

Book Reviews

RICHARD E. TURLEY, JR. *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992. viii; 519 pp. Illustrations, index. \$27.95.

Reviewed by Edward L. Kimball, Professor of Law, Brigham Young University, with an interest in evidence, criminal law administration, and professional responsibility.

As I read *Victims*, I could not help thinking of *Rashomon*, a play and film in which the same incident is told repeatedly, each time from the perspective of a different participant. The Hofmann case produced three earlier books. The title of this version rightly identifies Turley's emphasis on the role of LDS Church leaders in the playing out of Mark Hofmann's deadly game of forgery, fraud, and murder. Turley became the managing director of the Church Historical Department toward the end of the Hofmann case, and his position gave him unique access to church records, personal journals, correspondence, and individual memories. Anyone who has tried to piece together a controversial story from contemporary sources must stand amazed at what Turley has accomplished. His documentation is thorough and includes as prominent sources journals or other materials of LDS leaders Gordon B. Hinckley, Hugh W. Pinnock, and Dallin H. Oaks, as well as minutes of meetings of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, file memoranda, telephone messages, and interview notes. Turley received the full cooperation of such people because they trusted him not to sensationalize, nor to make one "an offender for a word" (Isa. 29:21), nor to take things out of context. His showing them as good but fallible people lends his account credibility.

Of all Hofmann's forgeries and frauds, only a few would have had real significance for LDS history: (1) The alleged Anthon transcript of Book of Mormon characters would have confirmed Joseph Smith's version of the incident. Likewise, the letter purportedly written by Joseph Smith's mother in 1829 was favorable in

that it referred to matters otherwise lost in the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript. (2) The Joseph Smith III blessing offered some discomfort to the Church, because of the expectation that the RLDS Church would use it as confirming their claim to be Joseph Smith's rightful successors. That blessing's acceptability was enhanced by a forged letter from Thomas Bullock to Brigham Young that referred to the blessing. (3) A letter from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell portrayed Joseph as involved in folk magic. (4) Similar in effect, but even more directly concerning the origins of the Church, was the Martin Harris letter which attributed the finding of the Book of Mormon to a spirit that took the form of a white salamander. A hymnal with writing purporting to be Martin Harris's provided a basis for authenticating the handwriting in the salamander letter.

Turley's point is that the Church was a victim not only in more than \$100,000 in cash and trade items it gave Hofmann for various spurious documents, but also in the shadows cast on Church origins by his forgeries—particularly the salamander letter—and on the honesty of Church leaders by his planting false news stories that they possessed an embarrassing document written by Oliver Cowdery. Their denials only heightened the imputation of dishonesty. And the adverse publicity could never be wiped out by the later disclosure of Hofmann's frauds. Everything the Church leaders did was subjected to unfriendly interpretations.¹

Of the earlier books about the Hofmann case, two received generally good reviews, but one was so sensationalized as to lack credibility. *Victims* is designed largely as a corrective to the earlier books, based on Turley's access to information the other authors did not have. No one can affirmatively prove honest character; the best one can do is disprove alleged lies. Mormons give their leaders the assumption of honesty; anti-Mormons are prone to assume the opposite. Turley cuts away many of the grounds on which suspicions of dishonesty were based, but probably nothing can persuade those who have predetermined that the Church leaders acted dishonestly.

Turley reports almost hour by hour the involvement of the Church and its leaders and employees in crucial events. The documentation occupies 150 pages in the book of approximately 500 total pages. That degree of detail would not be necessary (particularly when many of the sources are not accessible to other researchers) except for the author's need to

share his data and to persuade his readers of his accuracy and thoroughness. His status as a Church employee inevitably raises a question about his bias, and he seeks to compensate for that by exhaustive documentation. With respect to substantive matters, that practice serves him well, but occasionally footnoting becomes a fetish. For example, to illustrate how busy President Hinckley was during the five years of the Hofmann case, Turley cites twenty-six articles in Church publications telling of the President's attendance at new temple sites around the world (457 n. 36). No one is likely to dispute Turley's assertion on such a point, even without citations.

The author sticks very close to his sources and does relatively little interpreting. This he leaves to his notes, where he elaborates his disagreement with some inferences drawn by earlier authors. Indeed, for readers already acquainted with the case, the discursive notes may be the book's most interesting and valuable contribution.² In each of these instances some earlier authors had cast a shadow on the integrity of Church leaders, and Turley's information provides a basis for making a more favorable judgment.

The body of the book is divided into three segments: an introduction containing a brief history of Church beginnings and a fascinating description of more than a dozen earlier frauds (1-23);³ the Hofmann frauds on the Church (24-145); and the bombings and their aftermath (149-345). The third part repeats much that was discussed in the second part, but that may be inevitable.

Turley allows the story to unwind on its own and does not generally reach ahead in time to answer every question as it arises. We are allowed ultimately to see miscommunication and mistaken perceptions as the source of many problems, and we come to see fuller information as the best solution to such problems. For example, Alvin Rust's frustration and anger at President Hinckley's failure to respond to his letter dissolved when he learned that Hofmann had falsely told Hinckley that Rust's problem was being taken care of (327, 483 n. 80). Police supposition that Church security personnel had been following Hofmann simply proved to be a mistaken assumption (213, 286).

As I read this retelling, I stood again amazed and dismayed at Hofmann's ability to manipulate people. It is not that they were stupid or especially gullible, but that he was skilled

enough as a forger and conscienceless enough as a con man to take full advantage of peoples' trust and biases. He played various roles—the generous friend, the faithful Church member, the mole inside the Church organization, and more. While he undoubtedly had mixed motives, one to which he admitted was wanting to change Mormon history to conform to his own lack of faith (316).

By hindsight Hofmann's claim to have found so many important documents in such a short space of time sends up warning flares, but at the time his finds were plausible because no one else had ever sought for such documents as ingeniously and diligently as he did (or purported to do). Who was to say that such documents were not out there to be found? Historic documents are often in private hands, especially over so short a span as 150 years, especially if their significance is not obvious. A generation earlier, Wilford Wood's diligent search for Mormon-related artifacts had filled a small private Utah museum.

The book illustrates how often a promise of confidentiality is breached. Hofmann made such promises but gave them no weight. Other people, from whom he extracted such promises, felt guilty at violating their promises, yet on a number of occasions they felt a need to tell someone else, coupled with an instruction "not to tell that I told" (for example, 57).

Among the lessons to be learned from the Hofmann case is the futility of trying to keep secrets in a large organization. Leaks, from various motivations, are common. Of course, we never know about the secrets that are well kept, but we do know that many secrets come unraveled. Trying to control awkward information about the Church is understandable, but ultimately undesirable. The Mountain Meadows Massacre would still be a basis of criticism had not the sore been exposed to the healing sunlight by Juanita Brooks's work. The Joseph Smith III blessing and even the salamander letter did little harm; the Church is not to be derailed by such things. To modern sensitivities, more corrosive than a mistake or a wrong is an actual or purported "cover-up," as recent political history amply illustrates.

The Church was accused in connection with the Hofmann frauds of engaging in hiding information about its origins. In some instances that was simply false, as in the case of the purported Cowdery history. In others there is a germ of truth. The Church eagerly publicized the Anthon transcript and the

Lucy Mack Smith letter that enhanced the Church story, but put silently away for later decision the Josiah Stowell (money digging) letter (75) and the Bullock letter relating to the Joseph Smith III blessing (62, 75).

It seems to me that confidentiality pending cautious appraisal of authenticity and sufficient study to put the document into full context is not only acceptable, but desirable. One should expect nothing else. That is essentially what happened with the Martin Harris (salamander) letter. The Church expected it to be published by Steve Christensen, but only after authentication and study. With respect to the Dead Sea Scrolls, there was little complaint at first concerning the delay in publication while the scrolls were being studied, even though that took years; but complaints mounted when people felt that the delay was selfishly motivated. The time between the Church's acquiring the Stowell and Bullock letters and its publishing them (because of the rumors Hofmann floated) was not long enough to see what the outcome might have been, but the existence of a separate First Presidency vault to which almost no one has access offers a basis for speculation and accusation.

Concerning mechanics, the book is well printed and bound. The photographs reproduced on forty-two pages add much to the book's interest. I noted few errors.⁴ Turley left the occasional spelling errors in quotations without the signal [*sic*], but there is something to be said for using the signal when the error could as easily be in the transcribing or typesetting as in the original.⁵ Repetition is unavoidable, but the story of Alvin Rust's letter to President Hinckley is told in substantial detail four times. The index is reasonably good, but it can make no claim to completeness.⁶ Obviously, whether a reference is significant enough to warrant inclusion in an index is a matter of judgment, but I believe that the discursive notes are underrepresented in the index.

A puzzling omission is any mention of D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, and the work of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, which relate directly to the discussion of the salamander letter (103). The obvious place for the citation is where President Hinckley is quoted on the subject, rightly pointing out that some superstition and symbolism is part of culture and not inconsistent with receiving true revelation (103, 419 n. 64).

Anyone who wondered about the imputations of Church leaders' dishonesty found in other books concerning the Hofmann case, especially *The Mormon Murders*, will find this book illuminating. Turley has, by virtue of his unparalleled access to the journals and files of living Church leaders, been able in exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) detail to explain what the acts and statements that other writers have seen as sinister meant to those personally involved.

Victims is not *the* book on the Hofmann case, nor does it purport to be, but this careful work tells many essential parts of the whole story. Turley provides by far the most reliable source on the ways the LDS Church was victimized by the forgeries and frauds of Mark Hofmann.

NOTES

¹ Media distortions can make what is innocuous appear sinister. Reference to Hugh Pinnock's meeting Mark Hofmann in the Church's "secure parking garage" conjures up images of meetings with "Deep Throat" in *All the President's Men*, quite contrary to the brief exchange when the men met by chance as one was arriving and the other leaving the parking ramp. The press indulged in scandalous insinuations (185). The *Los Angeles Times* stories about the Church's suppressing a supposed Cowdery history, based solely on Hofmann's story as "confidential source," was bad in itself, but worse was the failure of the *Times* to correct the damaging imputation for most of two years (309, 477 n. 11).

² These argumentative notes concern the meaning of a cryptic notation concerning a phone call between Steve Christensen and Gordon B. Hinckley (421 n. 28); reasons for FBI involvement (437 n. 52); cooperation by Church leaders in the murder investigation (438 n. 1; 440 n. 3; 441 nn. 13, 16, 17; 444 n. 18; 445 n. 36; 446 n. 38; 447 n. 58); the identity of an "Oaks" mentioned by Christensen (449 n. 4), whom Kent Jackson has subsequently identified was actually Keith Oakes; the number of contacts between Christensen and Hinckley (450 n. 11; 452 n. 12); Church involvement in the bank loan to Hofmann (452 n. 22); Christensen's future role in acquiring historical documents (459 n. 54); Hinckley's record-keeping practices (468 n. 60); the amendment or dismissal of charges (469 n. 61); the choice of charges to which Hofmann would plead guilty (478 n. 23); the reasons for plea bargaining (479 n. 25); and the explanation to victims about the proposed plea bargain (480 n. 33).

³ The list of frauds is not exhaustive. Another involved supposedly ancient brass plates from South America offered to the Church by Bert Fuchs in 1976. Frauds in religious history have abounded over the centuries. See Curtis D. MacDougall, *Hoaxes*, 2d ed. (New York: Dover, 1968), ch. 14.

⁴The last line on page 167 is repeated. In the fourth line of note 80, on page 483, the name *Rust* should be *Bird*.

⁵For example, on page 105 the words *in* and *which* are run together in a quotation; was it originally so, or is the error in the typesetting? Similarly, *Summerbay*' for *Summerbays* (58) looks like a typo, whereas *negociate* (51) is the kind of spelling error one would assume belonged to the writer of the original memo.

⁶For example, although there are several page references in the index to the Rust letter, it is also discussed significantly on pages 117 and 483. Jerald and Sandra Tanner's work is discussed also on page 397. George Smith's denial of having some photographs is buried in the notes (142 and 433 n. 100) and not mentioned in the index. The Jonathan Dunham letter (132) is indexed under *Jonathan*.