

Autographs, More Autographs, and a Handbook

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BRANDES, Markus. *From the Hand of Albert Schweitzer.* Konstanz, Germany: Markus Brandes Autographs, 2008. 4to. Stiff mylar wrappers, spiralbound. 49pp. Numerous illustrations. Edition limited to 600 numbered copies. Postpaid \$20.00.

CLAREN, Patricia, KOSCHAL, Stephen, and WERNITZ, Ron. *Ronald Reagan and Nelle Reagan Autograph Mystery Uncovered.* Miami, FL 33231: Stephen Koschal, P.O. Box 311061, 2008. 4to. Pictorial wrappers. 67pp. Illustrations. Edition limited to 100 numbered and 26 lettered copies signed by authors. \$10.00.

LEVINSON, Jay. *Questioned Documents: A Lawyer's Handbook.* San Diego: Academic Press, 2001. Small 4to. Hardbound. 217pp. Illustrations. \$101.00.

One of the most unusual and interesting if homespun (or should I say PCspun) productions to cross my desk recently is a slim study published under the auspices of the German Autograph Society (AdA), an active association founded in 1986—and whose website, www.autograph-club.org, is entirely in English. *From the Hand of Albert Schweitzer* was written by German autograph dealer and AdA enthusiast Markus Brandes. The Nobel

Peace Prize-winning French humanitarian, missionary, physician, clergyman and organist (1875-1965) is a subject of great interest in Europe, though it seems to this writer that interest in him has been on the wane in the United States for quite a few years.

Other autograph studies published in recent years by such groups as the UACC (Universal Autograph Collectors Club) and the now-defunct IADA (International Autograph Dealer's Alliance) have strived – with varying degrees of success – to be serious collector guides. The person's signing habits are usually discussed, and most importantly exemplars of secretarial or spousal imitations, autopens and any other relevant nonauthentic signatures illustrated. Known forgers of the person's signature are identified and examples of their handiwork given – and the better guides spell out in detail how to differentiate the good from the bad and the highly questionable.

From the Hand of Albert Schweitzer does not strive to be such a signature study, and cannot be faulted for not going into the handwriting detail that other studies do. Rather, Brandes offers a concise biographical sketch nicely illustrated with his personal collection of Schweitzer letters and signed photographs. Detailed captions describe each item, thankfully including lengthy transcripts of Schweitzer's minuscule German script into English. Illustrations are plentiful and in full color, ranging from stunning signed photographs to meaty content Autograph Letters Signed.

Brandes couldn't resist giving one particular Schweitzer quotation front cover status, so indicative is it of Schweitzer's attitude toward autograph collectors: "I must not allow myself," he wrote, "to fail anyone who believes I can help him, even if it is just with an autograph...." We learn from Brandes that Schweitzer suffered from writer's cramp from 1930 on, which he supposedly inherited from his mother and which may be why photographs show him clutching his pen awkwardly between the index and middle fingers.

"On Albert Schweitzer's Handwriting," by contributors Vreni Buttiker and Timur Yukel, are two pages that close out *From the Hand of Albert Schweitzer* with a bang. In it they quote a 1965 Schweitzer letter in which he remarks, "Miss Mathilde Kottmann, along with two other people... has a handwriting similar to mine,



as she has been instructed by me to write small and absolutely articulately. However, what she has signed with her own name, she has written herself, and what I sign, I have written myself...." Unfortunately, Buttiker and Yukel fail to clarify this rather confusing statement. They do record one secretary being upset when Schweitzer "asked Greta Curtius, who had a handwriting similar to his, to write dedications in copies of his book on Paul during his absence and to send them off...." This lapse they credit to "overwork... it was certainly not done with the intention to

defraud” – so apparently while Schweitzer normally signed all letters personally, and penned many of the texts himself, the possibility of secretarial inscriptions and signatures exists.

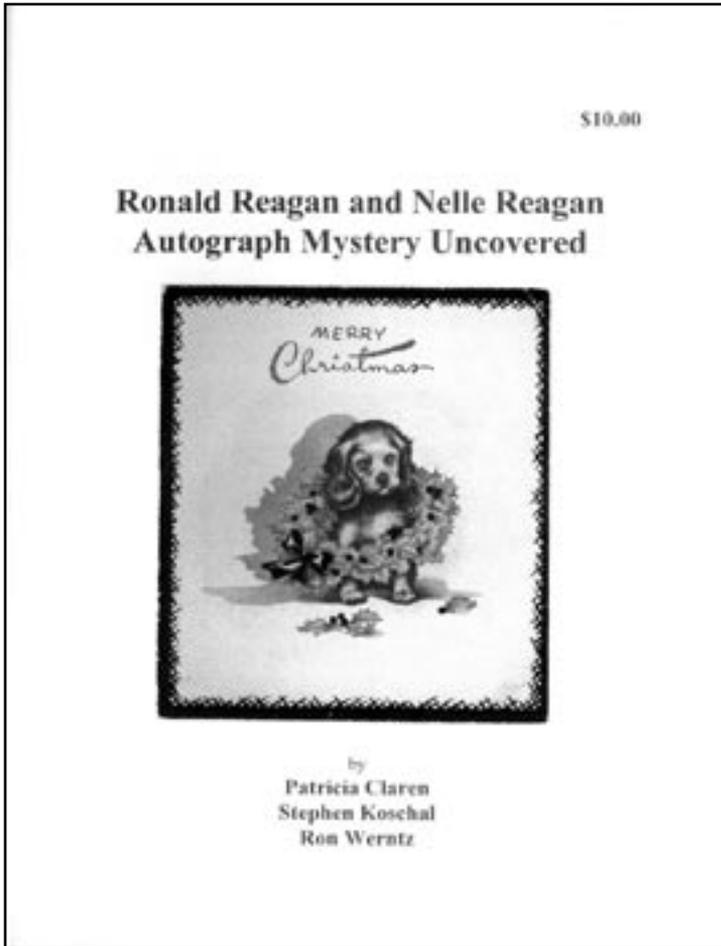
Brandes’ English may be stiff and textbook, the study’s design quality typical of self-published productions – but I salute his enterprise in creating such a focused study. Specialized studies such as this are pure gold to the specialist collector. *From the Hand of Albert Schweitzer* does give the autograph collector the largest source of authentic Schweitzer autograph material found anywhere.

The publication of *Ronald Reagan and Nelle Reagan Autograph Mystery Uncovered* is of particular interest to this reviewer, for the recently-publicized cache of Reagan correspondence that forms the centerpiece of this study was brought into my shop around 1991 by the elderly widower of the original recipient. I examined it, found it entirely secretarial and informed the disbelieving and disappointed owner.

Fifteen years later the collection again entered my shop, this time in the hands of a Freeport, Illinois, car salesman acting as agent for the even-more-elderly widower. Another identical conversation ensued, and the disbelieving agent departed. But this agent knew how to get attention: an AP article circulated around the country heralding a newly-discovered Reagan “treasure trove,” as did a *History Channel Magazine* article in the April 2007 issue and other writeups. (The magazine’s editor, to his credit, did publish a highly-edited letter to the editor from myself and another dealer calling them to task for publishing such a piece without proper research.)

Imagine my surprise, then, when this very same car salesman, Ron Werntz, turned up as co-author of *Ronald Reagan and Nelle Reagan Autograph Mystery Uncovered*. Co-author Stephen Koschal is an autograph dealer of long standing and of a muckraking disposition – and is clearly the driving force behind this study.

There’s no other way to put it: *Ronald Reagan and Nelle Reagan Autograph Mystery Uncovered* is a quirky booklet – oddly argued, weakly organized, strangely presented. Koschal and Claren tend to paint with a rather broad brush, at times making conclusions without the kind of substantial detail I would like to see before making damning conclusions. Their points aren’t without merit,



though, and certainly deserve the reader's thoughtful consideration. The booklet is packed with numerous worthwhile illustrations, too, and while a few are too coarse to prove useful, most are decent.

Accuse the authors in their preface: "Many items have been traded or sold believing it was signed by Ronald Reagan when in fact it was signed for him by his mother. Single items and entire collections of letters that have been described as written and signed by Ronald Reagan have been sold for very large sums of

money. However, many of these letters have been described incorrectly because they were actually written and signed by Nelle Reagan. We would like to believe this was done innocently.... During the late 1930's to the late 1950's, it is the authors opinion that everything that appears to be written and signed by Ronald Reagan should be considered suspect.”

Koschal and Claren begin by profiling four large Reagan letter collections – the Zelda Multz Collection, Roll-Sieffert Collection, Lorraine Wagner Collection and the Ronald Werntz (Ruth Reiter) Collection – and the strange sales history of each. The first two of these are the most unsatisfying. The Multz Collection features one illustration, a “group shot” of overlapping letters and photos – attractive, sure, but too small and hazy for comparison purposes. The Roll-Sieffert Collection has *no* illustrations (that's right, zero), supposedly “because of copyright laws.” In an exposé, this just doesn't fly. The authors' comments questioning the authenticity fail to persuade, for the reader must be *shown* the disparities, not told about them. The illustration-heavy chapters on the Wagner and Werntz show far more bite.

What most adversely affects the effectiveness of the authors' argument is the backwards organization. Readers need to be *shown* – in organized, meticulous, painstaking detail – numerous distinctive *individual characteristics* of Ronald and Nelle Reagan's handwriting in the form of side-by-side comparisons. Only then can the average reader feel like he is “on board.” Only then can he feel like he is taking part in the argument trying to persuade that these collections are largely not in the hand of Ronald Reagan. To persuade the reader, he must be made a part of the process. Koschal and Claren do offer this side-by-side comparison – but near the end of the book, wasting much of the effectiveness of it.

Instead, the authors begin by illustrating a multi-page Nelle Reagan letter and telling the reader “To get yourself familiar with the handwriting of Nelle Reagan.” Huh? Next a supposed Ronald Reagan letter being offered for \$10,000 is profiled and partly illustrated. The authors note, “Assuming you have studied the handwriting of Nelle Reagan in the preceding chapter, at this early stage in the study, you may be able to determine whether this \$10,000 letter is actually written by Ronald Reagan or by the hand of his mother.” Were this a courtroom and I

the defense attorney, I'd be on my feet, shouting "Objection! Prosecution is leading the witness!" Well (to borrow Reagan's favorite opening word), readers don't want to be given blunt instructions and coy suggestions. They need, and want, to be led by the hand in drawing such conclusions – not told to go figure it out for themselves.

Just as good fiction *shows* the reader the action instead of *telling* them, so too good exposé must demonstrate its contentions. Koschal and Claren would have been well-advised to *open* their study with this book's eighth chapter, "Handwriting Comparison/Analysis," and its seventh chapter, "Ronald Reagan as Ronald Reagan." This eighth chapter is truly the cornerstone of this study, and were it placed front and center would go a long way toward sweeping the reader along as the authors set about to refute the authenticity of these Reagan letter collections.

As it stands, and despite its drawbacks, *Ronald Reagan and Nelle Reagan Autograph Mystery Uncovered* should be considered a strong warning call for collectors owning Reagan material or pursuing the acquisition of some. The comparison of Nelle and Ronald Reagan's handwriting will seem devastating to anyone who has never studied it, although more in-depth and systematic study is still needed before definite conclusions can be drawn. The authors draw certain conclusions about some material for which the reader is not given any illustrations, while other conclusions seem premature and based on slim evidence. And the inclusion of Werntz as co-author – the very person who brazenly tried to market a highly suspect Reagan collection as authentic despite repeated attempts to show him its questionable nature – is, in this reviewer's opinion, *just plain weird*. Far more research is needed before the autograph community comes to a consensus about these Reagan caches.

Intriguing – provocative – disturbing – troubling – *Ronald Reagan and Nelle Reagan Autograph Mystery Uncovered* calls to mind these and more adjectives. At ten bucks (\$13 postpaid), it's a bargain that every presidential autograph collector should be curious to investigate.

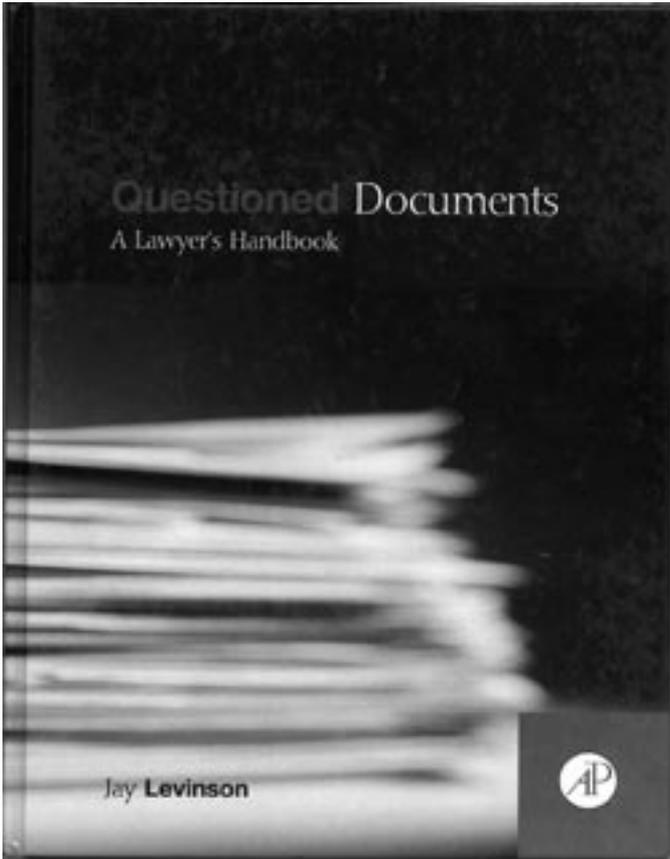
In our continuing effort to show autograph collectors and dealers what a great resource is the mysterious world of forensic document literature, let's back up to an "oldie" (that is, published in 2001).

Jay Levinson opens *Questioned Documents: A Lawyer's Handbook* with the same kind of disclaimer that opens a great many forensic document text: "The purpose of this book is not to teach the field of Questioned Documents to people who are in search of a new profession," he stresses. "The focus is very specific – to explain to the lawyer some of the basics of document examination so that he or she is in a better position in court to present document evidence and interrogate his or her own and opposition witnesses.... This volume is designed as a concise ready reference."

And that, in a nutshell, is why *Questioned Documents* is relevant to autograph collectors. That's why the more serious, education-oriented collectors may wish to invest in a copy. By the way, if the \$101.00 published price gives you pause, be aware that this title just went out of print. Consider this good news: On fixed-price online venues such as www.booksold.com – the "AddALL" subdirectory – about half of the handful of copies offered for sale are higher than the published price and about half are lower.

Despite Levinson's specialized intent, autograph collectors may benefit enormously from such forensic document texts. Collectors seeking out dealers with whom they feel comfortable and whose expertise they trust should think of themselves as attorneys hiring an expert witness for a court case. True, autograph dealers generally are not QDEs (questioned document examiners) – and likewise QDEs are not autograph dealers. QDEs train through a mixture of systematic course work and study and a minimum three years' supervised internship under a licensed QDE, followed by continuing education, conference attendance, publication in technical journals and the like.

Autograph dealers couldn't be more different – and even more different from one another – but typically they begin as long-term collectors of many years' standing who undertake their own reading and study program, eventually coupling this with the hands-on experience of handling, studying and cataloguing a large amount and variety of historical documents. A fortunate few (myself included) cut their teeth under an older dealer. Many of the techniques used by QDEs are also employed by autograph dealers, though the most high-tech scientific processes are rarely utilized. Autograph dealers occasionally are involved in court cases as expert witnesses, but of course that's



not the main thrust of their endeavors.

The two professions rarely mingle, despite the large overlap in their techniques and expertise. But there's no reason why *Questioned Documents* can't be read with the autograph collecting perspective in mind and its principles translated into that world. Autograph collectors should expect the same level of professionalism from their dealers as attorneys and the court system do from their QDEs.

Happily, *Questioned Documents* opens with a "Historical Survey of Questioned Documents," a topic that many forensic texts ignore. Levinson surveys the legal perspective of court rulings from the 16th century onward, explaining how they created the

need in the 20th century for the profession of questioned document examiner. As with the history of autograph collecting, the history of document examination too tends to get overlooked by the very people who should want to preserve it – not so with Levinson.

One odd note: Although Levinson is an American, *Questioned Documents* often refers to the Israeli court system and its standards – understandable, since Levinson serves with the Israel Police. But any non-lawyer, layperson has to wonder whether the legal principles discussed regarding questioned documents apply equally in the U.S.!

Questioned Documents: A Lawyer's Handbook: A worthy addition to the small but growing pile of forensic reference texts that with study can make autograph collectors and autograph dealers better at what they do.