

Forgeries, Bombs, and Salamanders

Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders by Linda Sillitoe and Allen D. Roberts, with a forensic analysis by George J. Throckmorton (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), xiii+556 pp., \$17.95.

Reviewed by Jeffery Ogden Johnson, Utah State Archivist, Salt Lake City, Utah.

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE you will see an image that stays with you for years. On 16 October 1985 I saw an image that will be with me a lifetime: a burned out sports car and yellow ribbons cordoning off the street behind Deseret Gym. The yellow ribbons had been put there by the police to keep the curious back. The burned out sports car belonged to Mark Hofmann. As I drove by the scene on my way home from work, I did not realize how the bomb would affect the Mormon scholarly community. During the next months, the picture of that burned car would be flashed on television many times as reporters would explain new details of the case. The questions that were being asked those long months ago are the questions that are now answered by Sillitoe and Roberts in this book. Linda Sillitoe, one of Utah's finest poets and novelists, developed her skills in investigative reporting at the *Deseret News*. Allen Roberts is a Utah architect specializing in historical preservation who has published several investigative articles and historical essays.

Salamander is so well written and interesting, I had a hard time laying it down. Though books without footnotes usually make me very uncomfortable, the narrative

style worked very well in this case. The lack of documentation could be seen as a weakness, but I assume that several sources did not want to be quoted and the popular format did not lend itself to footnotes. It could also be argued that the book would be too expensive if the extra documentation were published. I hope future researchers will have access to the research notes, including the many interviews.

The book opens with an account of the two murders. It details the cold-blooded way Hofmann went about the business of killing his friend Steve Christensen and bystander Kathy Sheets on 15 October 1985. It was the bomb that went off the next day and destroyed Hofmann's sports car that connected Hofmann with the mystery. This book cannot ascertain with surety the target of the third bomb, but the authors argue that it was not a suicide attempt as Hofmann later stated.

This third bomb connected the earlier killings with the Mormon historical documents business and put the historical community into a panic. Historical researchers and document dealers left their homes and took precautions to protect themselves and their families. Dean Jessee, Mormon document expert, and forensic expert George J. Throckmorton started putting the puzzle pieces together which led to the confession and imprisonment of Hofmann. Sillitoe and Roberts document how investigators slowly and carefully pieced together the evidence. This meticulous process seemed never-ending to those of us waiting for reports on the nightly news, but this book makes it clear why such care was necessary.

Many of us in the scholarly community acted like typical fraud victims. Many supported the perpetrator and refused to help the investigation, to the great frustration of the prosecution team. When the truth was revealed, most in the community felt pain and anger at the betrayal they had received at Hofmann hands.

Valeen Avery, past president of the Mormon History Association, in her 1988 presidential address discussed the price David Hyrum Smith, last son of the Prophet Joseph Smith, had to pay when his family refused to help him face the past. We are luckier. Sillitoe and Roberts force us to look at events in our recent past. Hopefully, a good clear vision of what happened can help heal the pain we all felt when we found we had been fooled.

The book's last few pages, written by George J. Throckmorton, contain information concerning twenty-one of the Hofmann forgeries. This part should be of special interest to archivists and history students. Anyone doing research in Mormon history should be aware of these forgeries. Several have been published or used in historical studies. The list not only includes the "Salamander" letter, but also the Joseph Smith III blessing; the Lucy Mack Smith letter to her sister-in-law (which I used as the basis for a sacrament meeting talk a few years ago); the Joseph Smith letter to Josiah Stowell (thought to have been the earliest known writing of Joseph Smith); a Betsy Ross letter; and the Joseph Smith to Jonathan Dunham letter (thought to have been the last known writing of Joseph Smith). It also includes the "Oath of a Freeman," thought to have been the first printed document in the United States. When the Library of Congress could not pay Hofmann's asking price for the "Oath" and Hofmann could not get the money to pay off his creditors, he took the desperate steps which led to murder.

Throckmorton states that 107 documents were proven forgeries and 68 documents could not be proven either genuine or forged. It is too bad that there is not a

complete list of these documents in the book so prospective researchers or buyers could be watching for them.

Hofmann had begun to shape our view of Joseph Smith. The forgeries changed our perceptions of the Prophet's attitudes about folk magic and plural marriage, as well as his feelings the day he died and his opinions about a successor. The Lucy Mack Smith forgery made us think that Ishmael and Lehi in the Book of Mormon were relatives. The Church picked up this concept quickly and published it in several places. The explosion of the third bomb brought an end to Hofmann's influence and his forged documents.

Though the murders and forgeries were painful, I am glad that Sillitoe and Roberts have researched and written their story. This book will become an important document offering insight into our own times. I found *Salamander* to be interesting, well written, and important. Not only does it help us understand the Hofmann incidents, but it is a warning to be careful what we accept and who we trust. It also highlights the disastrous consequences of greed. Hofmann's greed affected more than the Christensen and Sheets families. The historical community lost a dear friend in Steve Christensen and a good deal of its credibility. Hopefully we can learn from the mistakes of the past, regain faith in ourselves, and again bring the highest standards of scholarship to the study of Mormon history.

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THIS IS NO ORDINARY MURDER MYSTERY; nor does it in any way exploit the people