Eighteen years later, stimulated in part by heartening experiences with members and leaders of the Mormon History Association, RLDS historians and interested friends formed the John Whitmer Historical Association (JWHA) just at the time the exciting new historical/theological journal *Courage*, published out of Lamoni, Iowa, was about to go under financially. Now with over 400 members, the JWHA is looking to publish its sixth annual *Journal* this year and is in the strongest fiscal condition of its fourteen-year existence. Many of its articles have been reprinted to the general audience of the RLDS church through recent volumes of *Restoration Studies* which have spanned the years 1980 to 1986. Perceptive theological, philosophical, and historical minds continue to present the RLDS people with challenges to their faith and tradition, and we can optimistically look forward to much more of this type of development in years to come.

I have said all of that so that I can say this: most of the newly discovered documents of the past six years touching Mormon origins have not been viewed with either the alarm or the intense excitement with which they were greeted by Mormon historians and, from quite another perspective, some of the Mormon General Authorities. The one exception was the Joseph Smith III blessing document, obtained through exchange arrangement with the Mormon Church

on 18 March 1981, after earlier negotiations between Hofmann and the RLDS History Commission had failed. That document was generally viewed by RLDS members with the type of enthusiasm one might experience when winning a \$3 million prize from a \$2 lottery ticket. Once the Joseph III blessing document had been authenticated through independent analyses, an RLDS conference in England petitioned the 1982 World Conference to include it in the Doctrine and Covenants. Church leaders really did not want it there but managed to convince the World Conference to put it in the historical appendix — which carries with it non-binding status, in terms of church policy and doctrine. Had the conference managed to place it in the main body of the Doctrine and Covenants and should all authorities reach consensus that the Joseph Smith III blessing document is, in fact, a forgery, a sort of mild faith crisis might be a possible scenario. I have no specific reason, however, at this time, to doubt its authenticity. Albert A. Somerford, one of the renowned experts who examined it in 1981 has died, but James R. Dibowski, the other, has recently reaffirmed to *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter Dawn Tracy his staunch belief that it is a genuine Thomas Bullock holograph, written in 1844, with Joseph Smith, Jr.'s own handwriting also appearing on it. Even if all the experts could agree that this document is a forgery, however, I would affirm my belief that such a decision would create no more than a momentary stir in RLDS circles. My main reason for saying this is that the doctrine of lineal descent in church presidency, once the cornerstone of the early Reorganized Church, with the passage of time, has come to be seen as of much less importance to the mission and survival of the church.

For the moment, let us assume the authenticity of all the major documents that have come to light through the efforts of Mark Hofmann and his associates — the Lucy Mack Smith letter of 1829, the Anthon transcript, the Joseph Smith III blessing document, the White Salamander letter of Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps of October 1830, and the Joseph Smith, Jr., divining rod letter of 18 June 1825 to Josiah Stowell. Now, I should like to pose two questions: (1) When we look at how most of the scholars have responded to these documents, have their responses, generally speaking, been mature, restrained, reasoned, and calculated to avoid the necessity of wholesale re-revisionist history down the road a few years? (2) Would unassailable proof, say, two or three years down the line, that any or all of these documents were forgeries free us to return to the more traditional historical and faith assumptions regarding early Mormon origins and history? We may be a good distance away from answering these questions precisely. I would like, however, to make a few comments on matters related to them, as grist for the mill.

On the first question, I applaud the very recent works of Richard Bushman, Jan Shipps, Marvin Hill, D. Michael Quinn, and Ronald Walker, as well as some earlier works by Leonard Arrington, Mario DePillis, Marvin Hill, Klaus Hansen, David Brion Davis, Donna Hill, and Fawn Brodie, for their careful and insightful contextual studies of Mormon origins. Some of those works, of course, were done prior to the public release of the Martin Harris letter of 1830 and the Joseph Smith letter of 1825. But some of these scholars

knew of the existence of those letters prior to their most recent public statements on related issues, either verbal, or in some cases, in book or article form. Their works, at many significant points, rest on reliable sources dating back to the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century social milieu touching the Smith family backgrounds. Their explorations confront us, in varying degrees of specificity, with the truth that irrespective of either the existence or the authenticity of these Hofmann papers, Mormonism began in a complex web of social usages, including, as one primary dimension, that of rustic New England folk magic transplanted to Western New York.

In that setting, it becomes clear that Joseph Smith and several other early Restoration leaders used seer stones and witch-hazel sticks as means of revelation and translation in the late 1820s and early 1830s but had earlier used these same artifacts in an energetic quest for buried treasures and lost objects. Clearly, Joseph Smith, Sr., and later, Joseph Smith, Jr., had a robust confidence in the magical, divinational uses of objective media common to their culture, in uncovering buried treasure, whether gold or silver, or long-forgotten secrets of ancient civilizations. So convinced was Joseph of the efficacy of those artifacts, that a few years later he would give the seer stones a new label, "Urim and Thummim." This nomenclature was all the more respectable because it came from the Old Testament which Joseph Smith was studying and revising in 1833 (Urim and Thummim: Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Deut. 33:8; Ezek. 2:63; Ne. 7:65; Urim only: Num. 27:21; I Sam. 28:6).

The second question is closely related to the first. If the Hofmann documents without exception are found to be modern forgeries, the demands of honesty as a required response to historical truth would still compel us to eschew the simplistic, traditional perceptions of Mormon origins and early history. The blinds have been drawn back. New windows to the past have been discovered and opened for the enrichment of our vision. Perhaps what that vision will disclose to us in the future will cause our faith to suffer much pain. But my hunch is that we shall survive to discover another truth: a faith never tested is a faith of little value. A faith deliberately subjected to the journey through the dark valleys of doubt and forced to kill outworn ideas and understandings is, in the long run, a life force that will bring about rich and liberating intellectual and spiritual transformations.

As a harbinger of such transformation, the General Officers of the RLDS Church in the summer of 1985 invited Temple School to organize a three-day study session to consider the very things we are concerned with in this session. The seminar met the following November, and the agenda was tough, honest, confrontive, and yet pastoral. The spirit of inquiry was akin to the same spirit of openness I have felt through the years when the Saints gather to worship and recommit their lives to their discipleship. The result was no final answers, praise God! Rather as we left that experience it was with thanks that we had been privileged to take one more step together in what is from time to time a most painful, frustrating, and uncertain faith journey. RLDS historians and theologians, together with their General Officers, thought out loud together.

They shared moments of unease, deep perplexity, good humor, and mutual concern for one another and for the church at large.

I am currently at work on a new narrative history of the RLDS church. I have written and rewritten the opening chapters many times in recent years as I have sought to convey something of the linkages between folk magic and early Mormon history. Much good has come my way, both from Mormon scholarship and from the sense of support I have felt, in recent months particularly, from some of the RLDS General Officers and others of my colleagues at headquarters and in academia. What was, a year or so ago, a dark and foreboding cloud engulfing me in this writing task is starting to lift. Beyond the cloud I am beginning to see, as never before, the value of cultural history as a vehicle for exposing something of the essence of the Latter Day Saint past. I have known this in my head for many years; now I can feel it in the core of my being, and the long night of winter is showing signs of relenting.

The recent documents, then, have played at least an indirect role in what for me is a new point of departure. They fit the historical frame of those times. As they became public, they served as catalysts, moving scholars to explore that time frame, that setting, in more earnest detail than ever before. Hofmann's documents, whether genuine or of his devising, have perhaps had a telling effect on recent work. And whether genuine or spurious, they have quickened in all of us the passion for historical truth. In the end, however, Mark Hofmann's ultimate fate under Utah state law is, in a sense, only marginally related to the future of Latter Day Saint historiography. The process of revisionist history is fully under way. Thanks to Arrington and Company, and many others, it has been moving forward for many years. Well may we applaud the revisionist historians for stimulating the document diggers to a new intensity of activity, even though, in the end, we may be required to censure one of them for actions inimical to the entire historical enterprise. In any case, the revisionist process will continue, for it has a life of its own. It will mature and flower quite apart from what might be either discovered or invented by this document dealer or that.