

Studies in Authentication and 19th Century Facsimiles

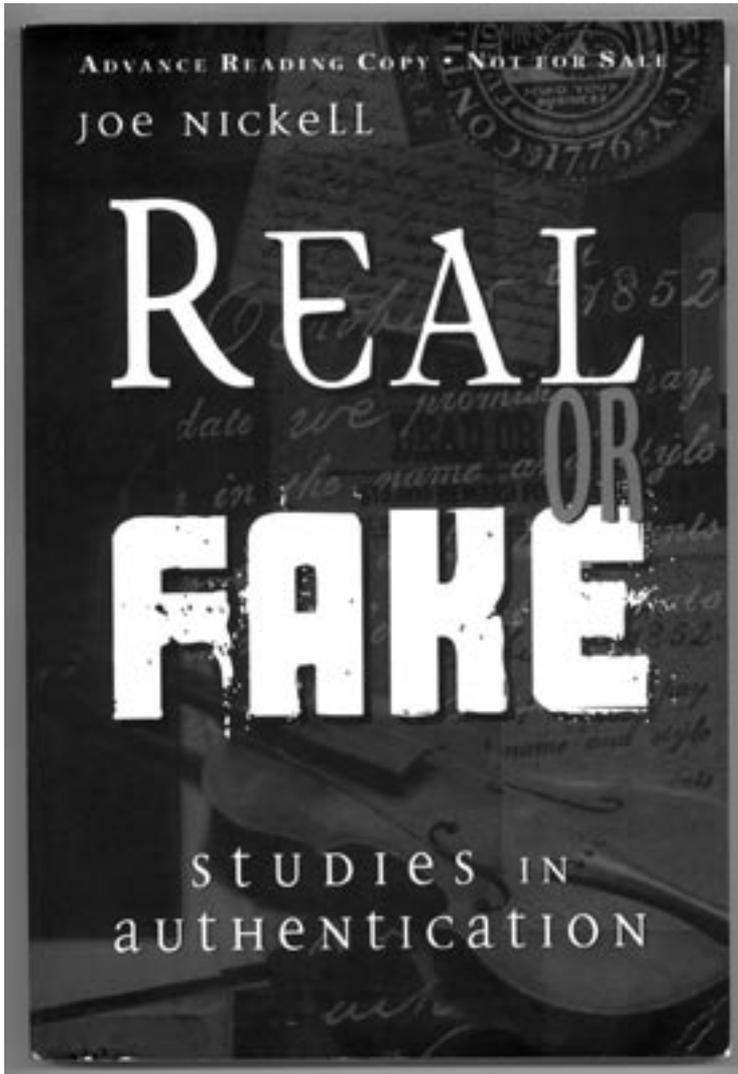
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NICKELL, Joe. *Real or Fake: Studies in Authentication*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009. 8vo. Clothbound, dust jacket. xii, 228pp. Illustrations. **\$35.00.**

CHARAVAY, Etienne. *Lettres Autographes Composant la Collection de M. Alfred Bovet....* Paris: Librairie Charavay Freres, 1885. Small 4to. Clothbound. xviii, 816pp, xxvi. Extensive illustrations. **Out of print.**

Case studies. Readers can't get enough of them. Short and to the point, the public eats them up because they're bite size and fit well into the hectic American lifestyle. They don't require anywhere near the time and attention commitment that a full-length true crime book would, yet the reader gets the same basic satisfaction the true crime genre offers (here's what the bad guys did, here's how they did it, here's how we solved it) in easy-to-digest form.

Joe Nickell is one of those figures who should be better known in the autograph world than he is. He has penned two of the best reference works to appear in recent years—*Pen, Ink, & Evidence: A Study of Writing and Writing Materials for the Penman, Collector and Document Detective* (1990) and *Detecting Forgery: Forensic Investigation of Documents* (1996)—along with a slew of works on a wide array of hoaxes and frauds outside the autograph world, from



paranormal and UFOs to the Shroud of Turin and Loch Ness Monster. This broad versatility is of course part of the reason for this, as his voracious curiosity has spread his interests widely. Nickell brings a unique set of talents to autograph sleuthing: A Ph.D. in English and a serious art and chemistry background,

work experience as a private investigator and more “stints” in more jobs than any person has a right to claim, combined with first-rate analytical skills, make him a formidable autograph sleuth.

Real or Fake offers up case studies in three major categories: “Documents” (six cases), “Photographs” (five cases) and “Other Artifacts” (five cases). An introduction to each section discusses the general principles behind authenticating each category, while an overall introduction to the volume savvily addresses broader concerns. Nickell’s general plan of attack, for instance, when tackling a questioned item, reflects his well-rounded talents: “...it is wise to take a multifaceted approach to questioned artifacts. If there is some reason to suspect an object, every aspect of it should be thoroughly examined. In a sensational artifact, the various factors to be considered include provenance, content, material composition, and the results of scientific analysis.”

Regarding provenance (the most mispronounced word in autographs, by the way, often mistaken for “providence”), I’m delighted to report that Nickell stresses my conviction that many collectors have no inkling how craftily provenance can be faked. Far too often I see collectors accept provenances at face value that I view with grave doubts. Notes Joe, “provenances themselves can be forged in much the same manner as the works they are supposed to authenticate. Dealer markings, penciled notations, and the like are sometimes falsely added to a work to indicate previous ownership. Fake repairs and other restorative efforts may be added to create the impression that the work is of sufficient age to require such measures. Evidence of prior framing or mounting may be faked to suggest than an earlier owner considered a work authentic. Moreover, bills of sale, dealers’ certificates of authenticity, and other papers, including written statements allegedly from prior owners, can all be fabricated by a determined forger....” Amen!

Another telling comment will have any experienced dealer nodding in agreement. It has to do with mankind’s innate and apparently unstoppable *desire to believe*. People’s need to believe, this inborn craving to have something to hold onto that’s true and real, is probably the most difficult instinct for collectors to overcome when studying autographs and trying to learn to

separate the good from the bad. The objectivity of the scientist is the goal to which all collectors should strive. “Over the years,” Nickell remarks of this phenomenon, “I have learned that, with regard to authentication, people often allow bias to creep in. There is a tendency to start with the desired answer and work backward through the evidence, packing and choosing the ‘facts’ that support their convictions. Investigation must be predicated on a rational, scientific approach, keeping emotionalism in check and focusing only on learning the truth....”

Nickell’s preface to the document case studies of *Real or Fake* might be thought of as his superb book *Pen, Ink & Evidence* in Cliff’s Notes form, condensed down to 24 pages. He then takes the reader through half a dozen notable document cases in which he was involved, some of which received much press attention.

“Diary of Jack the Ripper” concerns Liverpool scrap metal dealer Mike Barrett’s 1991 “discovery” of the diary of a 50-year-old American expat cotton merchant named James Maybrick. Nickell neatly dissects “a number of the diary’s features—provenance, internal evidence, and writing materials”—to devastating affect. “Its author seemed to go out of his way to include Ripper trivia,” writes Nickell, “insignificant material intended solely to make the diary appear genuine.” Nickell gives example of some of these “heavy-handedly” inserted references, some of which rely on factual errors that appeared in published books used by the forger. The diary itself had been a scrapbook with quite a few pages sliced out—which begs Nickell’s question, “why would someone mutilate an item so boldly identified as the diary of Jack the Ripper? Actually, all the evidence... suggests a different scenario: that a forger purchased the album from an antique shop as a means of obtaining credibly old paper and then, possibly with an old pen and bottle of ink from the same store, used it for his purpose.”

Nickell’s summation of the various forensic tests undertaken and his analysis of the handwriting is concise and damning. In the end, even Barrett’s admission to forging the diary (which he retracted) failed to persuade the British publisher from admitting their egregious error. To save face, they grimly maintained the diary to be authentic. As Nickell wryly notes, “no amount of evidence will convince those with a vested interest in the diary’s

authenticity” despite the avalanche of evidence to the contrary.

Far less well known is “Novel by an American Slave,” the story of a manuscript purchased by noted scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. which if authentic would represent “the first novel written by a black woman and definitely the first written by a woman who had been a slave.” Nickell takes the reader step by step through his analysis of “The Bondwoman’s Narrative” by Hannah Crafts—a fine piece of detective work utilizing, of course, his “multifaceted approach.” His dissection of the handwriting and the forensic tests used shows how a document authentication should be done: logical, measured, persuasive, with the evidence leading the way. (“We must remember that the burden of proof is on the proponent,” Nickell cautions. “...We must also guard against wishful thinking, being careful to follow the evidence and not get ahead of it.”)

Unlike the Ripper case study, which profiles a forgery created for financial gain, the American slave narrative is an uplifting study of what is believed to be an authentic manuscript, even though Gates and Nickell failed to pinpoint the writer’s identity.

In “Lincoln’s Lost Gettysburg Address” Nickell tackles Lincoln artist Lloyd Ostendorf’s 1990 discovery of what he believed to be the missing reading copy of the Gettysburg Address. Most of us in the autograph field weighed in with a resounding thumbs down when this bombshell hit the press, believing this copy to be a well-done tracing of one of the other drafts. Ostendorf hung firm to his belief in his copy’s authenticity—or so he said, at least—and Nickell’s retelling of this bizarre episode is another example of his thorough approach. It’s always interesting to note how often experts disagree with each other. Well-known forensic experts Walter C. McCrone and Maureen Casey Owens both weighed in that this Lincoln forgery appeared to be a skilled freehand rendering—“too good for a tracing.” This reviewer seconds Nickell’s conviction that this forgery “was traced by just such a skilled penman who used more freehand smoothness than usual with a slow, careful tracing.”

Likewise this reviewer/dealer differs from Nickell’s belief that this Gettysburg Address forgery “points to Mark Hofmann”—the notorious Mormon forger. “If it is not his work, then it is that of his equally evil twin.” Nickell’s summation of Hofmann’s

techniques is first-rate, to be sure—but I vote for the evil twin on this issue, maintaining also that the Ostendorf document comes from the evil, *less talented* twin. This Lincoln document, with its basic tracing technique, strikes me as not quite good enough, not clever enough, to have come from the pen of the greatest forger of the 20th century. Or perhaps it simply represents one of Hofmann's early efforts, before he had developed his sophisticated techniques.

"An Outlaw's Scribblings" chronicles yet another album, this one "A jail notebook containing the purported writings of legendary outlaw Billy the Kid and his nemesis Pat Garrett... as well as a framed page with a letter signed 'WH Bonney.'" Nickell's examination of this especially inept forgery is particularly enjoyable. You've got to admire his hands-on, can-do approach to building a case. "It has been suggested that the handwriting quality was diminished by Bonney's having been in handcuffs or, alternatively, that he could not have written at all because of being fettered," objected one desperate defender of these items. Nickell simply confronts the argument head on: "I experimented with writing in handcuffs and found that one can certainly do so. Although there is some effect on the writing, it by no means necessitates the result seen in the 'Bonney' writing."

A miscellany of mini-case studies rounds out the document portion of *Real or Fake* nicely. Forensic groupies are sure to appreciate Nickell's scientific approach. Autograph studies written by autograph dealers and collectors invariably focus largely on handwriting analysis, with scant attention to science and forensics; those by forensic document examiners naturally focus on their methods and aren't intended for a general audience (though I've reviewed a number of such titles in this column in an effort to encourage collectors and dealers to not disregard this resource). Nickell's approach and style manages to combine both approaches in a pleasing and illuminating manner. His lessons on the chemistry behind the faking and aging of inks and papers and the chemistry behind the detecting of such fakery add a whole dimension and level of sophistication to more routine forgery detection skills.

And while the document section of *Real or Fake* will be the area of greatest interest to *Manuscripts'* readers, don't gloss over the photographs and artifacts section—which alas get short shrift in

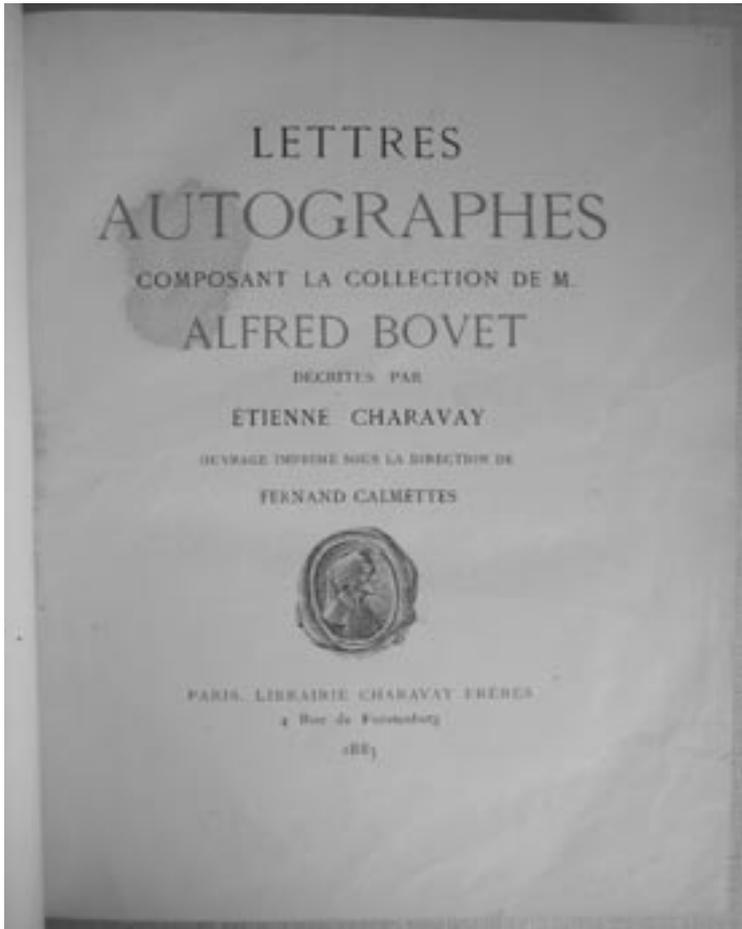
this review. These will intrigue equally and also hold worthwhile lessons. In “Photo Sleuthing,” for instance, Nickell introduces this related art which often works hand in hand with autograph sleuthing. He begins with a crash course on some basic types of photographs—daguerreotypes, tintypes, ambrotypes, cartes de visite, cabinet photographs, crayon enlargements—explaining the process for producing each and how to identify them. I’ve known many a sophisticated autograph collector who completely failed in this skill. It’s one skill, and a valuable one, to be able to detect, say, a forged signature of Robert E. Lee. It’s a very different skill, and an equally valuable one, to be able to label a carte de visite of Lee as spurious. Obviously the person who can combine both skills has the advantage—and Joe Nickell in *Real or Fake* once again shows he’s the type of educator who cannot only do that himself but can artfully articulate how it’s done.

19th Century Facsimiles

Time for another of my retro-reviews: Coverage of long out-of-print titles, so arcane, old or off-the-wall—or all three!—that they can easily *not* be found in the most serious collector’s library. At 125 years old this one is certainly the oldest title addressed in this column.

Etienne Charavay’s *Lettres Autographes Composant la Collection de M. Alfred Bovet* is the book version of the auction of the autograph collection of Alfred Bovet, a Swiss collector who lived in France and amassed a large collection over the course of fifteen years. In February and June 1884 and June 1885, at the Hotel Drouot in Paris, there took place the sale of his collection of 2,137 items. According to one source, they realized 113,524 French francs or 4,540 English pounds.

Like so many Americans, I speak just enough French to make a fool of myself. With an inkling of Spanish from in-laws and long-ago intense exposure to Italian while a student in Rome, I like to think I can grasp the gist of the text portions of Charavay’s text. His preface offers an overview of Bovet’s collection, explaining the eleven categories into which it is organized. He discusses Bovet’s collecting method and lists certain “high spots” in each category. Those categories consist of: Heads of state; statesmen and politicians; French Revolution; military figures; savants and explorers; authors; actors; painters, sculptors, engravers and



architects; composers; singers; Huguenots; and women. Within each category, exemplars are given alphabetically by country: French, German, English, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Belgian, Swiss, Danish, Polish, Swedish and American, among others.

Lettres Autographes Composant la Collection de M. Alfred Bovet surprised this reviewer, both because I had never heard of or seen it until recently and because of the massive number of illustrations it contains. I recommend it simply as a source of an enormous quantity of handwriting exemplars. The focus is obviously Eu-

ropean with a slight bow to the United States, the time frame primarily the 16th through 19th centuries. Every item consists of a routine catalogue entry: Birth and death year of the subject, brief mention of his or her claim to fame, physical description of the item for sale and more detailed discussion of its content and significance. More importantly for our purpose, almost every item is accompanied by a decent signature and/or handwriting example, quite a fair number of which are full page.

Even the best autograph reference libraries can feel challenged in coming up with handwriting exemplars of a certain 16th century Spanish politician, 19th century Dutch poet, 18th century Polish architect, 17th century German actor.... on and on. The well-known names are certainly to be found here, of course—but then, handwriting examples of these figures can generally be found in countless reference sources. No, it's the obscure figures that make *Lettres Autographes Composant la Collection de M. Alfred Bovet* stand out and that make it “essential reading” (if one can be said to *read* such a book as this!) for an autograph reference library that wants depth and breadth to its collection. And make no mistake, the majority of figures illustrated here will strike most as obscure.

Sniffed one reviewer of the 1887 deluxe edition of this volume, “M. Bovet was no mere amasser of miscellaneous signatures, such as we may conceive the vulgar autograph-hunter of America. He was an amateur of literary MSS. and historic documents—things which are capable of yielding as elevated a pleasure as the proofs of prints or the fine states of coins.” He goes on in a manner that reminds us the more things change, the more they stay the same: “It is understood that he has now succumbed to the modern weakness for specialisation; and that he parted with these treasures in order to concentrate his passion upon the autographs of composers and documents illustrating the history of music.” And one can almost hear this English reviewer sigh and shake his head in horror with his veiled reference to “the vulgar autograph-hunter of America”: “But, though his collection is now scattered—some of the most valuable lots have, we believe, crossed the Atlantic—its fame will be rendered imperishable among bibliophiles by this edition....”

The edition discovered by this vulgar reviewer is the first, standard trade edition, a large and sturdy volume printed on decent

stock. (It was published in quarter red morocco and marbled boards, but many such as the one I use have been rebound in cloth.) Sales must have been decent enough that in 1887 the Parisian publisher Librairie les Neuf Muses issued the edition deluxe discussed by the review above, with each page bordered in red. Another Parisian publisher, Librairie de l'Abbaye, apparently released another edition in 1982—presumably a photographic facsimile, but whether this is clothbound or paperback, actual or reduced size, is not known.

The usual online fixed-price sources this reviewer recommends for out-of-print books may be pursued for copies of Charavay's *Lettres Autographes Composant la Collection de M. Alfred Bovet*, but be aware that prices for such specialized reference works vary enormously. It's a fluid market, with prices for many standard reference books nose-diving as online sources replace them. How much might one expect to pay for either the 1885 first edition or the 1887 deluxe edition of Charavay? Well known New York bookseller lists an 1885 first edition at \$250, which strikes me as not unreasonable for a decent copy in original binding. European dealers tend to list copies at significantly higher prices.

But whatever one pays for a copy, *Lettres Autographes Composant la Collection de M. Alfred Bovet* is an engrossing and potentially still useful work that should be a welcome addition to those sagging autograph reference bookshelves.