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Celebrating One Hundred Years

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Forgeries

Fakes and forgeries seem to carry a universal fascination – certainly they fascinate me. It's interesting to think about just why a perfectly executed forgery of a painting which fools everyone and moves the viewer in the same way as the real thing is nevertheless of no value. Having said that, the work of certain accomplished forgers is considered collectable in its own right.

I will not tread the well-worn paths of T.J. Wise's pamphlets, Prokosch's Butterfly Books, nor the scandal of the Mormon document forgeries by Mark Hofmann which ultimately led to bombings and murder, brilliantly told in Robert Lindsey's *A Gathering of Saints, a true story of money, murder and deceit*, Simon & Schuster, 1988, a page-turning thriller whether you are interested in the subject or not. Nor the Fortsas Hoax, the elaborate prank of 1840 in Binche, Belgium, where an auction catalogue of rare books drew many potential buyers, who were only to find that neither the books nor the auction house actually existed, except to say that one of our old colleagues still has "fortsas" as part of his e-mail address. The Hitler diaries are of course particularly notorious, but my manuscript specialist colleague at Sotheby's at the time, the learned Felix Pryor, dismissed them straight away. I remember his saying they were blindingly obviously fake, he just couldn't understand why anyone thought otherwise.

When I used to talk and hold tutorials at the London Rare Book School, an annual activity for a few years which I enjoyed and which occasionally brought in some significant business until I was unceremoniously fired by the organising bookseller for entirely invented reasons - I checked with contacts at the University of London whether there had actually been complaints from students, there had not, rather the reverse in fact which tallied with feedback I had myself received - who did not have the courage actually to tell me he had done it. I found out only by pure chance and at the last minute through the omission of my name on the list of tutors and had pointlessly worked on it all sporadically through the year as relevant ideas and incidents popped up, made a few appropriate purchases and indeed taken pains to keep the week free, not without difficulty. Anyway, there were a few items for the forgery part of the course which I would take with me and still have.

A fake Byron manuscript was one (which came from the Dusty Miller collection). It is quite common in my experience for forgers to deceive by creating something more complex than one might imagine they would bother to do. In this case, the brown containing envelope is inscribed in pencil: " – unpublished Poem by Two Hands, addressed to Thos Moore. Joint composition by Byron and Robert Bloomfield. 6 stanzas of 5 lines each – first 4 stanzas in Byron's hand, remaining 2 by Bloomfield." There's an autograph letter signed, purportedly by Walter Bloomfield addressed "My dear Prince!" presenting the poem, an autograph manuscript of the first four stanzas supposedly in Byron's hand, an autograph transcript of the entire poem in another hand altogether and three carbon typescript transcripts, one marked up to show who had allegedly written what. Something didn't feel right (as good a way as any of sensing forgery) and so I sent a copy to a Byron expert who immediately told me not to waste another second on it. As I have been taught by several true experts, it is all very well inspecting letter formation, confidence of handwriting and other aspects in great detail, but if you have been at it long enough, you will come to know, quickly, through some other not quite definable factor, whether something is amiss, or not.

Another useful example for the course was a copy of the first edition of David Storey's *This Sporting Life*, Longmans, 1960, in dust-jacket, with the genuine autograph signature of John Braine, author of *Room at the Top*, on the front free end-paper. As our cataloguer put it: "An instructive example of an attempt to manufacture an association copy of a scarce modern first edition. In this instance the sheets of a first impression have been placed in a binding case that is significantly brighter and cleaner than would be the original covers when one inspects the internal condition of the book. Moreover, the front and rear end-papers of one (possibly two) other books have been trimmed and pasted in, in a clumsily executed attempt to link the authors of two seminal works of the 1960s."

A third take-along was the strange *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley Selected from the Collection owned by Mr. H.S. Nichols*, New York, H.S. Nichols, 1920, one of 500 numbered copies signed by the publisher. Nothing wrong with the book itself, the problem is that none of the drawings is by Beardsley and they were quickly debunked by experts. It's thought they were concocted by Nicholas and possibly a collaborator. I was happy to pay £125 for the book in any case, valuing its interest as a curiosity and a teaching aid – and there are copies on the market for more than twice that now, like this one without dust-jacket.

There is a difference between forgeries and facsimiles, but I did also used to take a copy of the facsimile edition of *The Catcher in the Rye*, complete with dust-jacket, just as an example of ways in which one might be fooled. Facsimile dust-wrappers are certainly a problem, but best practice is that they be indelibly stamped or printed as such and I believe it is still the case that they are banned altogether from ABA fairs. Finally a book from my own animal rights collection:

[Carroll (Lewis)] *Some Popular Fallacies About Vivisection*. Oxford, Printed for Private Circulation only, June 1875. 16pp. Original printed wrappers, preserved in a cloth folder and red quarter morocco slipcase, ruled and lettered in gilt. Wrappers a little soiled, upper wrapper with light stain, trivial tear to blank margin of first few leaves and small wormhole to blank margin of last few leaves, but a very good copy. *cf.* Magel 287 (reprint); *cf.* Magel (b) 34 (in *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*); Williams, Madan and Green, 106.

This first appeared in *The Fortnightly Review*. "This is a rare pamphlet, since only 150 were printed in 1875 and I think few can have survived. . . a serious attempt to discredit vivisection, which fails to be fully effective from the juxtaposition of pitiless logic with warm and generous sentiment. He counters no fewer than thirteen positions or theses which he regards as fallacious, but regards the infliction of pain on animals as in some cases justifiable, under proper legislation. He argues on p.7 that the evil charged against vivisection consists chiefly in the effect produced upon the operator" (from the Carroll bibliography). C.S. Lewis's pamphlet *Vivisection* includes a statement of the importance of the pamphlet in the campaign.

In spite of the above, Dr Selwyn Goodacre in an article in *The Book Collector*, 1978, proved beyond doubt that this separate printing is a forgery - it is condemned by the paper (post 1875) and the type (post 1900).

The pamphlet still has some rarity and a copy fetched £500 at Christie's in 2010 nevertheless.

I also used to talk about "authorised" forgeries, for example secretarial signatures, and the use of the autopen.

I presented illustrations of two copies of *Casino Royale*, one a good honest copy at £25,000, the other superficially in better condition but with the dust-wrapper ironed, washed and probably supplied at £30,000.

For further reading there is no better source than *Forging History, The Detection of Fake Letters and Documents*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994, by the renowned rare and historical documents dealer Kenneth W. Rendell. Slightly bizarrely, for a couple of years I used to haunt ephemera fairs and auctions to gather up and send him every example I could find of British World War Two propaganda. There were a few other 'items' too which I am pretty sure he really should not have taken on an aeroplane with him. He remarks upon the "insidious type of forgery . . . of recent years . . . offered by several honest and reliable dealers" – genuine signatures with forged statements added to the paper (perhaps a fly-leaf removed from a book) afterwards. There have been many such versions of Richard Nixon's resignation letter for example. Graham Greene muddied the waters by signing multiple copies of his letterhead in advance of his secretary typing letters in the blank space available.

In contrast, someone once came to the shop with a very scruffy edition of a work by Gandhi, a major hero of mine, with an inscription by him neatly encapsulating his entire philosophy in a few words. The vendor had taken the book to one of the auction houses but was in a hurry for funds. He said he'd take £600 and utterly enthused I paid him immediately. That same day another dealer came to the shop and I was eager to show it off to him. "How do you know it's Gandhi?" "I just do"- and I did, I had seen his hand before, and it was authentic without a doubt. "How much do you want for it?". I pondered. Would I prefer the book or £1,000? The book. I kept up an internal debate like that for a while and ended up selling it for five times what I had paid. Rather more than the accepted doubling up, but I had not intended that to happen, at the time of purchase I was not even sure whether I was buying it for the business or for myself (I still rather regret parting with it), and had no means of contacting the vendor to better compensate him.

One of our customers, Lionel Dakers (see Centenary June), came to us with what we had sold him and I had catalogued as a Siegfried Sassoon letter. It was not. Another bookseller had pointed out our error and we naturally refunded him immediately. I looked at it and wondered how on earth I had been fooled. As I thought about it I recalled my time working on and cataloguing Sassoon's library and correspondence at his Heytesbury House and the mud cleared. This letter was in the hand of his wife, Hester Sassoon. So I had known instinctively it was not in a sense completely 'wrong' but it certainly wasn't right either.

During my early days at Sotheby's I was busy cataloguing and researching a framed five pound note with a signed note "by" Dylan Thomas thanking the recipient for helping him out and putting him up at his hotel. I looked into it and Thomas had indeed been in the area at the time. Everything checked out. Stephen Roe, another Sotheby's manuscript specialist, merely glanced at it as he walked past my office: "That's *wrong*." He was familiar with the work of the North London forger in question for a start, but he could tell straight away that the signature was simply not correct.

A senior UK bookseller once assigned himself the task of monitoring (just monitoring, not reporting or doing anything about) the number of forged J.K. Rowling signatures and inscriptions in books for sale on E-bay. He had to give up after just a week – there were so many it left him no time for anything else.

Sometimes too little thought goes into it: there is no point creating an elaborate contemporary inscription in biro in a book published long before the biro was invented.

Another aspect of all this is the removal of inscriptions and signatures or other marks of ownership, sometimes to remove what is seen as a defacement or flaw, but often to conceal that the book in question has been stolen. The insertion of bookplates and ownership stamps on the other hand has been common practice in some quarters.

Policing this fraud is tricky, sometimes made none the easier by galleries, owners, whether private or institutional, or auction houses, preferring to hide their embarrassment rather than take action to prevent further occurrences (the same has been true for out and out theft from libraries over the years).

Whilst not a forgery at all, the magnificent two-volume Macmillan and Co. signed limited edition of Yeats' *Collected Poems*, 1949, was published after the poet's death, but he signed the relevant pages whilst working on the text before publication was called off until after the Second World War. It does give pause for thought nonetheless. In a way, Yeats never actually signed the books themselves, although that makes them no less desirable to me.

Two further anecdotes for this brief dabble (it is the holiday season after all) into a vast subject. Walking round a London fair with another bookseller, we stopped at a stand occupied by a modern firsts dealer. I won't even name the author since it might identify the dealer, but as we went to pluck a book or two from one section of a shelf, we were told, "Oh, don't bother looking at those, they are not for you." We quickly noticed on opening these otherwise excellent copies of ostensible first editions, very much priced as such, that there were erasures from the versos of the title-pages, printed words had been scraped away, probably with a razor blade, none too expertly. The words were "Second Edition".

Lastly, Oscar Wilde's signature must be one of the most commonly forged of all. Many of them are really not very good at all. A friend had a postcard on his kitchen wall with a portrait of Wilde with his printed signature underneath. It reproduced an attempt I had seen before on a number of occasions, and probably rather irritatingly I pointed out "That's wrong!" I explained what I meant and how I knew at some length. When I next visited, the postcard was still there. That surprised me – if it had been mine it would have grated, jarred and annoyed me every time I walked past it. What satisfaction there was in continuing to display it was beyond me.

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